



**Episode #155:**

**Dr. Manju Banerjee Gives Us an Inside look at Landmark  
College for Neurodivergent Students**

April 30, 2019

Debbie: Hi Manju, welcome to the podcast.

Manju: Hi Debbie.

Debbie: I am looking forward to talking about Landmark and to hearing more about the services that Landmark offers for college students and beyond and also for high school students. I actually met a former student from Landmark at the Diamonds in the Rough conference last week and just really impressed with, with what you are doing. So can you take a moment before we get into that to introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about what you do.

Manju: Absolutely. And first of all, thank you for this opportunity. The more we can kind of share about what we do at Landmark, I feel the more we can inform the public. I'm Manju Banerjee, I'm the Vice President of Educational Research and Innovation at Landmark College. I oversee two broad divisions at the college. One is our online programs, I'm happy to tell you more about it, but, and the other division is our research and professional development.

Debbie: And tell us just what Landmark college is. This is something I only learned about a few years ago and so I'm assuming it's not even on the radar for many of our listeners.

Manju: Yes, Landmark College is unique in many ways, but what really makes us stand out is that we are only one of two colleges nationwide that exclusively serves neurodivergent college students. And we have a population about 400 students. Every student comes in with a learning difference, primarily in the area of learning disabilities, attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder and autism. Another interesting fact about landmark is that almost 50% of our students are transfers from other colleges. Means for a whole host of reasons these students didn't find that college environment to be one where they could succeed. And at Landmark, they find their niche, we like to say.

Debbie: So how do they, I'd love to know more about how Landmark specifically supports neurodivergent learners. And first of all, I'm so glad that this exists. Um, I, when I first discovered Landmark, I was like, oh, how cool is that? Because I know that college can be a stressful time, you know, for neurodivergent learners, especially centering around executive functioning. And it can be really difficult, that transition. We've done an episode with Elizabeth Hamlet who I know you know, about that transition from high school to college. But what is it in the way that Landmark works and supports its students that helps these kids specifically?

Manju: Yes, that's a great question, Debbie. As you know from many postsecondary institutions, the support for neurodivergent students is housed in what's called the disability services office. Uh, there are different names for disability services office, like the office of accessible education or accessibility and all sorts of different names. But at the end of the day, these offices are guided by the Americans With Disabilities Act and their primary focus is providing

accommodation. Now what I like to say is accommodations are retrofits and they come from a deficit mindset. That is you're looking at the student determining what the student can or cannot do and then trying to fix it within codes, through accommodations, compensatory strategies, modifications, and so on. Where Landmark College is radically different from that is that we are grounded in the framework and mindset of universal design. And what universal design posits is providing an environment that, a learning environment, that is inclusive of individual differences from the get go and the focus shifts from deficits and accommodations to universally designed learning spaces and learning platforms.

Debbie: I've never heard that term universal design. So what does that actually look like in practice? I, I love the framework. I, I've never heard of accommodations being described as as retrofits and it makes complete sense. So I'm really interested to hear what does it look like in a classroom? What does it look like for these students?

Manju: Absolutely. So, uh, I'm going to answer that question, but I'm going to take a little detour. I want to share a fact, which is pretty astounding. And this came out in the National Center for Learning Disabilities, NCLD's state of LD report in 2017. And what they reported is students who use support services and special education in high school, 69% of them don't connect with the support office once they go to college. There's a lot of reasons for that. Uh, you know, some of it is the belief that I no longer have a learning challenge.

There are others who just, just feel that there's a lot of shame and stigma associated with this, but that's, I can answer that question for a long time. But to be more specific to what you asked about and how does universal design look at Landmark College, I want to say universal design, while it does have certain principles that guide the framework of thinking, such as multiple ways of representing information, multiple ways of engaging students and multiple ways of assessing mastery, if you will, it is more of a mindset and that's what we see at Landmark College.

Yes, we do observe the basic guidelines and so we present information to students in multimodal approaches. We provide both lecture modality as well as small group methodology and so on. And we engage students, not necessarily in only true and in class standardized timed test, but also opportunities for simulations, for group discussions, through flipped classrooms, all of that. But what I think is the common thread through all of this is the three e's that I like to talk about, about Landmark. One is student empowerment, the other is unique and personalized ways of engagement, and the third is empathy. And that empathy is where your faculty, your residence life staff, understand where you're coming from. And it's not about hand holding, but it's about providing the scaffolds at the right time and then pulling them away when students don't need it.

Debbie: It's interesting, empathy is not usually a word associated with secondary education, you know with a university. So I love that. So I'm, I'm kind of curious to know about this faculty. Where are these teachers coming from, who have this

skill set and are and are able to work with this population in such a powerful way?

Manju: Yeah, we, we do a lot of faculty and staff orientation. It's a very deliberate process of kind of merging new faculty and staff into the Landmark College ethos and understanding of how we work with students. At Landmark College students don't have to come by and, like you would do in a regular classroom or a regular, post-secondary setting, every semester ask for an accommodation letter, go up to the faculty member to provide that letter and advocate for them for their accommodations. These are built in. So any student who needs extra time for example, can get that through that by just going up and talking to the faculty member and saying, I need extra time. And what often happens is students who realize that it's not what they need, extra time is really not what they need or what they need is a different way of approaching the content before they came to the test or having more connections with the instructor for clarifications in office hour time, uh, going to our tutoring center, maybe sleeping well before the day of the test and on and on.

So, and we do research in that area and based on our research, we now have, as employees, five therapy dogs. We do research with greening and its effect on cognition. We have a pacing corridor where students, some students help, it helps them to calm down if they're pacing before going into the exam room. So traditional ways of addressing students' needs but also non traditional ways.

Debbie: That's so cool. It sounds like the culture of the school must be, I mean it must feel so different from any other university. What is the, the vibe like for students? What's the feedback you get from students?

Manju: Yeah, great question. Uh, so one of my favorite quotes from one of the students is 'Landmark College gave me my smile back'. And you know, the best way I can operationalize the ethos of Landmark College is through the tenets of non directive coaching. So for example, students know that Landmark College is a safe place to fail, but they know that they are accountable for their actions. So that gives them a sense of agency, which they hadn't, may not have had ever in their life, where in the past they've been told by the teacher or the guidance counselor or their parents what to do. For the first time, for many of our students, it's like, you mean I can make the decision for myself and it's okay if I fail? We talk to a lot of our students about how the brain learns and brain based learning. So for example, our brains are not perfect at learning the first time round. We actually learn through trial and error. And for students to understand that it's okay to have that trial and error as you're learning is very, very engaging. And for the first time, you know, it's intrinsically motivating for many of these students.

Debbie: So I know that you also work with helping students transition into the workplace. And so can you tell us a little bit about how you do that, specifically how you get students ready to, to be in a setting where it may not be, you know, as safe a culture for them and the expectations and demands will be different?

Manju: Yes, absolutely. Another great question. Uh, we have a very robust career services division. Every student at Landmark College gets an opportunity to do an internship and replace many of our students first at campuses, the campus offices, and then we have partnerships with many corporations and organizations that have really changed their hiring and placement and internship and mentorship practices. So right now we have partnerships with SAP, with JP Morgan, Microsoft, and we just recently on March 23rd held an event where we had five multinationals, Microsoft, JP Morgan, EUI, Mass General Hospital, and Fidelity all come together and talk about their approaches to hiring neurodivergent individuals, where should you apply? How, how have they changed their interview practices?

And we, we are very closely linked with these organizations and some of them we have MOU, so we actually transition our students as interns. And in fact some of our students have been hired through the internship process. But also we have coursework that is folded in. So many of our courses, part of the syllabus actually focuses on what's going to happen beyond this course, beyond Landmark and beyond your academic trajectory when you get into the workplace. So that's baked in, into the courses, and that's another unique way in which we address this transition to the workplace issues.

Debbie: And so then I just wonder, you know, I imagine a lot of the students come in with lagging executive functioning skills and maybe some life skills. Is that part of the curriculum?

Manju: Uh, you know, for many of them, yes. Uh, when students come to Landmark, they come in at three levels if you will. And we recommend which level they should come in, whether they should be taking a full course load, whether they should take partial course load or whether they should come in the level that we call language intensive, uh, placement level. And then they work very, very closely with their academic advisors to map out what their academic trajectory is going to be.

Debbie: So. Okay. That's great. I want to talk a little bit about high school students because um, there are a lot of parents who are in that space. Their kids are in high school, they're trying to figure out what's next. And I know that even if students aren't going to Landmark, there are ways that they can engage with the work that you're doing. And can you say more about your dual enrollment program? And some of the other ways that you support high school students?

Manju: Absolutely. We have a whole host of, uh, programs. They're called short term programs and summer programs for high school students and middle school. We have a grant through which we provide programs for middle schoolers in the stem areas. And for our high school students we have um, coursework, some of them are for credit, some are not. But it's basically to develop that metacognitive awareness and transition skills for postsecondary education. And the one that I'm particularly excited about is our online dual enrollment. What I think makes our online dual enrollment unique is again, following that mindset of universal design. The courses are designed and engineered in a way to support executive

function challenges. So for example, when a student opens up a learning module for our online dual enrollment, the first thing they see are the learning tasks that need to be done this week.

So, uh, the text is kept brief and the focus is on this is what you need to do for this week. And it's standardized across the courses that we offer. So the same design format is used across the courses and that helps to facilitate associative memory. Our courses also include study schedules and not just homework and due dates schedules. So you can see that there's a lot of support that's built in, uh, and it addresses the diverse needs of students from the start, and it's not dependent on accommodations. Also our, each course is restricted to a maximum of 12 students. So the fact that we have small classes means that the students get more personalized attention. And in any given class, the students really come from all around the country, the, they learn to function as a community of learners. And for some students, this is the first time that they're interacting with students outside of their school or their class.

And that's a strong learning experience because that's what's going to happen once they get to college. But in addition, our dual enrollment model is a personalized instruction model that is facilitated through a liaison. So each course not only has an online instructor but it also has a liaison who can be on site at the high school or online depending on the partnership that we have with the schools. What I like to say is that this liaison is the manual executive function override for the student, helping the student with online communication with instructors, better self advocacy, self determination, you know, managing time, setting goals, all of that. This, the, the liaison is not a tutor, it's not an academic coach but it's kind of like a safety net for students while they are taking a college level course and becoming familiar with college level work. So I do want to just add one more thing is that if folks listening to this are interested in finding out more about the online dual enrollment, the website URL is [online@landmark.edu](mailto:online@landmark.edu).

Debbie: Great. And listeners, I will include a link to that in the show notes pages as well. But just to clarify, so this is, this is a college level class for high school students who are attending high school or are homeschooled or is there an age requirement for it?

Manju: Yeah, another great question. We have certain criteria and we work very closely with the homeschool population or the public school and we are branching out now into public schools or, but, but our majority of our students taking the online dual enrollment until now have been the LD focused schools, independent schools. But last year we branched out into homeschool populations as well as charter schools and public schools.

We are also looking at another broader range of students, uh, in the future maybe who are incarcerated youth and so on. So, uh, it's a, it's a really rapidly growing program. But to answer your question, while we don't have an age, it's rising juniors and seniors and we work with the facilitator at the school or the organization to make sure that the students are a good match for online learning. And that, because that is really important to us, the fact that students have a

successful and positive experience is very important to us. So in the application form itself, we have certain criteria, uh, these should be students who are thinking of college and maybe have a college transition plan in their IEP. These are students who, whose primary challenges are due to executive function or learning and attention issues and not so much mental health or intellectual disabilities. The online courses are not designed for that level of scaffolding.

Debbie: Okay, great. So interesting. I, I look forward to just checking out, as I said, you know, this weekend when I met a former student from Landmark, he told me about his experience and also I was really intrigued by the summer programs that are available, you know, not just for students who are going to be entering Landmark college, but you also have, for juniors and seniors, summer programs that are designed to help them prepare for any university experience.

Manju: Absolutely. And many of these programs, the summer programs, are about developing self advocacy and self determination skills, putting, thinking about a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. And then um, your, your study skills and learning strategies for today's generation of college students.

Debbie: Right. Which is very different than when some of us went to college,

Manju: When I went to college, that's for sure.

Debbie: Exactly. So for parents who are listening to this and they've got high school students, I'm just wondering if you have any advice for them for how they can best set their child up for that, a successful transition into college or even identifying the right college for them?

Manju: Yes. You know, it, it can really be daunting to families and students trying to decide, you know, which is the best college for them. There's so much information out there and what are the right questions to ask and how to do this in a way that you know, will possibly be a good match for how your son or daughter learns and what the institution can provide. I'd say three things. One, definitely for my parents in the audience, make this a partnership discussion. You know, we are so used sometimes to being the advocate for our students and now they're going into a different phase of life, uh, where they're going to learn to have to advocate for themselves. So, you know, talk to your son or daughter about what he or she would like and have that discussion, give them an opportunity to say, I, I'd like to do this, this is what I want.

Regarding Landmark, what I will suggest is we have something called professional visit days and of course any parent can call up our admissions office to learn more about the program. They can also talk to our students and we have a very active alumni association and they can talk to alumni as well. I would suggest number two find out as much information as you can. We are a two year and a four year college and our four year programs are growing rapidly. We have programs in computer science areas, business and entrepreneurship, uh, the arts, classes in pottery if that's your interest, in house radio station again, if that's your interest. So you know, find out more about what is the best match for you.

And then the third thing is to just be prepared, uh, what that institution is going to require in terms of paperwork, in terms of documentation, in terms of additional information. Just just be ready with that because different institutions have different requirements, different requirements for admissions and it, you don't want to be disappointed. But definitely check out Landmark College. You may be very surprised. Today's Landmark is very different from what we were 34 years ago.

Debbie: Great. Well thank you for that. And I just want to again mention the podcast I did with Elizabeth Hamlet because if you want to learn more about that last point that Manju was just sharing about, you know, what, what a university would require and there's a lot of misinformation out there about, you know, whether or not an IEP transfers and all of those things. Definitely check out episode 89 of this podcast. It's called How to Navigate the High School to College Transition. And Elizabeth talks about those issues really specifically. So that's a nice compliment to this uh, episode. So Manju, this has been super interesting. I'm so happy to be connected with you and to learn more about the work that Landmark's doing. It's so important. And again, the student I talked or former student was just a, he's like best decision I ever made. Like he was such a, he was a great spokesperson for this school. But um, before we go just share the URL and any other places that listeners can connect.

Manju: Well definitely going to the Landmark College website. That's your primary source of information, [www.landmark.edu](http://www.landmark.edu) and then navigating that to find specific information regarding admissions or placement, residential life. And then for parents who are particularly interested in the dual enrollment, you can look at [www.landmark.edu/institute](http://www.landmark.edu/institute) and the institute offers professional development and training information on the research we are doing. Uh, I want to say the research that we do is with students in a participatory design approach and not necessarily students as subject. For your students that are interested in research, this is the place to find out more information.

Debbie: Very cool. Well, thank you again so much for taking the time to share with us today and, um, yeah, I'm excited. I hope that that this conversation introduces a lot more people to the work that you're doing.

Manju: Debbie, I can't thank you enough. This is a great opportunity for us to share the information about Landmark College. We are so proud of our students who go out and do great things in the world, and thank you again for this opportunity.



## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Landmark College](#)
- [How to Navigate the High School to College Transition](#) (podcast episode with Elizabeth Hamblet)
- [Landmark College summer programs](#)
- [Landmark College's Dual Enrollment online program](#)
- [Landmark's Research Institute](#)