



National Disability Center
for Student Success

Research Review

Intersectionality and Disability in Higher Education Research

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Intersectional Identity: More Than the Sum of Its Parts

Our individual identities – disability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, place of origin, first-generation – are both separate and together in the complexity of who we are.

Intersectionality theory – grounded in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw – helps to explain this complexity by emphasizing the compounding nature of oppression for people from multiple marginalized populations.

Intersectionality's role in research on disability in postsecondary education is an opportunity to bring layers, nuance, and individual differences – a diversity that can be reflected in research aims, methods, interpretations of findings, and recommendations for policy and practice

Address the Intersectional Experiences – Including Disability – of Your Study Population

Disability is not a “one-size-fits-all” experience as students navigate opportunities and obstacles on campus.

Their intersectional identities mean that there is great diversity within the disabled student experience – even beyond the many different kinds of apparent and non-apparent disabilities.

Ableism is embedded in many higher education policies and practices. To understand the disabled student experience, it is essential to also understand the intersectional experiences of ableism.

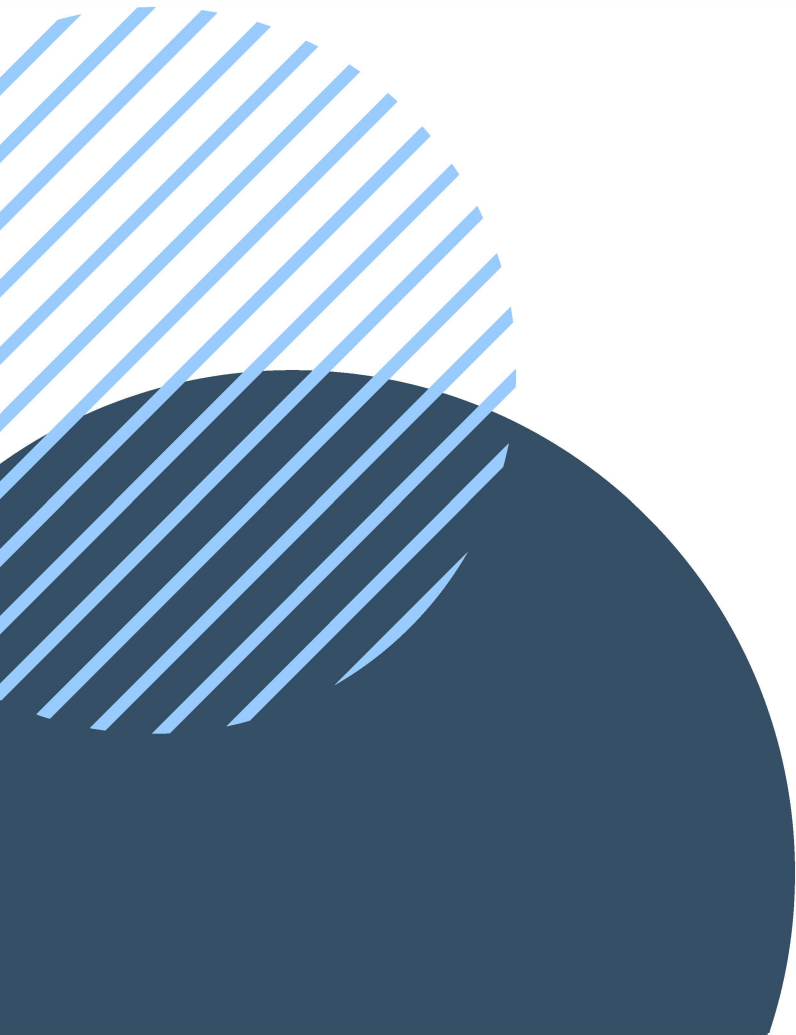




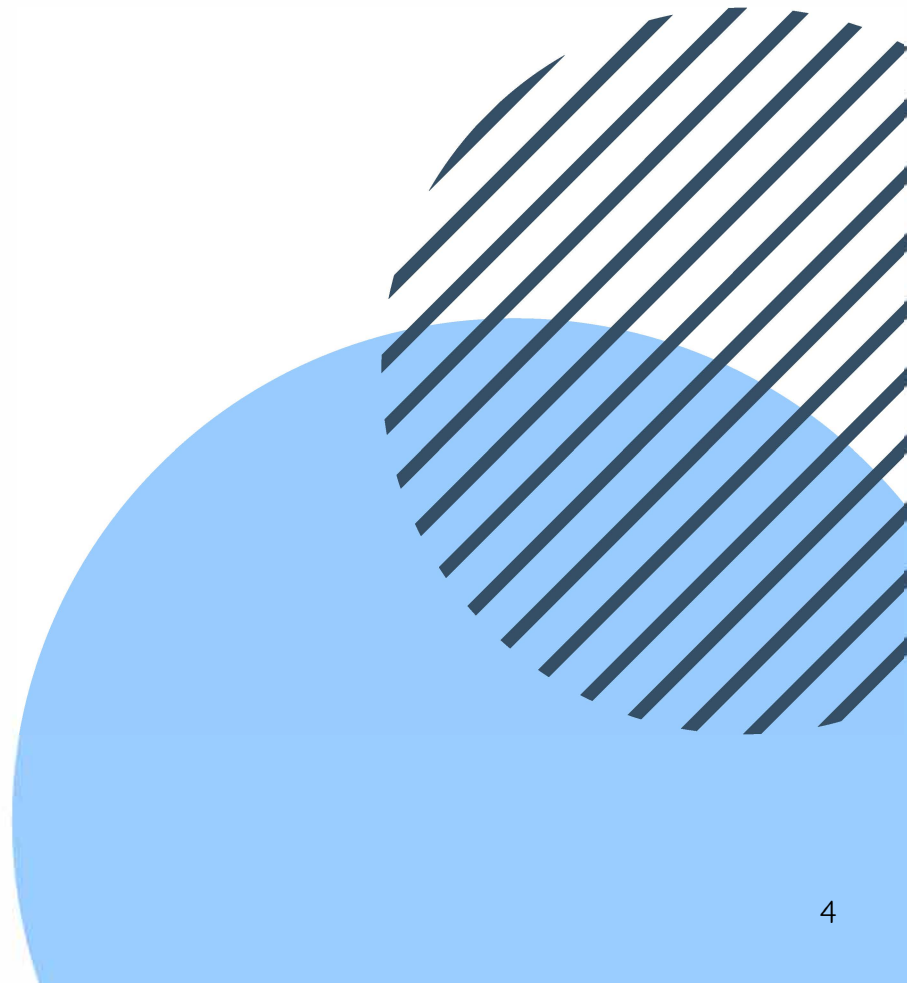
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Consider Disability Disclosure (or Lack Thereof)

Critical student decisions about disclosing a disability and navigating accessibility are challenging in institutions largely designed without intersectionality in mind.

Choosing not to disclose a disability (and not to receive institutional supports or accommodations) can be a strategy they use to protect themselves against negative stereotypes, particularly perceptions of laziness and incompetence.

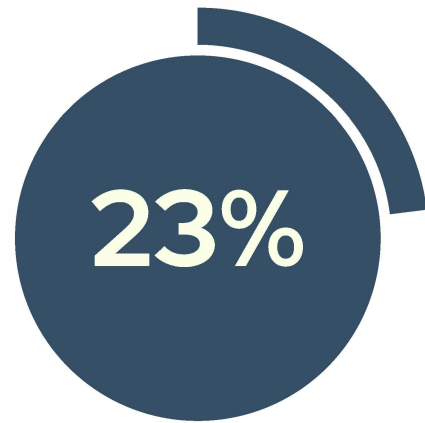
This strategic decision-making around disclosure leads to feelings of distress, isolation, and alienation. These contribute to disconnect and a lower rate of persistence to graduation.



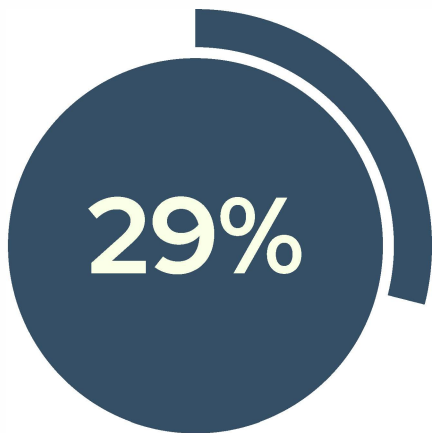
Postsecondary Students and Their Disability Disclosure



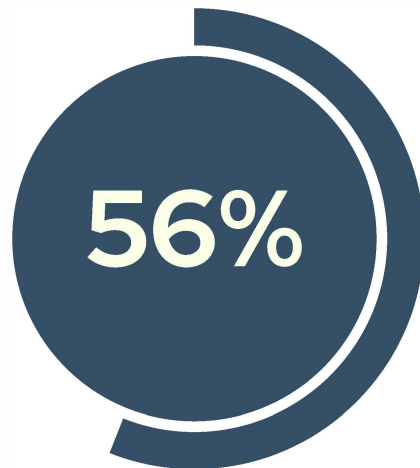
Disclose to Instructor
*(Without Official
Accommodation Letter)*



Disclose to Instructor
*(With Official
Accommodation Letter)*



Disclose to Institution



Disclose to Peers

Source: National Disability Center for Student Success College Accessibility Measure Survey, 2024

Research Can Address Hidden Barriers to Inclusive Learning Environments

Feelings of exclusion and low expectations about their potential from both peers and faculty are more likely to be reported by disabled students with intersectional identities.

Social navigation is required to deal with differences in apparent and non-apparent disabilities, fluctuating conditions, and a wide variety of classroom settings and expectations — which opens up judgments based on race and gender (beyond disability).

Disabled students are often tasked with educating their peers on top of managing the discrimination of their intersectional identities. This is an additional burden of time and energy.

Researchers have the opportunity to explicitly investigate the postsecondary experiences of disabled students from diverse, intersectional identities. This is both an opportunity and a great responsibility.



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Tips and Strategies for Researchers

1. Know Your Positionality

Know your own positionality within your research, especially as it relates to disability and intersectionality. Be transparent with your own experiences and perspectives.

2. Build Diverse Teams

Assemble a team with diverse experiences of disability, including their own. Bring an intersectional focus to measure development and study implementation.

3. Collect Intersectional Data

Gather detailed information about identity status across multiple categories. Pilot your items and questions with members of your target population and seek feedback.

4. Recognize Identity Variances

Be mindful that diagnosis labels and identity categories can differ and coexist in complex ways.

5. Allow Identity Combinations

Ensure surveys capture multiple identity combinations and report them as both separate and combined categories.

6. Amplify Student Stories

Numbers alone don't tell the full story. Use interviews and focus groups to highlight diverse student experiences.

7. Understand Disclosure Effects

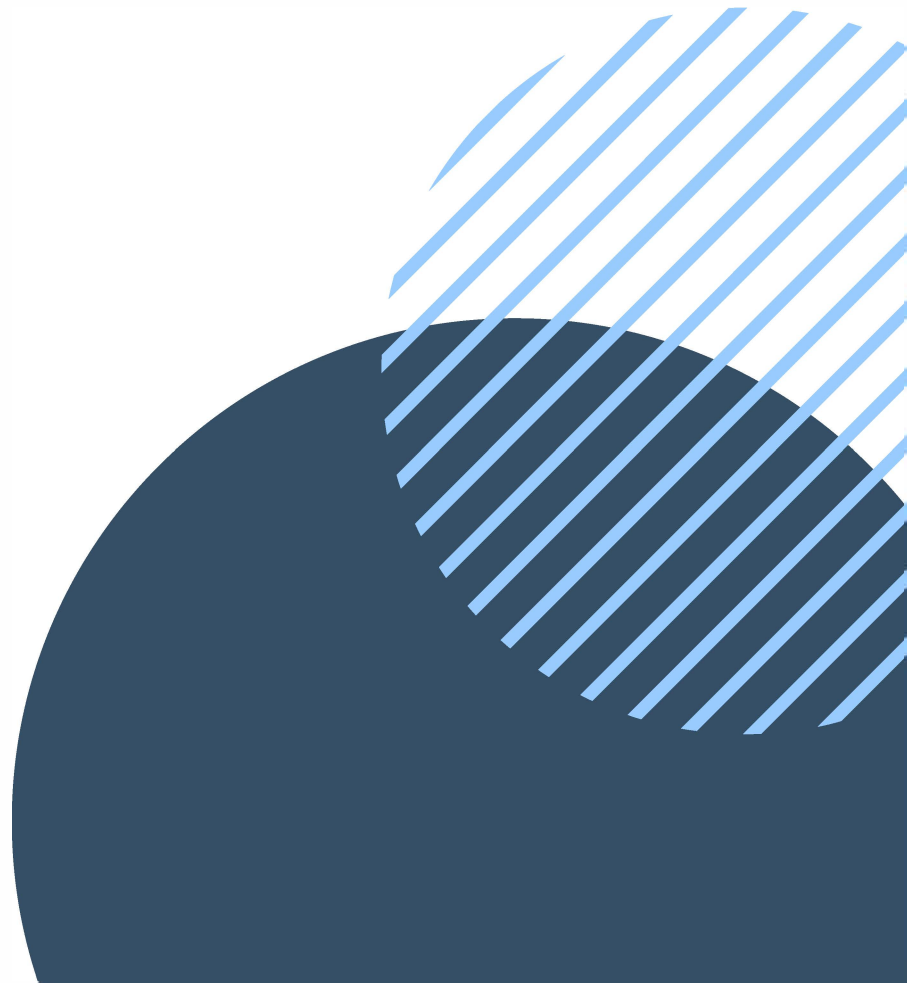
Be aware of how social pressures and disclosure impact the information gathered from students with intersectional identities.

8. Avoid Tokenism

Share findings that reflect the full range of perspectives without overgeneralizing or tokenizing certain experiences.

9. Consider Study Impact

Remember the broader effects and implications your research will have on communities and future studies.



Key References

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