

# Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

MAY 2022

## Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education: Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Access and Success

BY: ASHLEY V. TACONET, EMILY J. TARCONISH, TRACY E. SINCLAIR, MARY LEE VANCE, RICHARD P. ALLEGRA, STEPHEN ROSE, TERI A. ADAMS



### Background

Increasing access to our nation's colleges means eliminating inequities for marginalized student groups. In order to foster thinking on student groups that are often overlooked, College Promise and ETS convened 5 design teams in 2019 to talk about student populations that have specific support needs, including first-generation students, students needing academic support, students who have aged-out of the foster system, students with disabilities, and student parents. This brief summarizes the paper on students with disabilities.

### Introduction

Seventy-six percent of high school youth with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) expect they will obtain postsecondary education; however, the number of students actually receiving postsecondary education degrees is much lower: 25.5% of disabled students have earned at least an associate's degree, but only 16.4% of disabled students have received a bachelor's degree or higher [1,7]. The rate of students with disabilities earning an associate's degree is similar to those without, but there is a discrepancy in earning bachelor's degrees. Approximately 34.6% of nondisabled people have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, which is more than double the rate of people without disabilities [1]. The rate of degree completion also varies between disabled and nondisabled college students. Of students that started their education at a two-year college, 32% of students with a disability and 43% of individuals without a disability acquired an associate's degree or certificate. At four-year colleges, 47% of disabled students earned their bachelor's degree versus 67% of non-disabled students. These numbers indicate disabled college students may require more support in order to be successful. Disability often overlaps with other personal characteristics such as veteran status, socioeconomic status (SES), and race. Individuals may also not be reporting a disability, causing inaccuracies in these numbers.

To receive a monthly update about Promise news, events, and publications, sign up for our newsletter at [www.collegepromise.org](http://www.collegepromise.org)

Historically, students with disabilities have encountered campus-based obstacles that can disrupt their academic dreams. Inaccessible design of the physical and virtual environments, inadequate accommodations, and uninformed campus personnel are common barriers, from prestigious universities to community colleges [9]. Discrimination on the basis of disability, while addressed by federal and state law, continues to be encountered, especially by students with “hidden” or chronic conditions, and mental illness [5]. Despite these barriers, the population of students with disabilities in postsecondary education has steadily increased over the years, with upwards of 19% reporting a disability [11]. A college education that provides greater opportunities is still the key, regardless of the struggle. Policymakers, administrators and funders would do well to explore various aspects of the experience of disabled students seeking postsecondary education—legal, transition, social, pedagogical and financial—to understand the opportunities and barriers.

### Disability Rights are Civil Rights

In 1990 the ADA was signed into law. This comprehensive civil rights legislation prohibited discrimination and guaranteed individuals with disabilities the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in mainstream American life—to enjoy employment opportunities, to purchase goods and services, and to participate in State and local government programs and services. Despite the achievement of having the ADA, the law still was difficult to enforce. Disability discrimination cases were overwhelmingly thrown out, because the process of proving one was qualified under the ADA for protection was made difficult. Eventually in 2008, the ADA Amendment Act was signed by the President, to restore the intent and protections of the ADA of 1990. Even with the amendments, the individual with a disability bears the brunt of responsibility to self-identify not only in college, but also in other parts of society, or risk not being accommodated [2, 3].



In PK-12 education settings, all children with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [4, 10]. Special education includes specially designed instruction in classrooms, at home, or in private or public institutions, and may be accompanied by related services such as speech therapy, occupational or physical therapy, psychological counseling, and medical diagnostic services necessary to the child’s education. Specifically, students receive an IEP, which is essentially a written plan for providing a special educational experience at school which includes a list of services provided, progress monitoring, annual goals, and more. What is defined

as an appropriate education for a student varies with an emphasis on placing students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and is determined by a multidisciplinary team. For one student, appropriate LRE may be comprised of learning in general education classes, and access to a paraprofessional; while for another student appropriate education may be learning in a self-contained special education classroom for all or portions of the school day.

## Transition from High School to College and College Level Accommodations

Under IDEA, transition services must start at least by the time a student turns 16 years old, though some states start providing these services earlier [4]. A transition plan within the IEP identifies both in-school annual transition goals and postsecondary goals in the areas of further education/training, employment, and independent living (as appropriate). Examples of transition services include students attending or leading their IEP meetings, learning career awareness through occupational classes, and meeting with individuals from agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation. During this transition period students also need to learn the differences between services provided to them at the high school level compared to the college level; however, this learning does not necessarily occur for all students. Once a student graduates or ages out of high school they are no longer covered under the IDEA, but instead under the ADA.



At the college level, students with disabilities must self-advocate and disclose their disability to the school's disability services office in order to receive services. Furthermore, even with self-disclosure, receiving accommodations is not guaranteed. Accommodations can come in a variety of forms from academic to housing accommodations. In academic settings, students may be eligible for extended time on exams if they have challenges with processing time, priority seating at the front of the classroom if they need a low distraction environment, or have the ability to record their lectures if they have challenges with memory or attention. In housing settings, students may have a single room if they need additional space for medical equipment, or a room with central air conditioning if they have medical conditions requiring so. Per the ADA, individual disability services offices are able to determine eligibility requirements for accommodations, including whether or not students are required to submit formal, medical documentation of a disability to receive services. This is in part due to the vague definition of disability in the ADA. The ADA defines disability as:

*a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (b) a record of such an impairment; or (c) being regarded as having such impairment" (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) [12].*

However, the language allows for a broad interpretation among clinicians. The ADA Amendments Act provided clarification on this definition, specifically around the phrases “substantially limits” and “major life activities.” Additionally, the amendments included that when receiving a diagnosis, individuals are to be evaluated without use of auxiliary aids or medication [6]. Even with this guidance, the decision of what will be accepted as documentation of a disability falls to the institutions of postsecondary education. In the Spring 2020 semester, colleges shifted to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning through this new method, occurring synchronously and/or asynchronously, posed both advantages and challenges for students with disabilities. As a result of the instructional format changes, over half of students (58%) required new or adjusted accommodations [8]. We propose several recommendations to reduce barriers to success for college students with disabilities, based on their multifaceted and evolving needs.



## Summary of Recommendations

Barriers to success for college students with disabilities are multi-layered and often intersect in complicated ways. Our recommendations here describe what we feel will provide the broadest reach for the most students with disabilities in postsecondary settings. The table below lists all of the recommendations proposed.

### Federal Level Change

- Develop College Promise programs for students with disabilities: College students with disabilities have specific needs in order to be successful. A College Promise Program specific to this population would increase access to funds.
- Rethink federal financial aid formula to include students taking reduced credits: The federal formula for financial aid should recognize students approved for reduced course loads. As such, those students should be treated as full-time students eligible for typical financial aid.
- Student financial support to obtain a diagnosis, evaluation, and/or assessment of disabilities: Lack of documentation prevents access to accommodations at many institutions. Providing financial assistance to allow students to obtain diagnosis, evaluation, or assessment will remove potential barriers.
- Funding to create a national training for disability awareness to dispel ableism: Stigma surrounding disability often prevents self-disclosure (and therefore receipt of services). Creating a national training for members of postsecondary institutions will increase knowledge, understanding, and reduce ableist behaviors.
- Standardize postsecondary-level identification procedures: Lack of standardization in procedures may prevent access to services creating inequitable opportunities for success from one college to another.

## Local Education Agency (LEA) and Higher Education Level Change

- High school training for transition service providers: Trained professionals will be able to better prepare students for the differences between high school and postsecondary settings.
- Use of evidence-based practices in high schools: Evidence-based practices increase the likelihood of more positive post-high school outcomes.
- Increase faculty knowledge of Universal Design practices: Instructors can design courses with accountability in mind using UDI procedures which can provide benefits for all students.
- Increase student opportunities to practice self-determination skills: Self-determination skills are a predictor of post-school success. Students must be explicitly taught these skills in PK-12 settings, coupled with opportunities to practice in all settings (including postsecondary settings).

Disability services offices typically evaluate students individually and determine accommodations on a case-by-case basis. While this practice may enable services to be individualized, it may also situate disability within the student, not as a result of an inaccessible environment. We know that disabled college students may require more support in order to be successful. Our recommendations here intend to support the holistic needs of college students with disabilities.



## References

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, The Economics Daily, People with a disability less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2015/people-with-a-disability-less-likely-to-have-completed-a-bachelors-degree.htm>
2. Cone, K. (n.d.). Short history of the 504 sit in. Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund. Retrieved from <https://dredf.org/504-sit-in-20th-anniversary/short-history-of-the-504-sit-in/>
3. Grossman, P. D. (2014). The greatest change in disability law in 20 years. In M. L. Vance, N. E. Lipsitz, and K. Parks (Eds.), *Beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act: Inclusive policy and practice for higher education* (pp. 3-20). Washington, D.C.: NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
4. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004)
5. Jaschik, S. (2019, August). College found to discriminate on mental health. Inside HigherEd. Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/08/27/new-college-florida-found-discriminate-against-applicants-mental>
6. Keenan, W. R., Madaus, J. W., Lombardi, A. R., & Dukes III, L. L. (2019). Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act on documentation for students with disabilities in transition to college: Implications for practitioners. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 42(1), 56-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143418809691>
7. Lipscomb, S., Hamison, J., Liu Albert Y., Burghardt, J., Johnson, D. R., Thurlow, M., National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (ED), & Mathematica Policy Research, I. (2017). *Preparing for Life after High School: The Characteristics and Experiences of Youth in Special Education. Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012. Volume 2: Comparisons across Disability Groups. Full Report. NCEE 2017-4018.* In National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.
8. Madaus, J. W., Gelbar, N., Faggella-Luby, M., and Dukes III, L. L. (2021). Experiences of students with disabilities during the COVID-19 interruption of in-person instruction. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 34(1), 5-18.
9. Scott, S.S. (2019). *Access and Participation in Higher Education: Perspectives of College Students with Disabilities.* NCCSD Research Brief, 2(2). Huntersville, NC: National Center for College Students with Disabilities, Association on Higher Education and Disability.
10. *The Rehabilitation Act of 1973: 45 Years of Activism and Progress* Retrieved from: <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/the-rehabilitation-act-of-1973-45-years-of-activism-and-progress/>
11. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2017* (2018-070).
12. U.S. Department of Justice. (2009). *Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended.* Retrieved from <https://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm>

Please see the following for a full copy of the report:

Millett, C. M. (Ed.) (2022). *Expanding Promise: Depicting the ecosystems of support and financial sustainability for five college promise populations* (Research Report No. RR-22-01). Educational Testing Service. [doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12350](https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12350).

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: [collegepromise.org](https://collegepromise.org) or email [info@collegepromise.org](mailto:info@collegepromise.org)