

Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series

Advancing Retention Through Accessibility

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Introduction: The Institutional Challenge

This Campus Accessibility Spotlight focuses on strategies to support student retention at The Ohio State University. These conversations focus on accessibility as a potential framework for understanding student needs and institutional impact for all students, but especially students with disabilities.

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“First-year **persistence and retention** are strong early indicators for students staying enrolled throughout their program of study and eventually completing college.”

Doug Shapiro, Executive Director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

Why Student Retention?

Student admissions and enrollment is just the beginning of a student’s academic journey towards graduation. When students leave an institution or higher education all together, institutions are challenged to examine ways to better support students to continue their degree plan. Student attrition is not just a matter of financial investment for the students and the institution, it has a significant long term impact on the community. Accessibility frameworks highlight ways that strategies to support disabled students can also shape larger conversations about student retention and institutional support.

The Pain Points

- For students who do not complete their degrees, they are **most likely to leave in between their first and second years in college.**
- **Disabled student college readiness can vary based on high school preparation and transition planning quality.**
- **Accessibility experiences on campus may vary based on the type of disability** and sense of belonging.
- **Accommodation requests can take time,** especially if students have a new diagnosis or do not have paperwork from their high school transition team.
- **College campuses can be large with siloed resources,** forcing students to navigate multiple offices spanning vast physical distances, even more challenging for disabled students.
- **There is a “hidden curriculum” to college success,** one that can be a barrier for students with disabilities, first gen students, working adults, veterans, and more.
- **First year classes can be larger with reduced interaction with faculty,** creating weaker ties to personal academic trajectory.
- **The first year away from home can be challenging,** especially for young people who experienced delays in academic and social skill development due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meet the People

Students and leaders involved in various campus resources at Ohio State University were extensively interviewed by the National Disability Center about their work to support retention. Those leaders interviewed were:



Dana Renga, PhD

Professor of Italian Studies and Dean of Arts and Humanities

Role: Researching and teaching Italian film and media studies, with a focus on television.



L. Scott Lissner, MA

ADA Coordinator and 504 Compliance Officer

Role: Creating seamless access to the full range of the university's programs and opportunities; and guides his efforts as a catalyst for disability related initiatives.



Octavian Robinson, PhD

Associate Professor and Director of the Center for ASL and Deaf Equity*

Role: Focuses on language attitudes towards signed languages within academia and linguistic protectionism among deaf communities.

*Center Name is under review for compliance with Ohio SB1.



Andrew Knox, MPA

Dual Graduate Student in Public Administration and Educational Administration

Role: Focuses on building smarter, more accessible systems across education, government, and technology.



Kristin Wickham-Saxon, MEd

Assistant Professional Practice Professor, Director of Undergraduate Studies, and Assistant Director of the Center for ASL and Deaf Equity

Role: Focuses on advancing ASL education and assessment through mentorship, instructional support, and coordination across undergraduate programs.

MEET THE PEOPLE



McKinley Roza

Undergraduate in Linguistics and Anthropology

Role: Focuses on research involving Indigenous signed languages.



Ryann Patrus, PhD

Instructional Designer

Role: Collaborates with faculty to develop inclusive and accessible learning environments.



By The Numbers

76.5%

College students
continue into their
second year*

3X

Increased likelihood of
retention among disabled
college students who
experience a strong sense
of belonging

50%

College students
over the age of 21
persist into their
second year*

*Note difference between persistence (continue on to second year including at another institution) and retention (continue on to second year at same institution). Persistence rates are higher than retention rates across the board.

Sources: National Student Clearinghouse (2024); National Student Clearinghouse (2025); Matesic (2020)

Fresh Insights

We are eager to think about innovative ways to support students during their first year so that they are prepared to continue through their entire program.

Dana Renga, PhD



I feel that I need more than a bachelor's degree to be competitive, because as a deaf person, I will be seen as less capable even with the same degree.



Andrew Knox, MPA

Our work with digital accessibility on campus is well underway. Faculty are aware of needs such as alt text and captioned videos within their classrooms.



Ryann Patrus, PhD

The fight for accessibility goes back decades. We continue to shift the conversation away from cost and towards how people actually use resources.



L. Scott Lissner, MA

Faculty members also need to be considered when looking at the accessibility of a campus. We tend to focus on students, but supporting disabled faculty is critical to student success.

Octavian Robinson, PhD



Our cadre of ASL instructors are well connected with the local community. They are an untapped resource that can add value and insight to how to recruit deaf students to come to OSU.



Kristin Wickham-Saxon, MEd

Unexpected Revelations



AI initiatives are sweeping the higher education landscape, from learning platforms to how people communicate. When looking for partners to advance accessibility on campus, seek out collaborators who are engaged in the AI development space. This increases the likelihood that disabled perspectives will be part of early stage AI implementation, as well as serving as a potential resource for accessibility tools as new products and services emerge.



Retention rates are higher for those who had accessed universally available supports only, such as writing and math centers, which do not require disclosure of a disability (Newman et al, 2021).

What a Student Says

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“I went up to my linguistics professor who immediately assumed that because I was deaf, I could not participate in his class. I told him to give me a chance, read my accommodations letter, and work with me before assuming what I can and cannot do.”

McKinley Roza, Undergraduate Student

Strategies for Success on Your Campus

1. Invite Leadership

Invite leadership to share their insights about student retention.

2. Include Diverse Staff

Include staff with a range of experiences with accessibility and student supports.

3. Spotlight Real Stories

Examine specific examples of accessibility impact on campus life.

4. Design Themed Events

Create an accessibility theme week or month to allow people to connect dots.

5. Connect with Students

Engage with disability student groups, classes, or other social events.

6. Open Community Channels

Invite the community to participate in conversations about enrollment pathways.

7. Factor in Policy

Acknowledge local, state, and national policy impacts on student persistence.

8. Outline Key Goals

Create a list of accessibility priorities and action items for short and long term goals.

9. Track What Happens

Document experiences, conversations, and insights for follow up and follow through.

10. Reconsider Norms

Bring an open mind about how current practices may be strengthened or changed.

Continuing the Work



Start with Admissions

- Maintain a critical mass of disabled students needed for strong accessibility supports
- Partner with high schools to support transition for students with disabilities.
- Review orientation and first year experiences for accessibility considerations.



Bolster Campus Student Success

- Amplify disability as an integral part of campus culture and identity
- Encourage all student service units to work together to support disabled students
- Include digital accessibility supports that impact faculty, students, and staff.



Focus on the Future

- Include disability and accessibility considerations in career preparation services
- Support students in their search for additional training or certification
- Include accessibility in future planning and campus wide initiatives



