



**National Disability Center**  
for Student Success

**Access Leads to Achievement:**

# **A National Report on Disabled College Student Experiences**

January 2025

NATIONAL REPORT



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# Acknowledgements

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## Other Acknowledgements

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## Disclaimers & Limitations

- The majority of our research sample is students from 4-year institutions.
- Correlation does not imply causation, so results should be interpreted accordingly.
- These results are not generalizable to all U.S. undergraduate students who have disabilities.
- The authors caution against drawing conclusions or making policy decisions beyond the scope of these findings.

## Research Measure Companion Report

In addition to this national report, there is a separate companion report for researchers, The Campus Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of the Disabled Student Experience in Postsecondary Education. Besides the complete survey detail, the research companion includes explanations about the measure development process, how disability constructs were measured, factor extraction and analysis, and survey administration. ([nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure](https://nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure))

## Suggested Citation

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# Research Team

The National Disability Center’s interdisciplinary research team is led by people with disabilities – faculty members, researchers, and postsecondary students – who collaborate on a student-centered, asset-based approach that prioritizes understanding disabled students’ experiences and obstacles.

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# Introduction: Innovations in Disability Research

## **The Reality on U.S. Campuses: Millions of Disabled Students are Eager to Succeed**

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Based on estimates of disability in the population from the Centers for Disease Control, over 4 million U.S. college students have a disability.

Despite increased enrollment, disabled students face persistent challenges in higher education. These students must navigate complex accommodation systems while overcoming social stigma. They also struggle with accessing classroom and campus environments, all while managing limited energy and resources.

Their outcomes suffer – studies show they are less likely to persist in their studies, graduate with degrees, and achieve their career goals – as do enrollment milestones for U.S. institutions that educate and train disabled young adults after high school.

Furthermore, the pandemic fundamentally changed how colleges deliver instruction and support services. This transformation created both opportunities and obstacles for disabled students, requiring the field to reexamine and reimagine accessible education for the post-pandemic era.

Findings from this study help to fill a critical knowledge and practice gap in higher education. This is partly due to the significant under-representation of disabled perspectives in research, leadership, and services. These evidence gaps can be seen in all postsecondary pathways – career and technical training, 2-year community college, and 4-year programs. There is, therefore, a disconnect between the lived experiences of disabled students, current policies and practices to support their postsecondary success, and the research foundation for future interventions.

## **The National Disability Center’s Response: A Student-Centered Approach and Development of a New Research Measure**

The National Disability Center is addressing these challenges by creating an actionable, innovative research foundation that centers disabled students’ voices and experiences.

Its approach recognizes disability as a form of expertise, builds on established research, explores new questions, and carefully examines how recent changes in higher education affect disabled students.

The creation, development, and implementation of the Campus Accessibility Measure (CAM) is at the core of the Center’s mission to help establish an actionable research foundation to support the success of disabled students in higher education.

This national report synthesizes CAM survey responses and interviews with diverse students navigating higher education with disabilities – highlighting key challenges, institutional responses, and opportunities for improvement. The findings reveal both systemic barriers and examples of effective support, suggesting areas for institutional policy development.

## About the Campus Accessibility Measure

The findings in this report utilized the College Accessibility Measure (CAM), developed by National Disability Center researchers to provide a comprehensive assessment tool that prioritizes disabled students’ experiences and perspectives while remaining applicable for evaluation of accessibility for the entire student body.

By measuring accessibility in a holistic manner, including student engagement – which research increasingly identifies as a crucial factor in student persistence, retention, and achievement – the CAM has the potential for use in many other research areas. For example, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, a National Disability Center research partner, is using a subset of items from the CAM measure as a module on their Community College Survey of Student Engagement in early 2025.

For more detailed information about this new research measure and how to implement it in your research, see the companion report for researchers, *The Campus Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of the Disabled Student Experience in Postsecondary Education* ([nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-research](https://nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-research)).

### The Campus Accessibility Measure:

- Conceptualizes accessibility at three levels: Classroom, Campus, and Social Engagement.
- Captures accessibility experiences of both disabled and non-disabled students.
- Provides contextual information about disabled student experiences on campus.

## One-On-One Student Interviews Deepen CAM Insights

Disabled students are at the heart of the work of the National Disability Center. The student-led research team conducted an innovative qualitative study to deeply understand how disabled students navigate college life. Through in-depth conversations with 24 disabled students from across the nation in August 2024, researchers gained valuable insights into their lived experiences, daily challenges, and campus successes. This report incorporates those interview findings – in the voices of the disabled students themselves.

### Why This Research Matters: Access Leads to Achievement


Simply opening doors to postsecondary education isn't enough. As educators, administrators, leaders, and researchers, we must ensure disabled students have the support they need to complete their degrees and transition successfully to careers. Every student deserves the opportunity to fully participate in campus life and thrive both academically and personally.

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 When you see these icons throughout the report, you are gaining insights directly from disabled students themselves.

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 The quotation mark signifies a written open-ended response by a student in the CAM Survey. The microphone signifies a verbal quote from a student during their one-on-one interview online.

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# Key Findings: Understanding the Disabled Student Experience



## Disabled Students are Arriving on Campus Undiagnosed

Half of disabled college students in our survey weren't diagnosed with their disability until college. Providing diagnostic resources may be an unexpected part of supporting the disabled student experience for colleges and postsecondary institutions.



## One Size Does Not Fit All

Student identities are complex and many resist being described in just one way. Furthermore, the disabled student experience on campus is very different from the non-disabled student experience. Disabled students are less socially engaged, struggle with daily barriers, perceive their campus differently, feel isolated and misunderstood – and some decide to transfer or drop out as a result.



## Yet Disability is More Common Than Ever

Disability prevalence is far higher than expected, but many disabled students are not disclosing their disability status to their institutions, instructors, or even – for fully one-third of them – their peers and friends on campus.



## Students May Not Tell You About Their Disability

Non-disclosure is pervasive among disabled college students, even with friends and roommates.



## Disabled Student Success Hangs in the Balance

Students repeatedly told us that because of a lack of access and inclusion on campus and in classrooms, their grades suffered, they initiated transfer or withdrawal actions, or they questioned their self-worth and hopes and dreams for the future.



# Top Recommendations to Improve the Disabled Student Experience

The findings in this report provide U.S. postsecondary institutions with significant insights for improvement of their student experiences and success rates. This report can be used as a starting point for more in depth data collection at your own campus or program. From instructors to staff members to administrators, each person on campus can play an important role in supporting disabled students as they enroll, persist, and complete their education and training.

## **Understand What's Working (and What's Not)**

In some cases, improving accessibility and inclusion for disabled students can be connected to existing student success efforts on your campus. In other cases, true access and inclusion will come about only with a better understanding of the unique experiences of disabled students, a greater awareness that the Americans with Disabilities Act is the floor (not the ceiling) for accommodations, and an acknowledgement that a campus-wide shift in attitudes and approaches may need to happen.

## **Want to Reach Disabled Students? Target Everyone**

The CAM survey was not targeted specifically to disabled students due to their historically low level of self-disclosure to their institutions. When doing student surveys or implementing new accommodations processes, institutions should communicate to all students – not just those registered for accommodations – to capture all disabled students and because everyone will benefit.

## **Address Ableism**

Many students shared strong feelings about being marginalized and unsupported, labeling their experiences as “ableist.” This reflects a broader concern about negative instructor attitudes and institutional barriers faced by students with disabilities.

## Rethink Rigid Attendance Policies

The inflexibility of attendance requirements is highlighted as a significant barrier. Even when students complete assignments on time, a strict attendance policy can adversely impact student grades, suggesting a need for more understanding and adaptable approaches to what it means to participate in educational settings. Enhance support for disabled students with flexible attendance policies, better training for staff on mental health issues, and more proactive accommodations, such as incentivizing note-taking.

## Start Early

Awareness-raising about disability and access needs for disabled students must start before they even apply. Engage with all student success offices on campus to ensure they are mindful of disability in their programming and outreach. Strategies to support their success can begin during enrollment and then continue throughout their college journey – including extracurricular activities and student gatherings – to encourage persistence and degree completion.

## Prioritize Their Support Priorities

Make a big difference by focusing on what matters most to disabled college students. That includes:

- Simplified accommodation request processes
- Consistent implementation of approved accommodations
- Greater faculty understanding and flexibility
- Enhanced peer support opportunities
- More accessible learning modality options

## Make Short-Term Updates

- Streamline accommodation processes to reduce the overhead and resources required
- Implement flexible attendance policies, reducing the emphasis on points-for-participation
- Expand online learning options so that students have flexibility in how they participate
- Provide faculty training on disability awareness and accessibility strategies

## ✓ Plan Long-Term Initiatives

- Develop comprehensive mental health support systems
- Create accessible spaces for disability community building
- Establish consistent cross-departmental accommodation policies
- Build institutional capacity for hybrid learning options

## ✓ Tap the Resources of the National Disability Center

From the Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series to our twice-yearly online Townhalls, the National Disability Center for Student Success has resources, research, and opportunities for engagement for all postsecondary institutions.



# Survey of U.S. Postsecondary Students

After several rounds of pilot and measure development, the National Disability Center collected data on the full Campus Accessibility Measure in June 2024. A summary of study results are provided here.

From an initial pool of 532 participants recruited through Prolific.co, 501 eligible responses were retained after screening. Participants were U.S.-based students aged 18 or older enrolled in higher education programs.

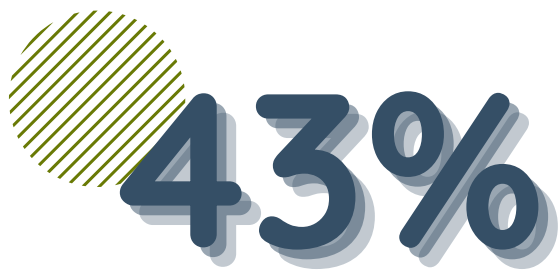
## Demographics of Students Surveyed: Diversity on U.S. Campuses

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The students surveyed represented demographics as diverse as U.S. campuses are today. Intersectionality, or how 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, plays a crucial role in disability research.

These survey findings frequently show that students are thoughtfully approaching their identities, opting to describe themselves in complex ways instead of a “one-size-fits-all” description. Because the researchers allowed a “select all that apply” option for many questions, the students surveyed took advantage of the opportunity to be specific and embrace their complex identities.

Of the 501 survey participants, 189 students identified themselves as disabled – or 38%, with another 7% either unsure or preferred not to say – numbers that are far higher than the percentages typically cited in higher education research or administration. This study focused on disability, chronic health, or mental health conditions that have lasted 4 months or longer – at least the length of a semester – and broad enough to include a broad range of temporary, congenital, acquired, and complex conditions.



Students Identified as Disabled

More than one-third (38%) of the overall sample were first-generation college students or the first people in their families to attend college – reflecting a potential need for resources in navigating, understanding, or supporting a successful higher education experience – resources that have also been associated with degree persistence and completion.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 57 years, with a median age of 22.

Most attended 4-year institutions (87%), with smaller numbers in 2-year colleges (8%) and technical/trade programs (4%). The student population spanned all academic years, including 41 first-year students, 106 second-year, 146 third-year, 166 fourth-year, and 41 students in their fifth or higher year. Only 1% were international students.



Years Old Median Age

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“ Having a disability means I have to do things in ways that are not always traditional and sometimes very difficult. My disability experience overlaps with other identities by the discrimination in society that people that have my disability experience, similar to people that are mistreated because of their gender or race in society.

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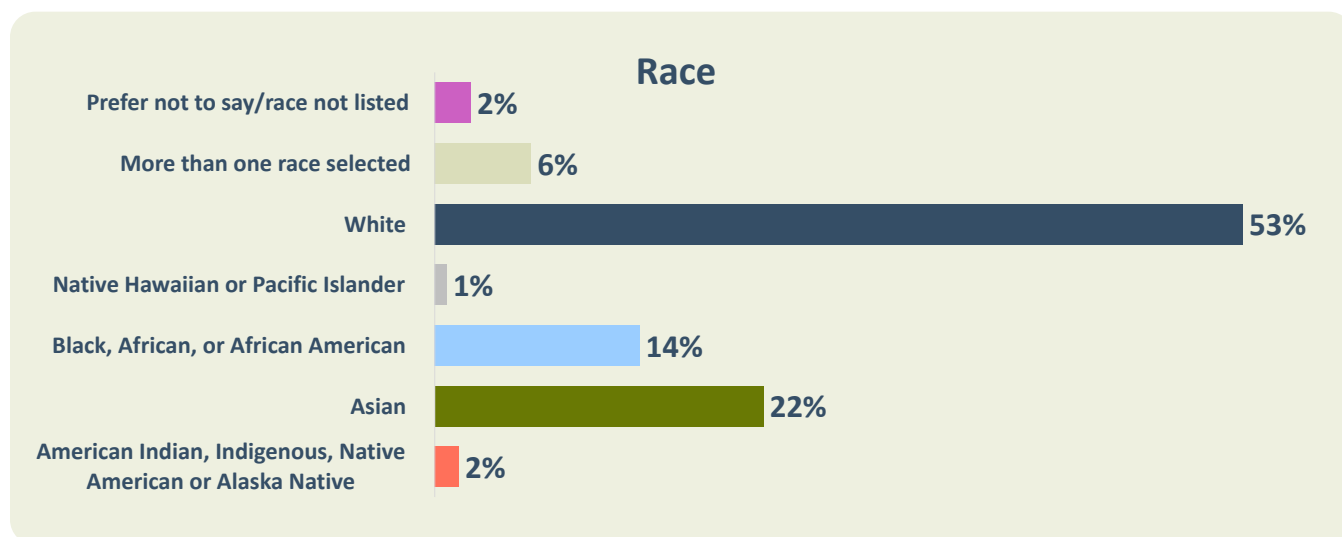
## Race and Ethnicity

To understand their race and ethnicity, the students were asked which responses best described them and were invited to select all that applied. Thirty two students (6.39%) selected more than one race, with myriad racial and ethnic combinations.

There were several questions about ethnicity in addition to race, with opportunities to choose more than one identity.

### Of the 15% of respondents of Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or of Spanish origin, they were:

- Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano/a 9%
- Puerto Rican 3%
- Other Hispanic, Latino/a/e, or of Spanish origin (e.g., Argentinean, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvordian, Spaniard) 3%
- Cuban 1%



“ I have an autoimmune condition and as a black woman who’s already overlooked in health care this makes it hard to receive treatment.

“ Having a mental health disability as an Indian woman sometimes makes me feel like I’m not living up to the “standards” for Indian people.

“ I think as a woman, people take disabilities less seriously than they would if I was a man. (i.e., people think I am more likely to be faking).

## Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

The survey also asked demographic information about gender identity and sexual orientation, two items that arose as important to students during the measure development process. Most of the students selected cisgender categories when asked about their gender identity in the survey, with 50% women and 42% men.

The remaining 4% chose two or more gender options, 3% were non-binary, and a total of 1% chose either gender-queer, gender-fluid, transgender man, transgender woman, two-spirit, no identification with any gender (agender), or prefer not to say.

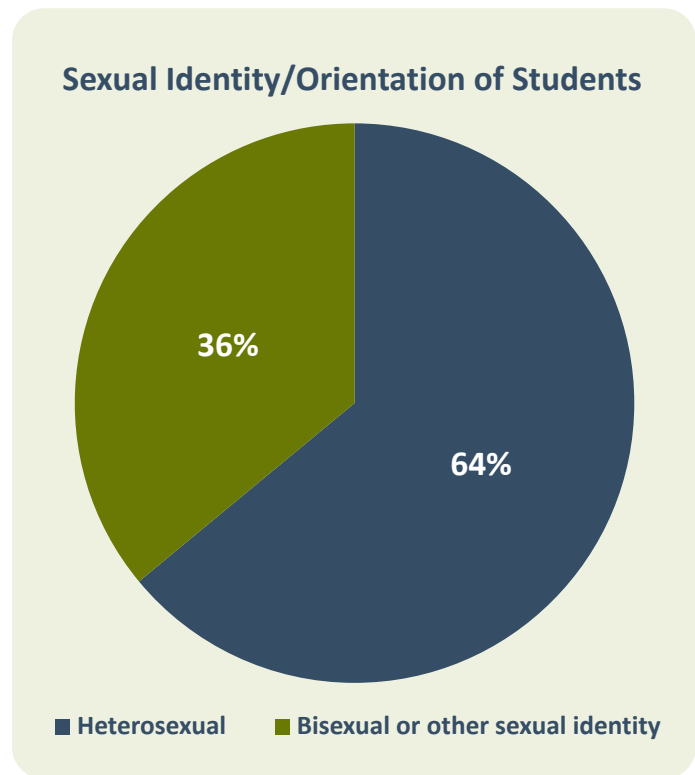
When it comes to sexual identity and orientation, only 64% described themselves as straight or heterosexual – far lower than most national averages – and 14% of the students were bisexual. The remaining 22% were either asexual, fluid, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, questioning, or selected two or more sexual identity options.

“ It feels like being the odd one out sometimes being a sexual minority with a mental illness.”

### What best describes your sexual identity/sexual orientation?

*(Please select all that apply)*

- Asexual 2%
- Bisexual 14.17%
- Fluid 0.4%
- Gay 2.2%
- Lesbian 3.59%
- Pansexual 2.99%
- Queer 1.4%
- Questioning or Unsure 0.8%
- Straight/Heterosexual 63.67%
- Prefer not to say 1%
- Not listed 0.4%
- Two options selected 5.99%
- Three or more options selected 1.4%

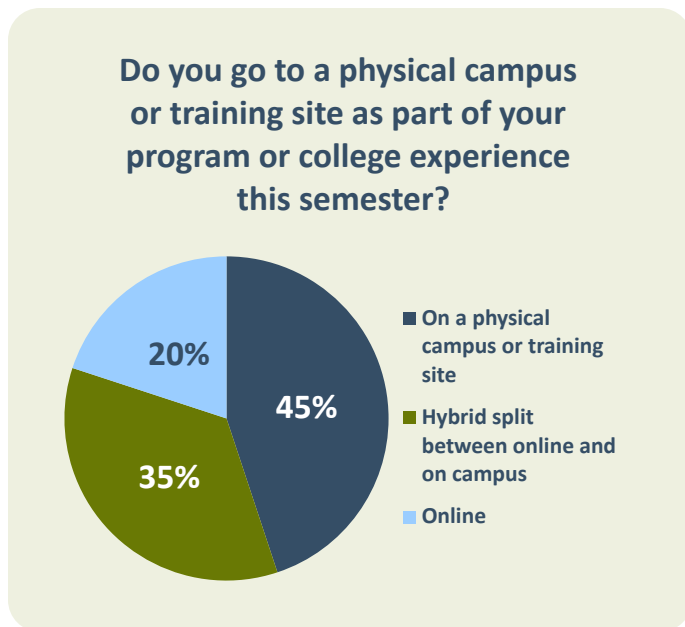
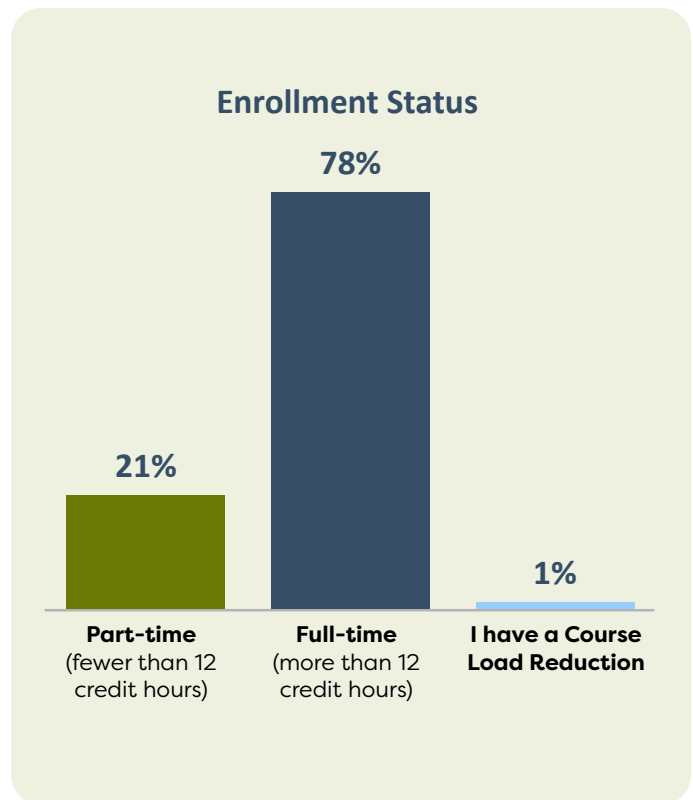


## Enrollment Status and Location

Most students surveyed were enrolled in college full-time (78%). Very few had a course load reduction, reflecting a lack of use of an option for disabled students experiencing a medical, psychological, or other setback.

More than half of the students surveyed were learning online, either all of it (20%) or a hybrid split between online learning and going to a physical campus or training site (35%). Strategies implemented during the pandemic are possible resources for campuses seeking additional ways to improve accessibility for their disabled students.

More than half of students (55%) either took academic or training classes online or as a hybrid split between online and a physical campus.



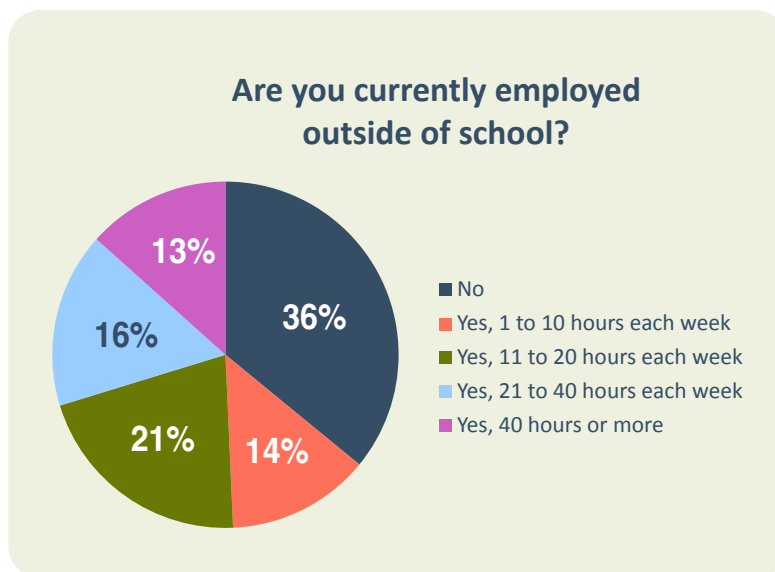
“ Being disabled is hard but has given me resilience and patience. I’m more empathetic because of the pain I go through and my struggles. I just wish it wasn’t so hard sometimes. If I try to interact with others in my communities, transportation and mobility are a problem. I feel isolated from others and housebound.



## Employment

Time management is a significant task for all undergraduates and especially those who are navigating disability and accessibility challenges. More than two-thirds of the students surveyed (64%) were employed outside of school, splitting their time each week between their studies, extracurricular activities, and earning income. For many

first-generation students, in particular, this can be an economic necessity because their scholarships may not cover living expenses or familial needs.



“ I have to be more aware of my limitations and prioritize rest and sleep while also managing the expectations of work, school and family. [Disability] overlaps with my gender some because as a mom, I’m expected to be everything to everyone and sometimes my needs are the last ones met but if I don’t prioritize my needs, I am sometimes physically unable to complete the demands of me.

## The Disabled Student Experience: Disability Prevalence, Types, Disclosure, and Accommodations

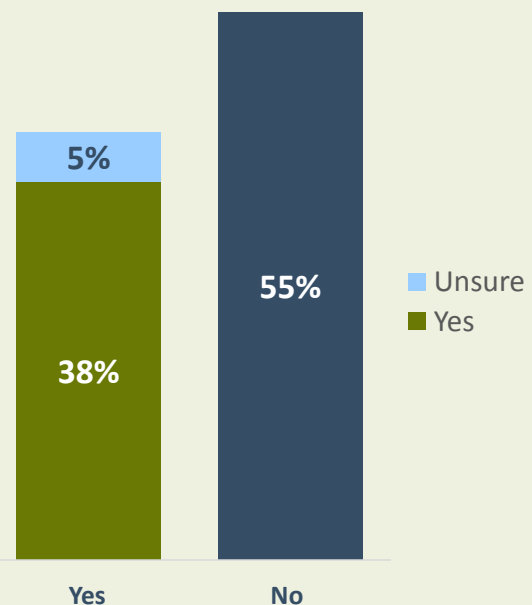
This next section of the report dives deep into the data related to disability and the disabled college student experience. We pull out several key themes that arose from responses of students who identified as having a disability. These are auxiliary experiences to accessibility itself and provide important insights into how disabled students perceive themselves and their experiences with both formal and informal supports in postsecondary education.

### Disability Prevalence Is Higher Than Expected

The survey was not targeted specifically to disabled students due to their historically low level of self-disclosure to their institutions and a desire to understand accessibility from diverse points of view. The survey began with a broad question to gain information about their potential disability status. This question was then used to route the survey to follow up questions about disability based on their initial response.

In the survey, 38% of students identified themselves as disabled, a percentage that jumps to 43% when combined with unsure (5%).

Do you have a disability, chronic health, or mental health condition that has lasted 4 months or longer?



### Why offer “unsure” and “prefer not to say” as options?

During the pilot studies and cognitive interviews, the researchers learned that some college students don't know their physical or mental health conditions qualify them as disabled, were in the process of diagnosis, or it was an emerging awareness. Those that prefer not to say may also be concerned about stigma or privacy. Students with this response were excluded from follow up questions that focused specifically on disability related experiences.

## And why is “unsure” included with the affirmative responses?

Students who responded with “unsure” were provided with the opportunity to respond to follow-up questions that focused specifically on disability related experiences. What we found is that these students primarily had mental health conditions, in line with what is often a grey area for students in understanding what “counts” as a disability. They also were likely to list self-diagnosis and diagnosis from a family member.

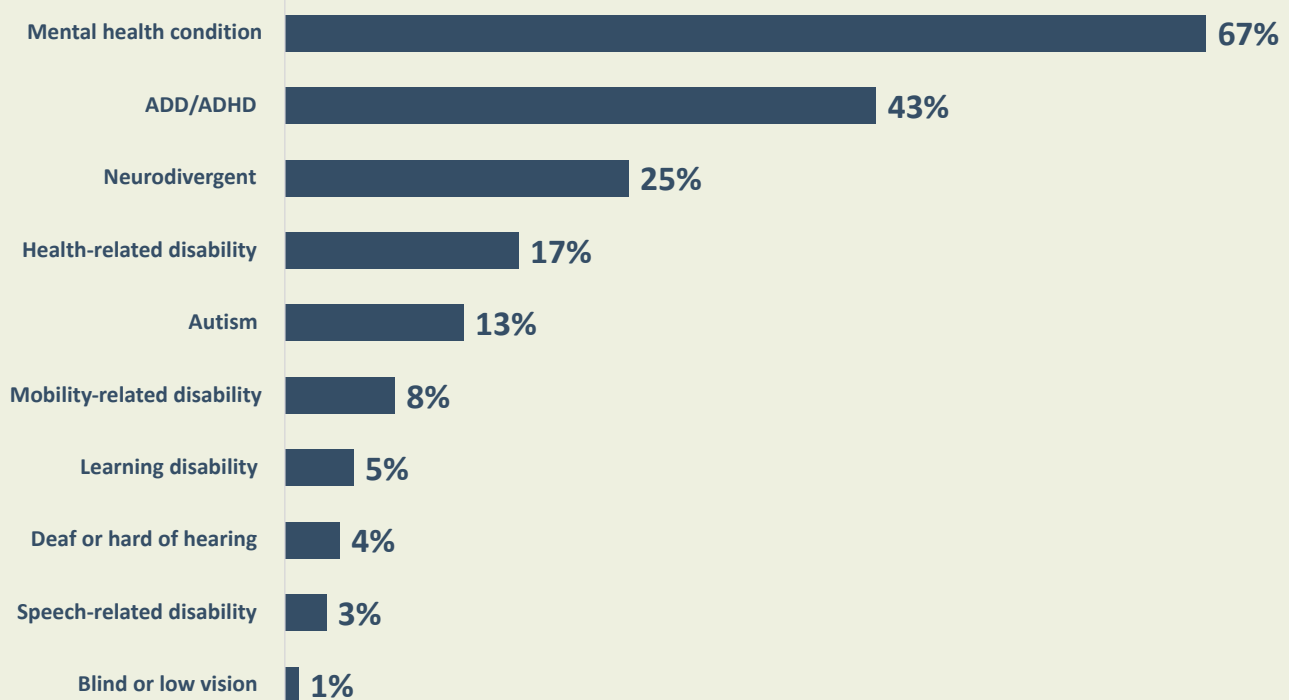
Using this phrasing and reasoning, 43% of our sample indicated that they have a disability, which is higher than estimates based on disclosure to an institution, which is at about 21% (US Census), but is more in line with estimates of how many students having disabling conditions while in postsecondary settings.

## Disability Types: A Complex Profile

The different types of disabilities students reported are both varied and in line with estimates that mental health and ADD/ADHD are the highest prevalence.

In the survey, a mental health condition is the disability most often reported (67%), followed by ADD or ADHD (43%) and neurodivergence (25%). For more on the development of these categories and insights from the pilot process, see the research companion ([nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure](http://nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure)).

### More Than 60% of Disabled Students Report Mental Health Conditions



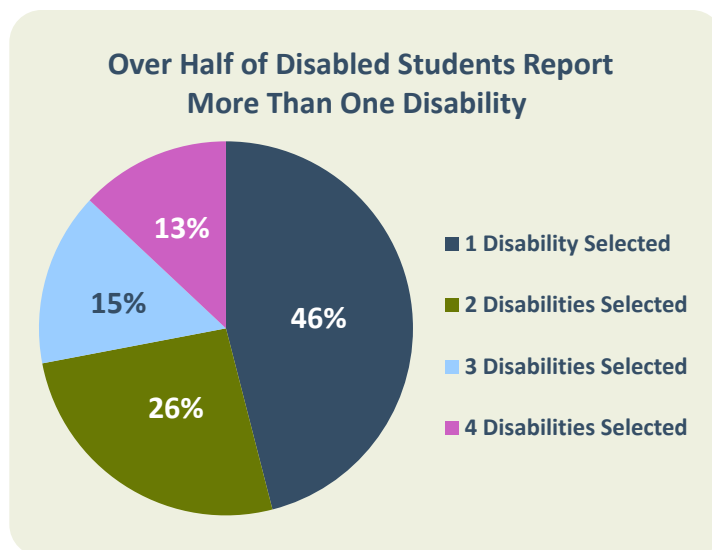
Critically, though, more than half of disabled students reported more than one disability – indicating a complex multi-disability profile that reflects their diverse identities and needs.

## Half of Disabled Students Are Diagnosed While in College

Students were also asked for insights into their diagnostic background – how their disability was diagnosed or identified and when it happened.

This was another complex category because, for many disabled people, the path to diagnosis is a meandering process involving a variety of people, from parents to medical providers to educators. That pathway was reflected in the survey responses, with many disabled students choosing a combination of diagnostic sources.

Medical diagnosis from a doctor was the top response either on its own or in combination with other diagnostics (71%), followed by therapist or mental health clinician (43%).



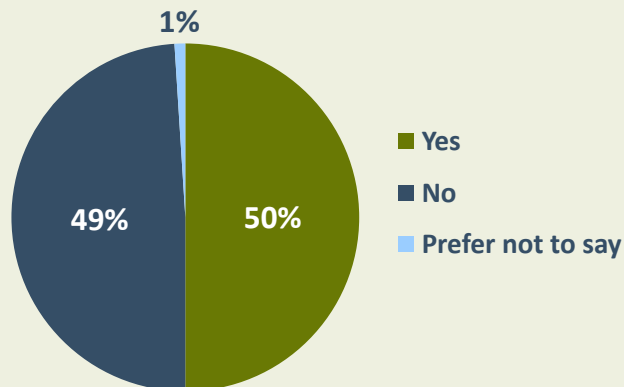
“ My generation has been very vocal about mental health being taken more serious, so I am not ashamed of my mental illness, and it doesn’t define me either.

“ I wouldn’t consider my mental illness to be a disability but I feel like an outsider. As a woman of color, people think I’m standoffish when I am just feeling anxious in a social setting.

### Are students diagnosing themselves?

The CAM survey shows self diagnosis (18% in combination with other diagnostics and only 5% as the sole source) as relatively low and likely the spark to seek official diagnoses. Other diagnostic options included psychological or academic testing, teacher referral, and parent or family member.

### Was your disability first diagnosed or identified during college?



“ When I first came to college, I did not know that my mental health disorder was considered a disability. I also had no idea that I was able to qualify for accommodations. The accommodations have helped me out tremendously with my coursework.

As for when their disabilities are being diagnosed — prior to arriving on campus or after they enrolled — half of disabled college students (50%) reported their disabilities were first diagnosed or identified during college.

What are the ramifications of such a high rate of diagnosis in college? It means these disabled students do not have documentation from high school of their diagnosis or accommodations and may be seeking a diagnostic role from their college — likely another unexpected part of managing the disabled student experience for many postsecondary institutions.

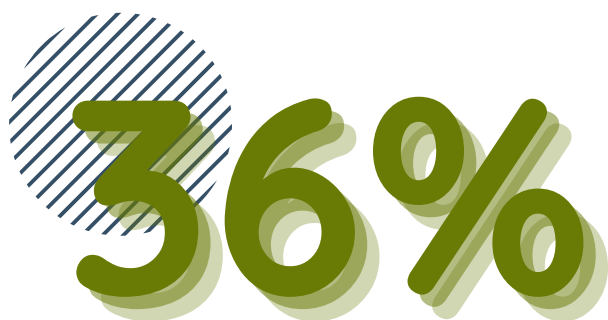
## Disclosing Their Disability: A Significant and Not-So-Simple Decision

Disclosure of their disability status to classmates and friends, professors and instructors, and institutions and staff can affect students' experience of college life both socially and academically.

In some cases, disclosure can be an enabling act for accessing both legally mandated and other institutional supports, which can be crucial to student success, well-being, and retention. However, despite the documented benefits of academic accommodations, disabled students must reconcile whether these outweigh the potential to be stigmatized and have their disability status revealed and made broadly visible through institutional labeling.

Whether or not to disclose their disability is a significant component of how students navigate higher education – if they choose to disclose it to their institutions, instructors, employers, and even their peers and roommates.

This survey first asked students if they had shared information about their disability with anyone on campus. Of those who did indicate disclosure, we followed up with separate questions about disclosure to friends, instructors, and the institution (e.g., to the accommodations or student services office). Students shared information for each of these disclosure categories, providing a nuanced picture of disclosure decisions in postsecondary education.



### Don't Disclose Their Disability to Anybody on Campus

Over a third (36%) did not disclose to anyone about their disability. A follow up question about why they chose not to disclose revealed a range of reasons, including feelings of shame, concerns about being seen as weak, prioritizing privacy, or that they haven't had a reason to disclose.

The remainder of this section focuses on those students who did disclose to someone on campus, or 64% of students in this survey who had a disability. Perhaps not surprisingly, the vast majority (88%) disclosed to friends, which can include roommates or others that they have a close relationship with.

Our second focus was on instructors and teaching assistants, who are often the front line of disclosure, particularly when students are advocating for greater accessibility. In the survey students were able to indicate if they shared information with their instructors with and without an official letter from the institution. Of students who had disclosed to someone on campus, 64% had shared with an instructor or teaching assistant. Of those, only 58% of those had done so with the support of a letter from the accommodations office. This means that nearly half of students are approaching their instructors about accommodations without a letter from their student services office.

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“ It's something I'm embarrassed about and try to hide it as much as I can.”

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This trend continues in the final question about disclosure. Of those students that had disclosed to someone on campus, under half, or 47%, shared that information with an accommodations or student services office. Even with the high prevalence of students who identified as having a disability in this sample, relatively few disclose to their institutions in an official capacity.

Disclosing their disability or not disclosing their disability – in particular, non-apparent disabilities such as neurodivergence and mental health conditions, which are not readily visible (or understood) – weighs heavily on many interactions between disabled postsecondary students and their peers, instructors, and school administrators.

These interactions are the foundations of their postsecondary experiences – and potentially their success – in class and on campus, yet they feel they must carefully navigate and provide this information strategically and based on a variety of contexts:

- **Their needs:** How will disclosing help me?
- **Power dynamics:** Will they use it against me? Will it affect my grade?
- **Relevance of the information:** Is disclosing necessary?
- **Past disclosure experiences:** Will I be stigmatized, doubted, or worse?
- **Observed attitudes and behaviors of others:** Will their ableism be directed at me?
- **Apparentness of their disability:** If they can't notice it, why should I tell them?

Some students may choose not to disclose their disabilities out of concern that they will be embarrassed, ostracized, disrespected, or not believed by others. Some students also want to avoid prejudice or misunderstanding from faculty, and at times draw on previous negative experiences and interactions regarding their disability.

Another disclosure factor is that students feel expected to “explain” their disability and share personal details about themselves to peers and instructors who regard them with inappropriate curiosity, prejudice, or ignorance.

The large discrepancy between the number of students who report their disability versus the number of students who receive disability services and accommodations highlights a potential group of students who do not perceive the relevance of their

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“ Disability is something that is a part of me and impairs my day-to-day life that can be helped in some ways. I think that there is a similar struggle in feeling misunderstood or looked down on.

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disability to their learning needs. This gap may also include undergraduates who are stymied by bureaucratic accommodations processes that require significant student investment of resources and self-advocacy to prove their disability and learning needs.

From a proactive stance, however, some students sometimes employ disclosure to prevent or clear up misunderstandings, misconceptions, or even negative attitudes about them.

Other students mentioned in-class interactions, such as discussion boards being an opportunity to share personal details about themselves, including their disabilities. Students, particularly those enrolled in hybrid and online courses with a robust digital component, often referenced discussion boards as a key mechanism for engaging with peers, instructors, and their course content.

Disability disclosure is not a simple or straightforward process – and institutions are not responsible for providing many academic accommodations if students do not disclose first.

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“ Before I disclose [my autism and ADHD] to them, a lot of my behavior may come off as, you know, not caring about class or not trying... They just don't really have context behind my behaviors, and so it appears that way. And then, after I have the conversation with them, they're a lot more warm and understanding towards me.

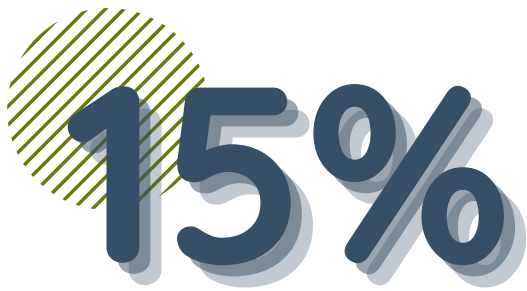
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## Accommodations: The Transition From Secondary to Postsecondary Education

Students who come to college with previous documentation and accommodations experiences have a different pathway than students who first learn of their disability in college. The latter must cope with the diagnosis process and have to navigate accommodations requests essentially from scratch (and, due to federal privacy laws, without assistance from their parents or caregivers).

Most research related to disability and higher education focuses on accommodation use. For accommodations use at college, researchers collect information from those who said they had disclosed to their institutions with an accommodations letter. However, CAM research shows low rates of disclosure, low accommodations use in high school, and low accommodations use in college.



**Disabled College Students Who Had a 504, IEP, or Accommodations in High School**

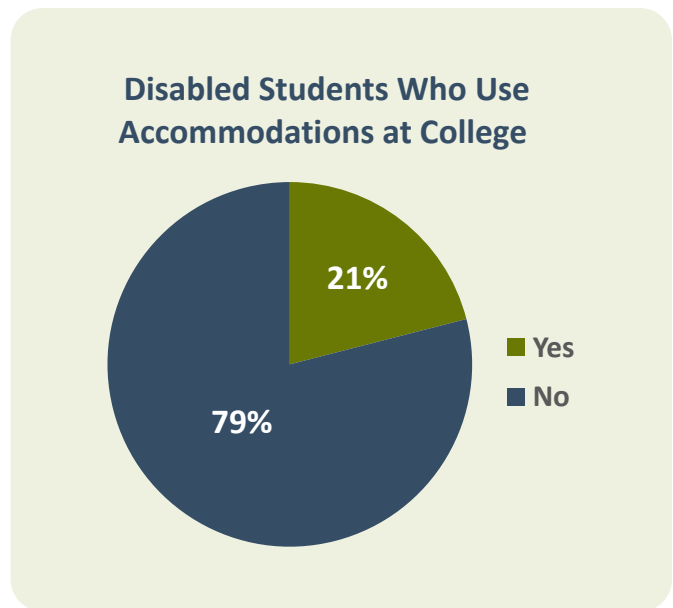
The CAM survey revealed just 15% of the disabled students responded “yes” when asked if they had previously provided accommodations and individualized K-12 education services (e.g., Individualized Education Plans or “IEPs” and 504 Plans) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 and Rehabilitation Act.

Of those students who responded “yes,” to receiving accommodations in high school, 50% used multiple accommodations. The primary accommodation they used was extra time on tests and assignments (59%), mostly in combination with quiet or separate settings for assignments and tests.

Others checked they had directions read aloud, sign language interpreters, graphic organizers or structured instructions, note taking support, assistive technology, captioning, and alternative formats for the course materials or assignments.

When asked what other accommodations they used that were listed, some students wrote in unrestricted bathroom access, custom schedule, excused from oral presentations, and waived attendance.

This low prevalence or high school accommodations means that college is the first time many of these students are dealing with the complicated world of accommodations – a process that can be jarring and difficult to navigate for incoming students. Official medical diagnoses are typically important prerequisites for receiving academic accommodations. Letters from doctors, therapists, and social workers outlining students’ disability and accessibility needs are considered alongside student petitions and testimony when registering for accommodations. This registration process—when including diagnosis, preparing paperwork, and holding appointments with staff—sometimes takes months to receive approval depending on institutional resources.



Student responses on the CAM survey (see next section) reflected mixed experiences with the ease, speed, and timeliness of the accommodation registration process – indicating a highly bureaucratic system for disabled student support that is inaccessible and discouraging, if not ironic and ableist.

When the students who responded “yes” were asked what kind of accommodations they currently use in college, extra time on tests and assignments continued to be the top response, either as the sole accommodation (25%) or in combination with other accommodations (48%).

#### **Accommodations currently used in college include:**

- Extra time on tests and assignments 48%
- Quiet or separate settings for assignments and tests: 32%
- Alternative formats for course materials and assignments: 16%
- Assistive technology: 14%
- Note taking support: 9%
- Speech to text for assignments: 4%
- Captioning (in combination): 4%
- Large print or Braille (in combination): 2%
- Sign language interpreters: 2%
- Graphic organizers: 2%
- Not used: Dictionaries or glossaries; directions read aloud

**Accommodations that were written in by respondents were:**

- Ability to remotely finish assignments due to long Covid-19
- Emotional support animal allowed
- Breaks during class
- Excused from oral presentations
- Priority registration
- Reduced course load
- Time off
- Single room housing

And yet for the majority of disabled students in college, they are not using formal supports and may instead rely on other resources to facilitate academic and social engagement.

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“ Definitely making it easier for students to be able to get these accommodations when they need them, and not having to drag the process out.

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“ I hate [my disability] to be honest. It makes my life much harder. It’s annoying and frustrating to keep needing to explain myself for the most useless accommodations and meaningless pity. It does not help that I am a young woman, Indian, and bisexual. I ran around several offices for basic accommodations and my college did not help me one bit. At one point they said the best I could do is transfer or quit. So I am [transferring universities].

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# Campus Accessibility Measure Results

## Accessibility Challenges and Opportunities are Systemic

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All participants responded to the CAM components of the student survey – both those who identified as having a disability and those that did not – which provided an insightful comparison of the campus experience and captured the perspectives of students who may not initially disclose their disabilities.

There were some separate questions for disabled students as it related to their accessibility experiences, specifically, but on the whole, these results reflect perspectives about accessibility from the full range of students in postsecondary education in the U.S.

For the purpose of this report, CAM components are summarized by domains – the systemic tiers of instruction, institution, and social engagement. Researchers provided descriptive data for each individual question, further psychometric data, and item considerations are included in the companion document, *The Campus Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of the Disabled Student Experience in Postsecondary Education* ([nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure](http://nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure)).

### All questions were asked on a scale of 1-5 with options that included:

- |  |            |  |
|--|------------|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strongly disagree</li><li>• Somewhat disagree</li><li>• Not sure</li><li>• Somewhat agree</li><li>• Strongly agree</li></ul> | <b>OR:</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• None of my instructors</li><li>• One of my instructors</li><li>• Two of my instructors</li><li>• Three of my instructors</li><li>• Four of my instructors</li><li>• Five or more of my instructors</li></ul> |
|--|------------|--|

In some cases, researchers asked students about the distribution across their classes and in others we asked about their ratings of their experience as a whole. Students only answered questions about physical settings if at least some of their education was on site.

## Key Campus Accessibility Measure Components

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The three factor structure of the CAM comprises seven components that strive to encompass all aspects of the campus experience – from classrooms to how students connect to each other – to gauge the full scope of learning and engagement. The components are:

### Classroom

- Instructor Attitudes
- Instructor Teaching
- Institution Attitudes

### Campus

- Institution Technology
- Institution Accessibility
- Services

### Social Engagement

Note: While these 7 components are here for thematic purposes, there are only three factors that arise from the Exploratory Factor Analysis that is described in the Research Measure Companion. Individual items within those thematic components should not be grouped or used outside of the three-factor structure.

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“ [Mine] is an invisible disability so I feel like others (ex. professors) do not believe me.

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While there were some similarities between responses from disabled and non-disabled groups, there were some areas where differences arose. This report provides descriptive level results only. Please exercise caution when drawing conclusions about the significance or size of differences between disabled and non-disabled student groups, or between survey items.

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“ I hate my school. I applied as disabled and was told I didn't need accommodations after having failed out of college twice and graduating HS with a 2.0 GPA. I'm miserable. I need help. I've asked therapists, doctors, disability office at my school, counselors, and I've been shut down or shut out at every turn.

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## Instructor Attitudes

This set of CAM items focused on student perceptions of instructor attitudes about disability and accessibility. Students responded with the number of instructors who exhibited each trait listed in the item. These results presented here represent the percentage of instructors they had classes with in the most recent semester, on average, by disabled and non-disabled students.

Overall, non-disabled students rated their instructors more helpful (70%) and with a welcoming and positive attitude about disability (78%) than disabled students (65% and 63% respectively). That said, neither group reported seeing their instructors express negative attitudes about disabilities or mental health conditions – their own or anyone’s – in class.

## Instructor Teaching

This next set of items focused on the perceived accessibility of instruction, ranging from the syllabus policies, to assignments to in class activities to the use of technology to support flexibility and accessibility. Again, figures represent the percentage of instructors for each group, with the exception of the rating of online materials, which is an average on the scale of disagree to agree (1 to 5).

**Disabled** and **non-disabled** responded similarly on a range of instructional strategies, including:

- Variety of activities and materials **(68% v. 65%)**
- Time to complete assignments and tests **(76% v. 79%)**
- Facilitate conversations so all can participate **(63% v. 66%)**
- Online materials are easy to use **(3.07 v. 3.15)\***

*\* This item is on a scale of 1 to 5, from none of their materials to all of their materials.*

They differed on the following items, with disabled students giving their instructors lower scores than non-disabled students on:

- Flexible and responsive to different student learning needs **(66% v. 74%)**
- Create flexible seating arrangements and workspaces **(61% v. 71%)**
- Caption videos they share in class **(35% v. 43%)**

Of note is the low percentage of students who caption the videos they share in class. Captions are an accessibility benefit not only for disabled students, but for all students. This stands out as a straight-forward and high impact target for postsecondary settings to focus on in campus policies and awareness raising around accessibility.

## Institution Attitudes

Students perceive accessibility not only in the classroom, but also in their interaction with institutional level staff and offices. This is also a place where elements of campus culture as a whole come into play. Average responses on a scale of 1-5 for disabled and non-disabled groups include:

- College is welcoming of people with disabilities **(4.17 v. 4.42)**
- Experiencing bullying or judgement related to my disability **(4.36)\***
- Witnessing bullying or judgement of others related to disability **(3.93 v. 4.29)\***

*\*These questions are reverse coded, so that a high number is a positive answer.*

Across these items, non-disabled students found the college more welcoming of people with disabilities than disabled students. This may be because, as someone who has a disability, they are more aware of the ways in which a college can be more or less welcoming to disabled people. That is not to say that the campus culture overall is free of negative attitudes related to disabled people. Both groups witnessed some bullying or judgement of others related to disability, with non-disabled students scoring higher on this item – perhaps again reflecting their awareness of hidden bullying, ableism, or judgement of disabled students.

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“ Now that I no longer pathologize [my disabilities] as things that need to be fixed, I am able to better understand them and advocate for myself. Especially at college, I’ve always felt imposter syndrome but now I’m growing to understand who I am better. I am Asian American, and my cultural background heavily stigmatizes disability. College is the first time I could have open conversations about disability, so it was really transformative in that sense.

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## Institution Technology

Technology is a key resource for accessibility in postsecondary settings. These items focus on ways that the institution as a whole uses technology, such as on their website or in public spaces. The disabled and non-disabled students scored their colleges very similarly on technology items:

- Videos shared on campus have captions **(3.2 v. 3.38)**
- Online course system easy to use **(4.5 v. 4.5)**
- College wide online materials easy to use **(4.4 v. 4.52)**

Items related to online course systems are rated amongst the highest across the entire CAM measure. Accessible digital resources is a major investment of time and resources for institutions that pays off in how students experience accessibility at their institution.

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“ I have to work extra hard to achieve the same goals as my non-disabled peers. It also helps me connect with others who share the same disabilities and support each other.

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## Institution Accessibility

Institutional accessibility relates to the physical plant and getting to and from their classrooms. Although overall scores were in the middle to upper range of the overall scale, disabled students consistently provided lower ratings than non-disabled students on all elements of institutional accessibility:

- Free of distracting noise **(3.35 v. 3.94)**
- Adaptable seating and workspaces **(3.54 v. 4.01)**
- Getting to campus with reasonable time and effort **(4.14 v. 4.45)**
- Getting to classes with reasonable time and effort once on campus **(4.27 v. 4.55)**
- Ease of parking **(2.76 v. 3.1)**

In some cases these campus accessibility items are small things or beyond the control of individual members of the campus community, but they still have a real impact on the daily life of students on campus. The lowest rating across the entire CAM measure was ease of parking; with limited resources for accessible parking, this can be a major challenge for students who find it difficult to navigate parking as part of their commute.



## Student Services

Student services are traditionally the main point of contact for disabled students and their home institution. Student success initiatives, however, may go beyond the accommodations office and include mental health, tutoring, residential life, information technology, and other related wrap-around supports.

Disabled students answered questions specifically related to accommodations services in this section of the CAM. They gave mid-level ratings on items related to:

- Accommodations requests are easy to use **(3.25)**
- Accommodations approvals are fast and timely **(3.38)**
- Have consistent service providers **(3.38)**
- Accommodations meet my needs **(3.84)**

All students were then asked about general programs and resources at their college, with the following average ratings for disabled and non-disabled students:

- Feel supported by the programs and resources **(3.67 v. 4.05)**
- Likely to ask for help if they need it **(3.6 v. 3.88)**

## Social Engagement

Social Engagement factor on the CAM is a single subset of items related to belonging and participation in the life of the campus community. Ratings from disabled and non-disabled students for social engagement indicates a consistently lower ratings for disabled students on these items:

- Be friends with classmates **(3.4 v. 3.7)**
- Participate in activities at their college **(3.42 v. 3.65)**
- Social activities are easy to participate in and inclusive **(3.53 v. 4.03)**
- Feel like they belong at their college **(3.63 v. 4.03)**
- Fully participate in class **(75% v. 72%)**

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“ [I feel] left out, behind.”

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# Their Lived Experiences: Interviews with Disabled College Students

In addition to the CAM survey, the research team administered an innovative study to deeply understand how disabled students navigate college life – conducting in-depth conversations with 24 students from across the country and gaining valuable insights into their daily experiences, challenges, and successes.

## Research Approach


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The research methodology centered on detailed one-on-one interviews with disabled college students via Zoom. Researchers partnered with Prolific.co and leveraged the National Disability Center’s network for recruitment, ensuring diverse representation across disabilities, academic programs, and backgrounds. Accessibility remained a top priority throughout the process, with participants offered interview questions in advance, flexible scheduling with breaks, American Sign Language interpretation, and other accommodations as needed.


## Innovation and Empowerment

In line with emerging best practices in disability studies, researchers empowered participants to choose how they wanted to be represented in the research. Students could use their real name to maintain ownership of their stories, select a pseudonym, or have a name chosen for them. This approach reflects the National Disability Center’s commitment to treating students as collaborators rather than just research subjects – a key principle of disability empowerment.

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 I made the mistake of... in my early twenties I was working at a restaurant, and I told some coworkers that I just got diagnosed with bipolar, and I was fired... So now I’ll speak to HR about it, but never my boss, never my manager, never my coworkers. With school, I’ll speak to the DRC about it, but not with my professors.

---

 The microphone signifies a verbal quote from a student during their one-on-one interview online.

## Rich Insights Into Lived Experiences and Greater Inclusivity

These interviews provided rich insights into multiple aspects of student

life, from daily campus experiences and academic challenges to interactions with professors and peers. We gathered valuable data about how students navigate university systems and services, campus accessibility, and their efforts at social engagement and community building.

This valuable research provided strong recommendations for improving campus accessibility, professional development for faculty and staff, student support services, and policy changes at both institutional and national levels. The insights gained from this study will help create more inclusive and accessible campus environments for all students.



I don't ever disclose to a professor, for basically lack of understanding and fear of judgment.

## Key Themes: The Students' Perspectives

We found several high level themes throughout the conversations with disabled students. In this summary, we provide examples both of the impact on students and quotes to illustrate their perspectives.

Students report difficulty managing tasks like time and schedules, especially if disabilities affect executive function, as well as difficulties with memory and organization. For example, one student mentions struggling with managing time across two campuses due to ADHD, while another describes challenges in classroom attentiveness and interaction due to neurodivergent traits.

For some students, personal experiences with disabilities influence their academic paths. For instance, one student chose to pursue elementary education to provide a supportive environment for children with disabilities, inspired by their own challenges in school.



I would say that my human services [professors] are definitely a lot more understanding because they work in social work. If I'm taking a Spanish class, or something that is irrelevant to something like that, it's often a lot less lenient.

This duality is found throughout the interviews and how students reflect on their own individual experiences with disability and accessibility in higher education.

## Theme #1: Disclosure Dynamics

Many students navigate the complex social landscape of college, facing choices about when and how to disclose disabilities to peers, instructors, and friends. Decisions to disclose often depend on the perceived openness and attitude of the other person, and students frequently assess “red flags” or “green flags” in others’ behavior before opening up.

Negative experiences, like instances where friends or peers weaponized a student’s autism against them, show the delicate nature of disclosure and the potential consequences of being misunderstood or judged. There is also often a fluctuation in their needs and the decision-making process around when to use accommodations or supports, reflecting a balance between independence and the need for assistance.

### Disclosure Dynamic: Strategic Decision Making

It requires a great deal of strategic decision making by disabled students – and a substantial amount of emotional labor – to navigate disclosure processes.

- Students carefully weigh disclosure decisions based on perceived receptiveness
- They use different disclosure strategies for faculty versus peers
- There is varying comfort levels between academic and social contexts
- Many distinguish between sharing basic functional needs vs. detailed personal information



It doesn’t really feel very good whenever a teacher’s like, ‘I don’t understand it enough. Give me more information. What’s wrong with you? What happened to you? What made you like this?’ They’re very ‘you have to pull yourself up by your bootstraps.’

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### Disclosure Dynamic: Impact on Academic Relationships

The interviews revealed that faculty responses to a student’s decision to disclose their disability range from highly supportive to dismissive.

- Subject area influences faculty receptiveness
- Students often face pressure to “prove” their disabilities
- Some professors highly supportive and proactive about accessibility
- Others are resistant or requiring extensive documentation
- Individual arrangements often needed when formal accommodations are inadequate
- Personal rapport with faculty often influences accommodation success

## Theme #2: Accommodation Processes

Managing institutional interactions, such as obtaining accommodations, is another common theme. Students share varied experiences with accommodation processes, often depending on the attitudes of instructors or administrative staff and the specific needs of their disabilities.

The structural challenges can be a significant barrier.

- Complex, time-consuming documentation requirements
- Multiple department approvals often needed
- The process itself can be inaccessible for students with executive function challenges
- Inconsistent implementation across institutional departments



They were actually fairly lenient with me and didn’t ask for too much. All they wanted was a letter from my specialist that this was a disease I have, this is something that I go through—they wanted that. And, they wanted a letter from my therapist saying I was being treated for depression and anxiety. So it wasn’t like how at my old school, how they asked for like 50 million documents for me to bring. This school just asked for like two different things.

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The administrative burden is also onerous.

- Students report “tedious” processes requiring multiple contacts
- Long waiting periods for approval
- Need to repeatedly explain conditions to different stakeholders
- Documentation requirements can be particularly challenging for students with mental health conditions
- Limited accommodation options sometimes don’t always match actual needs

In a more informal sense, students mention receiving both respectful inquiries and intrusive questions from peers and professors, indicating a mixed experience regarding acceptance and understanding from others.



A lot of professors have been very kind and gracious, allowing me to submit any late assignments until the last day of class. On the opposite end, I’ve had professors who have said absolutely no extensions, and it’s caused me to fail. So it is frustrating because you don’t know if you’re going to have a supportive professor or not.

### Theme #3: Learning Modality Impact

Some students find that online communities and discussion boards provide safer spaces to discuss disability openly compared to in-person interactions on campus, where they may feel isolated or judged.

The benefits of online or hybrid learning for disabled students include:

- Reduced social pressure and anxiety
- Easier management of symptoms and energy levels
- Canvas learning management system platform was singled out for praise for organization tools and accessibility
- Greater control over engagement level

In-person classes create additional barriers but also opportunities for connection. The challenges on in-person or on campus learning are:

- Social anxiety and peer interactions
- Attendance policy conflicts
- Managing visible versus invisible disabilities
- Physical accessibility issues (e.g. broken elevators, door buttons, etc.)
- Students often face pressure to “prove” or justify their disabilities



They don't get to know you. They don't meet with you... It feels very impersonal. It feels like they just check a box and say, 'Okay, you're disabled.'... They don't offer really any support, except for if you need an extension.

## Theme #4: Mental Health Considerations

The desire for structured support, such as disability-focused student groups, is also evident, with students expressing that such groups could help them connect with others who share similar experiences.

### **Mental health can have an impact on academics. Students reported:**

- Fluctuating symptoms affecting attendance and performance
- Difficulty maintaining consistent engagement
- Self-described “roller coaster” experience
- Intersection of multiple conditions creating compound challenges

### **Their unique support needs frequently exceed traditional accommodations in higher education. They include:**

- Desire for more mental health-aware policies
- Need for flexible attendance and deadline policies
- Importance of proactive faculty support
- Value of peer support networks

## Theme #5: Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is the ability to express one's needs, make decisions about the support necessary to meet those needs, and negotiate to acquire them. It requires four elements: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication skills, and leadership skills.

For people with one or more disabilities, studies show that an increase in self-advocacy skills contributes to an increased quality of life, sense of agency, and overall well-being. However, it can be particularly challenging if it hasn't been learned.

### The disabled students interviewed addressed many elements of self-advocacy, including:

- Learning to communicate needs effectively
- Building confidence in requesting accommodations
- Developing strategies to work with resistant faculty/staff
- Knowing when and how to push back on barriers
- Balancing advocacy with academic/personal demands



It's important that [disabled students] know their rights. Self advocacy is critical. For example, you know sometimes if I have a terrible interpreter, I'm not gonna suffer. I have a right to request a change [because] I need access. If you want notes, ask the professor. If the Professor's not willing to help them, make sure that they know their rights. Go back to the disabilities office.

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While advocacy is a self-supportive, individual action, it can also be a group action to seek the improvement of broader disabled student life.

In fact, many students mentioned their participation in advocacy groups or other affinity-based organizations that converge on disability identity. These groups not only push for greater awareness of disability, ableism, and access; they also create a space for on-campus social engagement and connectedness between students.



## Conclusion

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The disabled student experiences and perspectives documented in this report highlight both progress and persistent challenges in supporting students with disabilities in higher education.

While some institutions have developed effective support systems, significant opportunities remain for improving accessibility, understanding their experiences, and addressing accommodation processes. The increasing availability of online learning options and digital tools presents promising avenues for enhancing educational access, while ongoing challenges with concerns about disclosure, labyrinthine accommodation processes, and inaccessibility to the full campus experience indicate areas requiring immediate attention.

# Recommended Reading

While not a comprehensive list, the following readings provided important perspectives that informed the development of the Campus Accessibility Measure, the student interview protocols, and this national report. National Disability Center researchers focused on research findings from the last 10 years, as well as the legal foundation for accessibility in postsecondary education.

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# National Disability Center for Student Success

[nationaldisabilitycenter.org](http://nationaldisabilitycenter.org)

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## Research Measure Companion Report

In addition to this national report, there is a separate companion report for researchers, *The Campus Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of the Disabled Student Experience in Postsecondary Education*. Besides the complete survey detail, the research companion includes explanations about the measure development process, how disability constructs were measured, factor extraction and analysis, and survey administration. ([nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure](http://nationaldisabilitycenter.org/CAM-measure))

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