



National Disability Center
for Student Success

Research Review

Disabled Students in U.S. Postsecondary Education

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Contributors

Ryan A. Mata, MA

Doctoral Research Affiliate

Doctoral Candidate in the
Department of Educational
Psychology | Human Development,
Culture, and Learning Science

The University of Texas at Austin

Maura Borrego, PhD

Faculty Cadre Member

E. P. Schoch Professor in
Engineering | Professor in
Mechanical Engineering and STEM
Education

The University of Texas at Austin

Rising Enrollment, Yet Achievement Gaps Persist

More disabled students than ever are enrolled in postsecondary education.

- Having made strides through federal legislation, enrollment has steadily grown to more than quadruple past rates. (1,2,3,4)
- Non-apparent disabilities such as mental health conditions and attention deficit disorders are skyrocketing categories. (5)

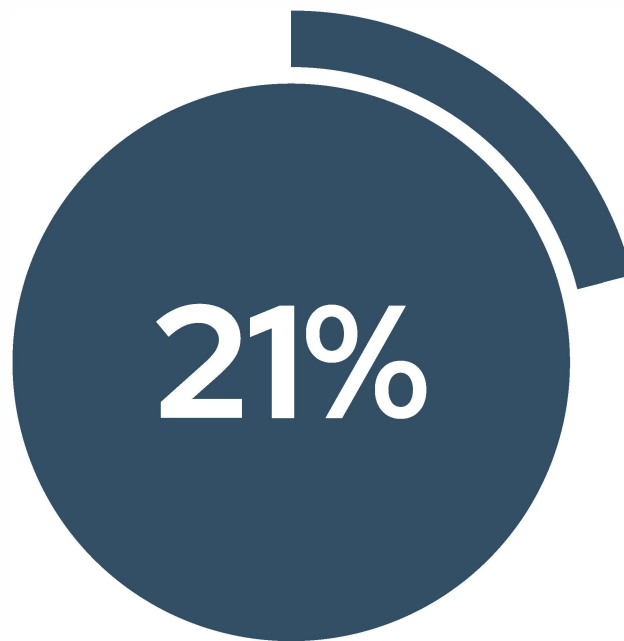
Yet their graduation and employment rates are lower.

- Students with disabilities graduated from college at lower rates than those without disabilities. (5)
- Those who did graduate were less likely to be employed full-time than peers without disabilities. (5)

The Undercount: A Lack of Disclosure and Awareness

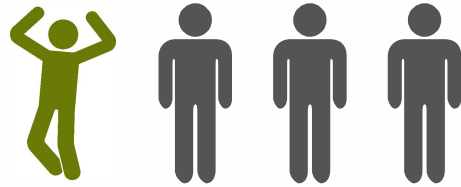
The numbers don't add up.

- As of 2019, there are reportedly more than three million disabled students across U.S. postsecondary education, making up nearly 21% of all students in higher education and about 20% of all four-year college students.



Disabled Students in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions

- However, the CDC estimates that one in four U.S. adults has at least one disability – an estimate that would equate to over 4 million disabled students. (9)



Up to

1 in 4

(or 27 percent) of adults over the age of 18 have at least one type of disability

The CDC estimate means

4M+

college students in the U.S. have a disability

(more than the population of the entire city of Los Angeles)

Students aren't disclosing their disabilities (or don't know they have one).

- Disability disclosure happens in both formal and informal ways, whether they have registered for accommodations or not, such as coordinating their learning needs with instructors or TAs and talking with classmates and other peers on campus.
- Only about half of students with disabilities disclose to their institution's disability services office. (10)
- For some postsecondary students, their disability isn't identified until college — either with an official diagnosis or the realization their existing health or mental condition is a disability and qualifies for accommodations.



“Disabled students can benefit from additional support beyond legal compliance, including from initiatives aiming to improve engagement and belonging and protect against dropout.”

(18,23)



There are hidden costs of disclosure.

- The bias against disabilities holds a lot of people back from disclosure, including discomfort sharing with peers due to fears of social stigmas or being met with disrespect. (11)
- Disabled students want to avoid embarrassment, being seen or treated differently, or simply don't find disclosure necessary or relevant to their studies. (12)

Persistence and the Path to Graduation

A disabled student enrolls. Now what?

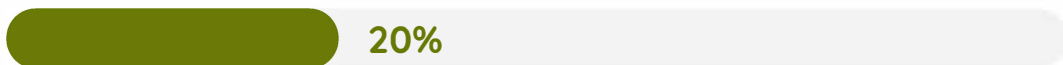
- Typical barriers to higher education include transitioning from secondary school, navigating campus, and registering for academic accommodations. (4,19,20,21,22)
- The good news: Census data reflects that between 2008 and 2021, degree achievement doubled from about 10% to 20% of all disabled adults aged 25-34. (13)

2008



10%

2021



20%

- However, persistence and program completion rates have only seen modest increases that routinely trail national averages and rates of non-disabled counterparts. (4,14)

Support resources can make a difference.

- Disabled students are more likely to stay in college after seeking and receiving campus support resources, including those universally available to all students and that do not require disability disclosure. (15)
- Some support is provided through special programs for disabled students, but most resources are a patchwork of accommodations for regular and typically inaccessible classroom experiences (and aren't usually available for non-classroom experiences on campus).
- Few students use the same accommodations in college as they did in high school. (16) Furthermore, the process for receiving accommodations is much different in college, and due to FERPA, parents cannot assist as they may have in secondary settings.

Tips and Strategies for Institutions

1. Understand your legal requirements.

More than one law supports disabled students' success in higher education — including Section 508's legal requirements for digital content accessibility.

2. Take an asset-based approach.

Disability is not the problem; an inaccessible system is the problem. Disabled students are not less than or lacking, and many statistics that compare outcomes about them use a deficit model.

3. Supports and resources work.

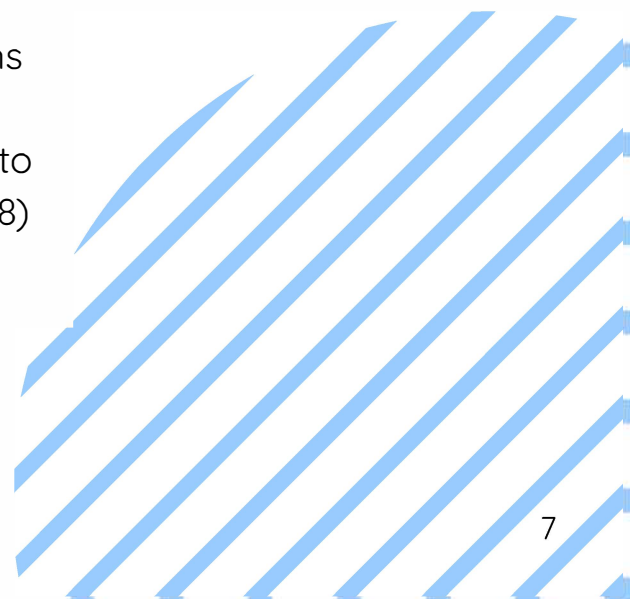
With proper support, resources, and accommodations from their institutions, faculty, and peers, disabled students can persist through their studies and complete their degrees.

4. Make support universal.

Design campus support resources that are universally available to all students and do not require disability disclosure. Be flexible and proactive with accommodation requests.

5. Access is more than accommodations.

Embrace a culture of inclusion by providing forms of support that extend beyond legal compliance offices on campus, to include initiatives that aim to bolster student engagement and belonging. (17,18)



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