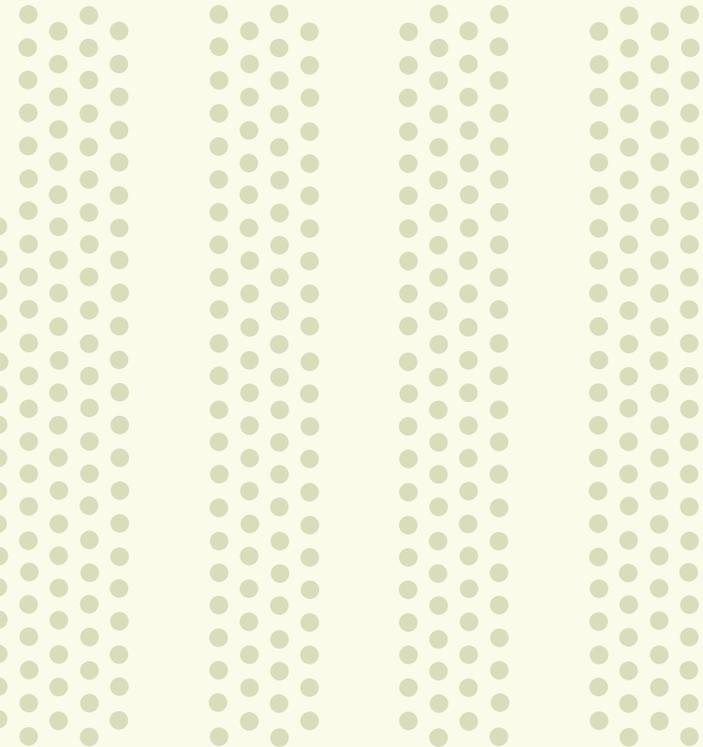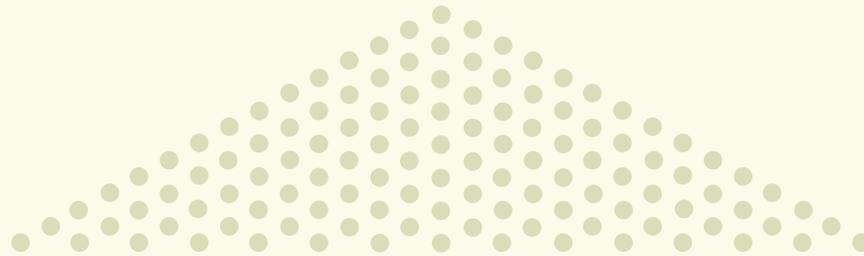**National Disability Center**
for Student Success

Access Leads to Achievement:

A National Report on Faculty Accessibility Practices

January 2026

NATIONAL REPORT

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Acknowledgements

Funder Acknowledgement

Other Acknowledgements

Disclaimers & Limitations

- The majority of the Center's research sample is faculty from 4-year institutions.
- Correlation does not imply causation, so results should be interpreted accordingly.
- These results are not generalizable to all U.S. faculty who teach in higher education.
- 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 Faculty Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of How Faculty Shape Accessibility 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/FAM)

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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The Reality on U.S. Campuses: Disabled Students Face Classroom Barriers

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

Yet many face persistent barriers that affect their ability to succeed. Students describe fear of judgment that keeps them from disclosing disabilities to professors, complex accommodation processes that drain their limited energy, and classroom environments where they feel pressure to prove their disabilities are "real enough" to deserve support. Many struggle in silence—less than half of students who identify as disabled formally disclose to their institutions, meaning millions more navigate learning challenges without any official recognition or support.

Faculty members stand at the center of this reality. Whether students have formal accommodations, informal conversations in office hours, or say nothing at all about their needs, instructors shape the accessibility of every class session, assignment, and interaction. Faculty don't create these learning experiences

<50%

Disabled Students Disclose to Their Institution

alone—they work within institutional contexts that provide resources, set expectations, and either champion accessibility as a core value or treat it as an afterthought. Understanding how faculty navigate this landscape, what supports them in creating accessible learning environments, and what barriers they face in doing so is essential to improving outcomes for all students.

The National Disability Center's Response: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Faculty Roles in Accessibility

To understand faculty perspectives on accessibility in higher education, the Center employed a mixed-methods approach combining national survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews.

The Faculty Accessibility Measure (FAM) survey provided broad quantitative patterns across institution types and faculty characteristics, while one-on-one interviews captured the nuanced experiences and decision-making processes that numbers alone cannot convey. Together, these complementary data sources offer both the scope needed to identify systemic patterns and the depth required to understand the lived reality of creating accessible learning environments.

About the Faculty Accessibility Measure

The National Disability Center has studied student experiences extensively, but surprisingly little about what faculty actually think and feel about accessibility is known. The Faculty Accessibility Measure seeks to fill this gap. The survey reached 274 instructors across technical programs, community colleges, and four-year institutions to create the Center's first national snapshot of faculty perspectives on accessibility.

The survey measures two distinct dimensions—individual confidence and institutional support—giving institutions a clear framework for targeting interventions where they're needed. Rather than treating accessibility as a single concept, this approach recognizes that even motivated faculty can struggle without proper institutional backing, and that robust support systems don't automatically translate to faculty confidence. These quantitative findings provide institutions with concrete evidence for decision-making and offer researchers a validated tool for tracking progress across different campus contexts.

One-On-One Faculty Interviews Deepen FAM Insights

The faculty interviews capture what survey data cannot: the many gray areas that arise when creating accessible learning environments. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, instructors shared the actual dilemmas they face with accessibility not hypothetical scenarios, but real moments when students disclose chronic health conditions or when formal accommodations don't match what students actually need. These authentic voices reveal the emotional labor and creative problem-solving happening behind closed doors that institutional policies rarely acknowledge from students directly—not through formal institutional training programs.

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The interviews expose critical gaps between official systems and daily practice. Faculty describe relying on hallway conversations with trusted colleagues rather than formal training. They share the anxiety of receiving accommodation requests days before finals without a game plan on how to best meet student needs. They explain how their own experiences with disability shape their teaching in ways institutions don't recognize or leverage.

The result is a varied landscape for disabled students: Some instructors follow rigid policies while others build trust-based flexibility into their courses. Interviews help us understand what drives these different approaches.

Why This Research Matters

This research matters because faculty are the frontline of accessibility—they make daily decisions that either open or close educational opportunities for millions of disabled students. When students describe avoiding disclosure due to fear of judgment, struggling with inadequate accommodations, or thriving under compassionate instructors, they're pointing directly to the critical role faculty play in their success. Understanding what supports faculty need, what barriers they face, and what drives their approaches to accessibility allows institutions to build systems that work for everyone.

Better-supported, more confident faculty create learning environments where students don't have to choose between disclosure and survival, where accommodations actually meet real needs, and where accessibility is woven into course design rather than treated as an afterthought. Ultimately, disabled students succeed when faculty have both the skills and institutional backing to approach accessibility with both an open mind and the resources needed to do so.

Key Findings: Understanding the Faculty Experience

Time Constraints Limit Faculty Seeking Accessibility Training

Lack of time is a primary reason for not participating in available professional development, particularly when publication and grant pressures compete with teaching improvement efforts.

Yet Faculty Worry About Being a Barrier to Success

Some faculty wondered if they could be more proactive in encouraging students to use approved supports.

Collaboration Matters More Than Strict Enforcement

Faculty emphasize the importance of students bringing their own solutions, reflecting a partnership model of accessibility.

Disability Status Increases Confidence, Not Support

Both disabled and non-disabled faculty perceive similar levels of institutional support, suggesting higher levels of confidence advantage stems from lived experience rather than school culture.

Leaving Faculty to Self-Learn Accessibility Strategies

Most faculty develop accessibility approaches through trial-and-error, class observations, or self-directed learning because structured guidance remains limited.

Top Recommendations to Improve Accessibility on Campus

These recommendations emphasize that accessibility is a shared responsibility requiring proactive communication from students, empathy and consistency from faculty, and robust, well-resourced institutional support systems.

For Faculty

✅ Lead with Empathy and Consistency

Faculty and staff should approach student accommodation requests with the fundamental assumption that students are being truthful about their needs and circumstances. Clearly communicate your willingness to provide flexibility in your syllabus and during early class meetings to build trust and encourage students to reach out when they need support. When one student requires flexibility, be prepared to extend similar accommodations to others in comparable situations to maintain fairness and consistency. Remember that learning to create accessible learning environments is an ongoing process that benefits all students, not just those with documented disabilities.

✅ Invest in Professional Development

Faculty members should actively seek out professional development opportunities focused on accessibility, inclusive teaching practices, and understanding invisible disabilities. Engage in informal conversations with colleagues about what works in their classes and don't hesitate to ask for advice when facing unfamiliar accommodation situations. Stay current with evolving accessibility practices, particularly regarding how emerging technologies like AI affect assignment design and academic integrity considerations.

✅ Tap the Resources of the National Disability Center

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

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For Institutions

✅ Design Supports that are Flexible and Responsive

Offer training in multiple formats including asynchronous and recorded options that faculty can access on their own schedules, and ensure that both tenure-track faculty and instructional staff have equal access to professional development opportunities. Dedicate adequate budget to accessibility resource centers and disability services offices to ensure they have sufficient staffing for quick turnaround times on accommodation letters and support requests. Fund faculty attendance at accessibility conferences and workshops, provide accessibility review services for course materials, and distribute regular newsletters with practical, department-specific tips on accessible teaching.

✅ Improve Communication and Systemic Support

Rather than waiting for faculty to seek help, institutions should proactively reach out to faculty with regular reminders about disability services, accommodation processes, and available resources. Make accessibility services highly visible across campus through mentoring programs, peer discussion opportunities, and the sharing of both success stories and concerns.

Address the financial and structural barriers that prevent faculty from accessing professional development, particularly for non-tenure-track instructors who often have the least access to these opportunities. Create formal accessibility committees with faculty representation to ensure consistency across departments and give accessibility a prominent voice in institutional decision-making.

✅ Integrate Accessibility into Core Functions

Institutions can integrate accessibility into the culture of campus – by including it in faculty job descriptions, evaluation criteria, and promotion considerations. This signals that inclusive teaching is a valued and expected competency. Develop clear institutional policies on attendance flexibility, deadline accommodations, and what constitutes "reasonableness" in accommodation requests to reduce ambiguity and ensure consistency. Ensure that accessibility is understood as a shared responsibility requiring sustained investment, clear policies, adequate resources, and ongoing collaboration among students, faculty, and support services.

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Faculty Accessibility Measure: Survey of U.S. Postsecondary Faculty

The National Disability Center developed and collected data with the Faculty Accessibility Measure in Summer, 2025. A summary of study results is provided here. Further information about the measure itself can be found in the The Faculty Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of How Faculty Shape Accessibility in Postsecondary Education.

A total of 418 participants completed the FAM survey. Participants were based in the U.S., 18 or older, and currently teaching in higher education programs.

Demographics of Faculty Surveyed

The final dataset had representation from 47 different states or territories of the U.S. Faculty varied in the type of institution they worked in, whether they were online, hybrid, or in person, and how many years of experience they had teaching in higher education. This diverse sample also had a range of experiences related to disability and accessibility on both a personal level and as part of their professional experiences.

Race and Ethnicity

To understand race and ethnicity, study participants were asked which responses best described them and were invited to select all that applied. Participants reported a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Race/Ethnicity

Category	Percentage
American Indian, Indigenous, Native American or Alaska Native	1.8%
Asian or Asian American	9.3%
Black, African, or African American	13.5%
Hispanic or Latino/a/e	67.5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%
White or Caucasian	7.7%

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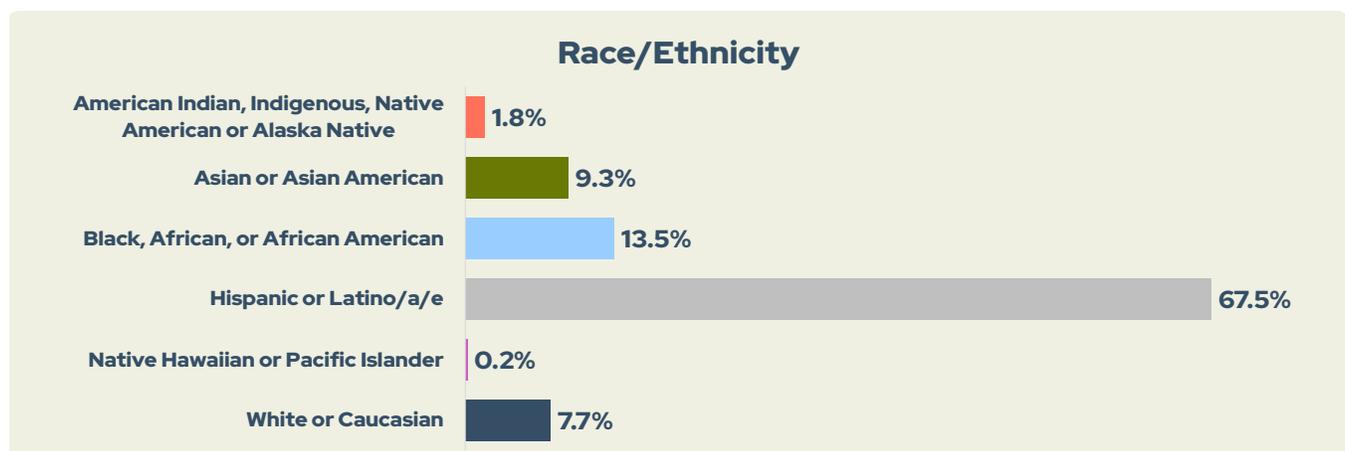
The sample included 67.5% of faculty who identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/e, followed by 13.5% who identified as Black, African, or African American, and 9.3% who identified as Asian or Asian American.

Institution Type

Across the 418 faculty surveyed, 63% of participants were from faculty at a 4-year institution. The remaining 37% include a combination of 2-year and technical programs, with technical programs representing the smallest group at 15% of the total population. Overall, the sample reflected a broad range of institutions, with representation across multiple postsecondary settings, highlighting variation in teaching environments and contexts.

Institution Type

Bar chart showing Institution Type: Technical Training Program 15%, 2 Year Community College 22%, 4 Year College 63%.

Do you go to a physical campus or training site to teach this semester?

Pie chart: Physical 55%, Hybrid 35%, Online Only 10%.

Physical ■ Hybrid ■ Online Only
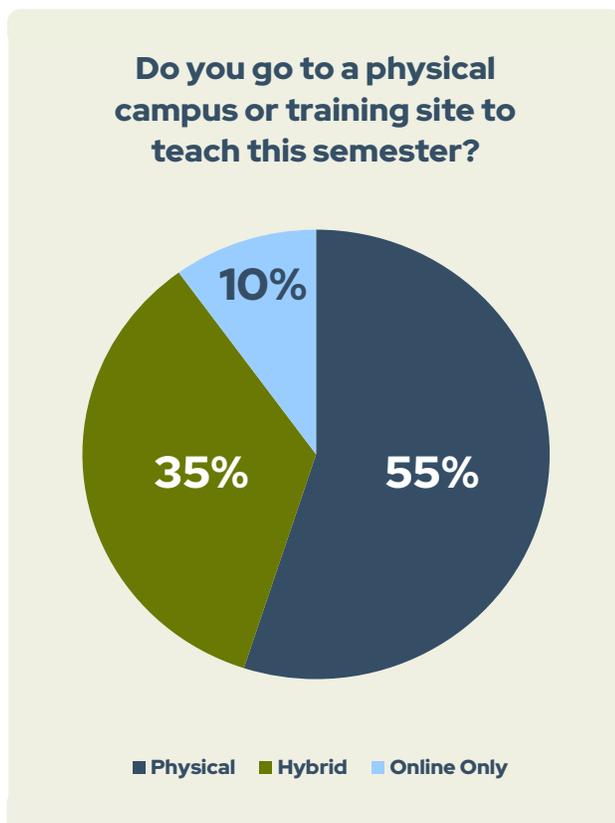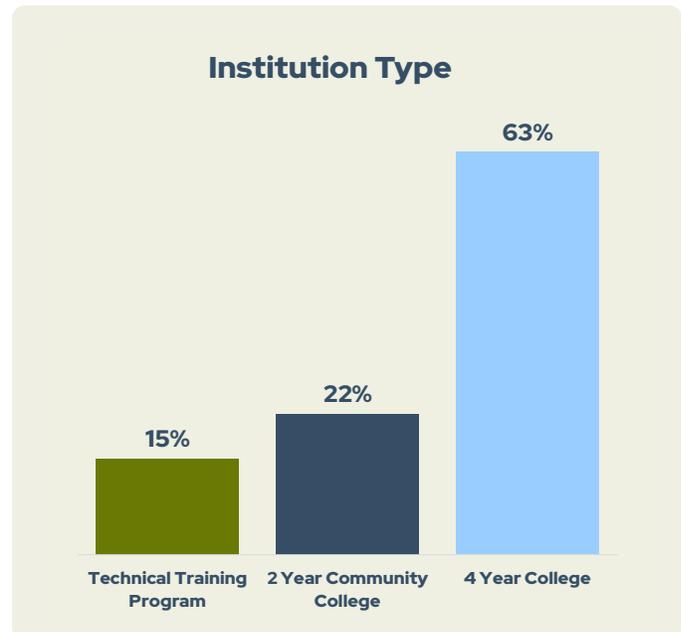
Roughly half of the participants, 55%, reported teaching only in person. Another 35% taught in a hybrid format, and the remaining 10% reported teaching only online. This distribution reflects both a shift back to in-person teaching after the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued blend of learning environments across higher education.

🎤 "It's so easy in a classroom to figure out what's going on with your students, and online, it's completely different."

— *Criminal Justice & Writing Instructor*

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Experience Teaching

Teaching experience varied across early-career (0-3 years), mid-career (4-10 years), and experienced faculty (11+ years). The average across the sample was 8 years of teaching with a standard deviation of 7.33. Overall, there was a relatively balanced distribution across career stages with a slight skew towards early career faculty. The faculty represented a diverse range of teaching experiences and a good balance across career trajectories. Newer faculty (0-3 years) represented the largest group representing 38% of the total sample.

Teaching Experience

38%
33%
29%

■ 0-3 years ■ 4-10 years ■ 11+ years
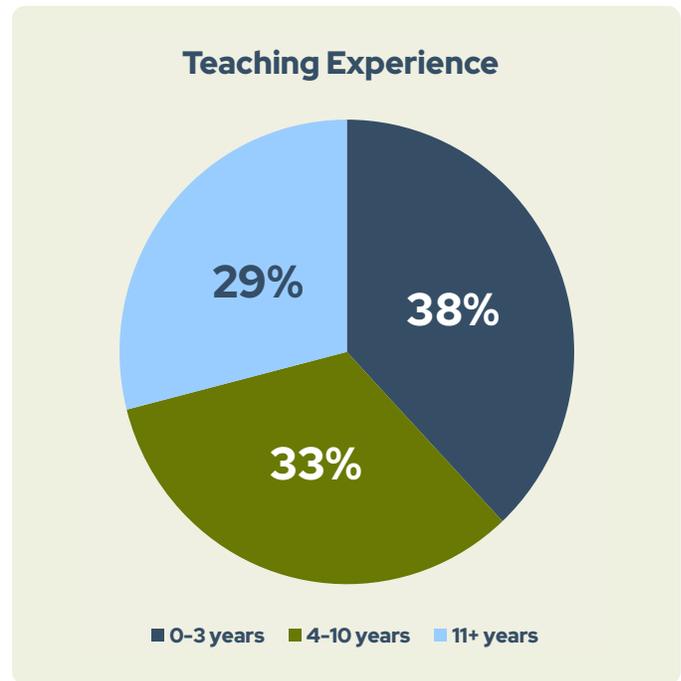
Disability Status

Faculty reported their disability status, with 44% indicating they have a disability, chronic health condition, or mental health condition lasting 4 months or longer. 51% reported no disability. A small proportion selected unsure at 3% or prefer not to say at 2%, resulting in a near equal split between disabled and non-disabled faculty overall.
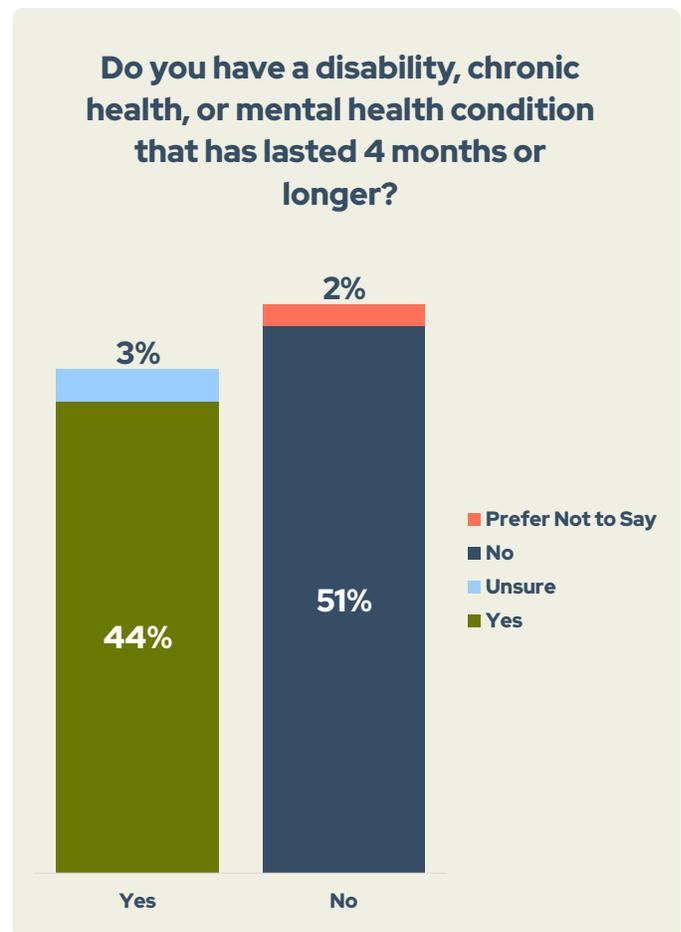
🎤 **"I myself am a disabled person, so there's definitely some personal experience in it, as well as professional experience outside the classroom."**

— Psychology Instructor

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

2%
3%
44%
51%

■ Prefer Not to Say
■ No
■ Unsure
■ Yes

Yes   No

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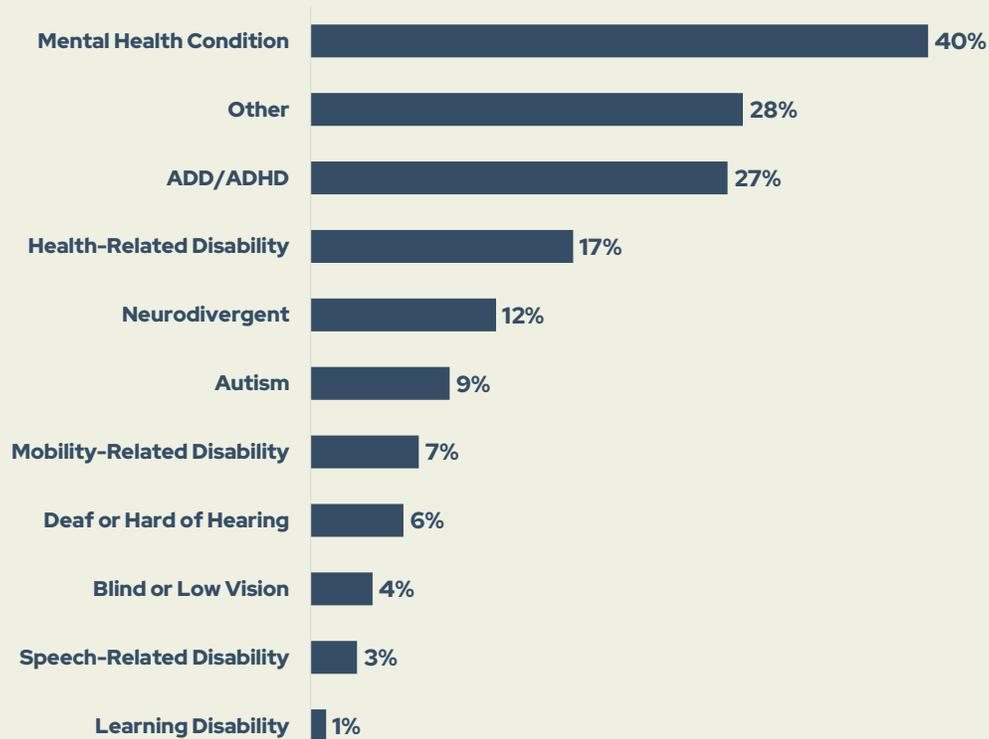## Disability Prevalence

Faculty who reported a disability identified conditions across 11 categories, including neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD and autism, physical disabilities including Deaf and vision-related disabilities, health-related disabilities, and other conditions. Mental health conditions represented the largest category, accounting for 40% of faculty with disabilities. The relatively high representation of disabled faculty is significant for the study's focus on accessibility and faculty experiences.

40% of Disabled Faculty Report Mental Health Conditions

Category	Percentage
Mental Health Condition	40%
Other	28%
ADD/ADHD	27%
Health-Related Disability	17%
Neurodivergent	12%
Autism	9%
Mobility-Related Disability	7%
Deaf or Hard of Hearing	6%
Blind or Low Vision	4%
Speech-Related Disability	3%
Learning Disability	1%

🎤 **"Visually impaired is pretty rare just because of the nature of the job that students are going into...the software is not designed for visually impaired people. So they can't just go and change an entire thing to accommodate one person."**

— Health Information Technology Instructor

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Accommodations Experience

Faculty participants reported a broad range of accommodations requests that they had received in their teaching careers. Participants checked an average of 3.4 different accommodations, with a range of 0 to 11 of the categories below. The majority noted accommodations related to time, either extra time or flexible time, followed by requests for a separate setting for testing. These are often provided together, especially if at a separate testing location. Notetaking, assistive technology and captioning were also familiar accommodations requests. Less often noted were accommodations for low incidence disabilities, such as Braille or Sign Language Interpreters.

The Most Requested Accommodation is Extra/ Flexible Time

Accommodation	Count
Extra Time or Flexible Time	340
Quiet or Separate Setting	226
Note Taking	192
Assistive Tech	170
Captioning	115
Alternate Formats (i.e. Graphic Organizers)	85
Speech to Text for Assignments	81
Directions Read aloud	71
Sign Language Interpreters	51
Dictionary or Glossary	43
Large Print or Braille	36

🎤 "I've probably had at least maybe four people that have asked for extra time on test taking without the documentation for it, which I always agree to do... whether it's diagnosed or not, you know they still have the challenge."

— *Criminal Justice & Writing Instructor*

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Accessibility Challenges and Opportunities are Systemic

All participants responded to the FAM components of the faculty 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 instructors who may have a range of experiences both personally and professionally with accessibility in higher education.

The figures represent the average score on a 1 to 5 scale with options that included:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Somewhat disagree
3. Somewhat agree
4. Strongly agree
5. Not Applicable - Not applicable figures were excluded from the average scores in this analysis.

The Center researchers provided descriptive data for each individual question – further psychometric data and item considerations are included in the companion document, The Faculty Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of How Faculty Shape Accessibility in Postsecondary Education. (nationaldisabilitycenter.org/FAM-measure).

Key Faculty Accessibility Measure Components

For the purpose of this report, FAM components are summarized at two levels: an instructor's own accessibility practices and the support they receive from their institution.

The first factor, **Individual Confidence**, provides information about how instructors approach accessible learning in the classroom.

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Disabled and Non-Disabled

These items are closely aligned with the classroom practices that were present in the student-focused The Campus Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of the Disabled Student Experience in Postsecondary Education (CAM) report, and expanded to include items that are a part of faculty responsibility in preparing postsecondary learning experiences.

The second factor, **Institutional Support**, reflects how well supported instructors feel by their institutions to implement accessibility strategies. These items reflect the systemic nature of accessibility as part of an entire campus set of resources and norms. Faculty are more likely to implement strategies when they have the support to do so.

Across both factors, items focused on four core areas:

- **Course design**
- **Technology**
- **Accommodations**
- **Student Support**

This report provides descriptive level results with comparisons between faculty with and without disabilities. Please exercise caution when drawing conclusions about the significance or size of differences between these groups or between survey items.

Individual Confidence

The first set of items on the Faculty Accessibility Measure focused on self-reported confidence in providing a range of accessibility strategies.

Although overall scores were high across the participant group, **disabled** faculty consistently scored higher, on average, than their **non-disabled** colleagues.

All items marked with an * are statistically significant differences.

Each prompt began with the phrase: **"Thinking about my current capacity, resources, and experiences, I am confident….**

- Teaching students with a range of disabilities **(3.35 v. 3.15)***
- Creating accessible course materials (e.g., PDFs, presentation slides, Word documents). **(3.62 v. 3.41)***
- Including videos with captions that I use in class or give as homework. **(3.68 v. 3.45)***

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Disabled and Non-Disabled

- Including accessibility statements in my syllabi or course plan. **(3.76 v. 3.60)***
- Planning alternative assignments that can achieve the same learning outcomes for students. **(3.38 v. 3.13)***
- Providing course materials in multiple formats (e.g., text, audio, visual). **(3.58 v. 3.34)***
- Structuring class discussions to be inclusive of different communication styles (e.g., listening, speaking, writing, individual, groups). **(3.59 v. 3.37)***
- Monitoring my pace when presenting information. **(3.52 v. 3.32)***
- Talking to students about how to implement accommodations in my classes (e.g., extended time on assignments, flexible deadlines, ASL interpreters, printed materials in class, recording lectures, lecture notes). **(3.61 v. 3.32)***
- Directing students to disability support services or mental health services. **(3.78 v. 3.61)***

These findings suggest that the lived experience of navigating systems and advocating for oneself as a person with a disability may cultivate a robust sense of personal efficacy. Rather than undermining confidence, the experience of disability appears to foster resilience and self-assurance that translates into professional settings. This enhanced confidence may reflect the development of self-advocacy skills, problem-solving abilities, and a realistic understanding of one's capabilities that comes from successfully managing disability-related challenges throughout one's academic career.

🎤 **"The most challenging one was a student who had a mobility accessibility need…we got a foldable ramp that we would bring into the classes so the student was able to get on the stage and perform just like everyone else."**

— Stand-Up Comedy Instructor

Institutional Support

The second set of items in the Faculty Accessibility Measure relates to access to information and resources related to accessibility.

In contrast with the Individual Confidence items, there were fewer significant differences between **disabled** and **non-disabled** faculty in their responses. Only items marked with an * are statistically significant differences.

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Disabled and Non-Disabled

Each prompt began with the phrase: **Thinking about my institutional support, resources, and infrastructure, I have access to information about…**

- How to make my in-class content more accessible (e.g., during lectures, labs, discussions). **(3.48 v 3.32)***

- How to make my homework assignments or out-of-class activities more accessible (e.g., readings, group assignments, projects, take home tests). **(3.44 v. 3.27)***

- How to use accessibility features in online learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas). **(4.43 v. 3.28)***

- How to make my digital course content screen-reader friendly (e.g., headings, alt text for images, reading order for PDFs). **(3.23 v. 3.07)**

- What assistive technologies my disabled students might use. **(3.20 v. 3.03)***

- How to maintain student privacy when handling disability-related information **(3.52 v. 3.39)**

- How students view the accessibility of my courses (e.g., through course evaluations, mid-semester check-ins, informal polling). **(3.29 v. 3.13)**

- How I can improve in my accessibility practices (e.g., through peer teaching evaluations). **(3.21 v. 3.05)**

- How to modify required course assignments while maintaining academic standards (e.g., reducing or chunking length of assignments, providing an alternate response format for assignments or exams). **(3.23 v. 3.07)**

- How to use testing resources such as a testing center or online test timeline extensions. **(3.47 v. 3.32)**

- How to support students with disabilities in an emergency (e.g., weather event, campus lockdown, etc.). **(3.02 v. 2.84)**

Only 3 of the 11 institutional support items revealed statistically significant differences, suggesting a more mixed picture of how disabled and non-disabled faculty experience organizational resources and backing. This inconsistency may indicate that institutional support systems are more variable in their effectiveness or accessibility, or that disabled faculty's experiences with institutional structures vary more than their personal confidence levels. While disabled faculty may possess strong individual efficacy, this does not necessarily translate into uniformly positive—or negative—perceptions of the support their institutions provide.

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🎤 **"Accessibility training may have been included with some of the onboarding materials. It's been a while, so I don't really remember...I think it's provided during onboarding and then after that you might have to seek it out."**

— Clinical Skills Training Instructor

Differences between Institution Types

Faculty at 2-year and technical institutions demonstrate higher individual confidence scores than their peers at 4-year institutions. Even more striking are the differences in institutional support, where all 11 items show significant advantages for 2-year/technical faculty. The most pronounced institutional difference appears in access to information about accessibility resources, suggesting that 2-year colleges and technical training programs excel at communicating available support. These findings suggest that these institutions may have more robust support infrastructures, clearer communication channels, or cultures that better prioritize faculty accessibility and well-being compared to their 4-year counterparts.

Role of Faculty Motivation

In addition to the FAM, the Center administered an expectancy value cost measure (EVC), adapted from Wigfield & Eccles (2000), to assess faculty motivation and belief about implementing accessibility strategies in their teaching. This additional measure is important as it tells us more regarding potential future barriers in accommodation implementation. Faculty were given 11 questions related to the perceived benefits and costs of providing accessibility strategies and were asked to rate them using a 4 point Likert-scale. Negative cost items such as, "Making my classes more accessible requires too much time", were reverse scored prior to analysis.

Overall, faculty scored an average of 3.39 on the scale of 1 to 4, with 4 demonstrating high value for accessibility over perceived costs. When comparing EVC between disabled and non-disabled faculty, disabled faculty reported a higher EVC at **3.47**, while their non-disabled peers reported **3.36**. This finding suggests that disabled faculty more fully embrace efforts to support accommodations and accessibility than their non-disabled peers.

There were no meaningful differences in EVC scores between faculty at 2-year/technical training programs and those at 4-year institutions.

Does Personal Accessibility Matter?

The Center also included a measure of personal accessibility – or the accessibility that faculty felt that they had to do their own jobs in and around campus. The purpose was to measure faculty's personal experience of accessibility on campus for their own workplace and infrastructure needs (not instructional accessibility). This measure was tweaked slightly from similar items that were part of the Campus Accessibility Measure (CAM) that was administered to postsecondary students.

The Personal Accessibility scale consisted of 6 items that assessed accessibility – including both time and effort required – in the following domains:

- Online course systems including LMS

- Online materials such as websites and PDFs

- Getting to campus in a reasonable time period

- Getting to campus with a reasonable effort

- Getting to office with reasonable time

- Getting to office with reasonable effort

Faculty rated these items on a scale of 1-4, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The overall Personal Accessibility Score was 3.56. This rating was relatively consistent across participants. Disabled faculty scored **3.59** and non-disabled faculty **3.55**, a negligible difference in personal accessibility. This suggests that basic campus infrastructure is relatively accessible for faculty's own needs, regardless of disability status.

There also were no meaningful differences in personal accessibility scores between faculty at 2-year/technical training programs and those at 4-year institutions.

Their Lived Experiences: Interviews with Instructors in Higher Ed

In addition to the FAM survey, the research team administered an innovative study to deeply understand how faculty navigate different decisions around accessibility in their teaching — conducting in-depth conversations with 23 faculty members from across the country. These interviews provided rich insights into how instructors across diverse disciplines experience and approach teaching students with disabilities.

From STEM fields to social work, from large lecture halls to hands-on labs, faculty members shared their experiences navigating accommodation processes, adapting their teaching practices, and balancing institutional policies with individual student needs. The conversations revealed both the commonalities and complexities of creating accessible learning environments, highlighting the gap between formal training and the realities of day-to-day teaching.

Research Approach

The research methodology centered on detailed one-on-one interviews with faculty members in higher education via Zoom. Researchers partnered with Prolific.co for recruitment, ensuring diverse representation across academic programs and learning contexts. 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.

Key Themes: The Faculty Perspective

The Center found several recurring themes throughout conversations with instructors in higher education. In this summary, we provide examples of the patterns that emerged and quotes to illustrate faculty perspectives.

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Theme #1: Frequency Matters

The overwhelming majority of faculty reported that learning disabilities represent their most frequent accommodation experience, with extended time on exams being the primary request, as well as distraction-free testing environments. This pattern held true across disciplines, institution types, and faculty experience levels.

Many faculty developed straightforward systems for managing extended testing time, often allowing students to complete exams in their offices during office hours or arranging alternative testing spaces. However, the frequency and regularity of these accommodations meant they were often seen as routine rather than requiring significant instructional modification.

While less frequent than learning disabilities, physical disabilities—including mobility issues, visual impairments, and hearing impairments—require more specialized accommodations and often raise questions about professional preparation in certain fields. These accommodations often required creativity, additional resources, and sometimes raised difficult questions about essential course requirements versus access barriers.

🎤 **"I had a student with blindness...she couldn't use the software like the rest of the class. So I had to basically design separate assignments for her."**

— *Sociology Instructor*

Theme # 2: Mental Health

Faculty increasingly encounter students with mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety and depression) as disability categories requiring accommodation, reflecting growing awareness of psychological disabilities in higher education and the rising frequency of students with mental health conditions. Several instructors noted this as a relatively recent shift in the types of accommodations they see. This theme revealed faculty grappling with how to support students experiencing mental health challenges while maintaining academic standards, often in the absence of clear institutional guidance.

🎤 **"And then we get into the realm… of mental health. And that's tricky because the disability office is pretty loosey goosey with who qualifies for disabilities."**

— Health Information Technology Instructor

Theme #3: Disclosure Timing

Faculty experience a range of student approaches to disability disclosure, from highly proactive early-semester communication to last-minute notifications that create logistical and pedagogical challenges. The timing significantly affects instructors' ability to implement accommodations effectively. When requests are made at the last minute, especially before a high stakes assignment such as an exam, faculty are in a bind and may not always know how to respond at that moment. Many instructors expressed frustration not with providing accommodations themselves, but with the compressed timeline when students wait until the last moment to disclose their needs or present accommodation letters.

🎤 **"Sometimes students are really proactive with accommodations. So they'll approach me very early in the semester and we'll sit down and figure out exactly what we need to do to help them be successful in the class. And other students ask the day before the exam for accommodations and I'm like, OK great… now I have to figure out how to give you time and 1/2 on an exam."**

— Psychology Instructor

Theme #4: Informal Disclosures

Faculty frequently encounter students who informally disclose disabilities or request accommodations without official documentation, revealing barriers to accessing formal disability services and highlighting trust-based relationships between instructors and students. Several faculty members chose to honor informal requests, but varied in the degree to which they also insisted on students reaching out to access services.

These findings suggest that while formal accommodation systems exist, many students either find them inaccessible, time-consuming, or stigmatizing, leading them to approach individual instructors instead. Faculty responses to these situations varied from strict adherence to official processes to flexible trust-based arrangements.

🎤 **"I always encourage my students when they're falling behind to talk to access services...I want that student to know that those resources are there."**

— Health Information Technology Instructor

Theme #5: Formal and Informal Support

Faculty reported navigating accessibility largely through a patchwork of supports—some formal, some informal, and many self-initiated. While institutional resources exist at most campuses, instructors described a significant gap between what's available and what they actually use or find helpful.

Faculty reported that formal accessibility training exists at their institutions but is often minimal, optional, or confined to orientation. Many acknowledged not utilizing available resources, sometimes due to time constraints, sometimes due to lack of awareness about what's offered beyond initial onboarding.

Several faculty described training that focused primarily on legal compliance rather than practical teaching strategies. While institutions can point to the existence of accessibility training, the actual impact on faculty practice remains limited, particularly when training is front-loaded at orientation and not revisited.

🎤 **"If I run into a topic I don't know, I look it up online. I'll go into Google Scholar and start looking for other ideas and other articles that will give me tips."**

— Psychology Instructor

🎤 **"I've had to do a lot of trial and error on my own, but I've also picked things up from mentors and colleagues along the way...Some of my colleagues are really good at this stuff, so I just watch what they do."**

— Biology Instructor

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In the absence of comprehensive formal training, faculty rely heavily on their own research, trial-and-error, and informal conversations with colleagues. This self-directed approach means accessibility knowledge develops unevenly and depends significantly on individual faculty initiative and departmental culture.

Theme #6: Accessibility Offices: Responsive but Not Proactive

Faculty described disability services offices as helpful and responsive when contacted, but rarely proactive in reaching out to instructors or providing ongoing support. The relationship is typically transactional. Accommodation letters are sent and faculty implement them, rather than engaging in a more consultative process. Faculty described a need for further support in making decisions about accessibility within instruction, above and beyond the accommodations such as extended time or providing class notes ahead of time. They are largely aware that faculty could do more to support disabled students, but have not received substantive support beyond implementing the required accommodations. These insights suggest a missed opportunity for disability services offices to serve as partners in accessible pedagogy rather than simply accommodation coordinators.

🎤 **"Our disability services is really good about getting letters to us and they're available if we have questions, but I don't think I've ever had them reach out proactively with strategies I could use."**

— *English and Learning Support Director*

🎤 **"They're quick to respond when I email them with questions...but a lot of times their answer is 'that's up to your professional judgment' but I need guidance."**

— *Health Information Technology Instructor*

Theme #7: Discussing Accessibility with Colleagues

Faculty conversations about accessibility with their colleagues revealed both the value and the limitations of informal peer networks. These discussions ranged from quick email exchanges about shared students to sustained collaborative problem-solving about complex accessibility barriers.

The most helpful conversations focused on specific student situations rather than abstract principles, allowing them to develop concrete strategies they could apply immediately. Hypothetical discussions were seen as less useful than real-world problem-solving. Faculty appreciated being able to discuss students they had in common (while maintaining appropriate confidentiality) because it allowed them to understand patterns and develop coordinated support strategies.

🎤 **"Honestly, when I run into a situation and then have to work through it…it's hard to imagine hypotheticals of what you would do, because every situation with a student is different…once the situations actually come up, then I think it's helpful to talk through the specifics with a peer or a mentor."**

— *Psychology and Organizational Behavior Instructor*

The willingness and ability of faculty to have meaningful conversations about accessibility varied dramatically by department, with some environments fostering open dialogue and others characterized by resistance or dismissiveness. Faculty in supportive departments described accessibility as a regular topic of conversation, while those in less supportive environments often felt isolated. Many faculty described learning more from observing and talking with colleagues than from attending formal workshops or training sessions.

🎤 **"I have brief conversations in person or by email. In passing, I say, 'Hey, do you have this student? How are you supporting them?' because sometimes we work with the same students."**

— *College Orientation Instructor*

🎤 **"Mostly just from other faculty members talking about their experiences and what they do. That's where I've gotten most of my ideas, and then from trial and error in my own experience."**

— *Sociology Instructor*

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Conclusion

The faculty experiences and perspectives in this report reveal how individual confidence and institutional support shape instructors' approaches to accessibility in higher education. While many faculty demonstrate strong personal commitment to supporting disabled students through trust-based relationships and flexible practices, significant opportunities remain for strengthening institutional infrastructure, improving professional development access, and leveraging the expertise of disabled faculty.

The Faculty Accessibility Measure survey results and interview findings together show that creating truly accessible learning environments requires more than motivated individuals—it demands well-resourced disability services offices, proactive communication systems, accessible professional development, and recognition that faculty learn accessibility strategies primarily through informal peer networks rather than formal training. Moving forward, institutions must recognize accessibility as a shared responsibility requiring sustained investment in both faculty development and systemic support structures that translate individual faculty commitment into consistent, accessible student experiences.

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Recommended Reading

While not a comprehensive list, the following readings provided important perspectives that informed the development of the Faculty Accessibility Measure, the faculty 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.

1. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 USC § 12131-12134 (1990).

2. Aquino, K. C., & Bittinger, J. D. (2019). The self-(un)identification of disability in higher education. Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 32(1), 5-19.

3. Biesta, G. (2021). Pragmatism and the philosophical foundations of mixed methods research. In The SAGE handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research. Sage Publications Ltd.

4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

5. Carroll, J. M., Pattison, E., Muller, C., & Sutton, A. (2020). Barriers to bachelor's degree completion among college students with a disability. Sociological Perspectives, 63(5), 809-832.

6. Cech, E. A. (2023). Engineering ableism: The exclusion and devaluation of engineering students and professionals with physical disabilities and chronic and mental illness. Journal of Engineering Education, 112(3), 462-487.

7. Dolmage, J. T. (2017). Academic ableism: Disability and higher education. University of Michigan Press.

8. Grimes, S., Southgate, E., Scevak, J., & Buchanan, R. (2019). University student perspectives on institutional non-disclosure of disability and learning challenges: Reasons for staying invisible. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23(6), 639-655.

9. Hsiao, F., Zeiser, S., Nuss, D., & Hatschek, K. (2018). Developing effective academic accommodations in higher education: A collaborative decision-making process. International Journal of Music Education, 36(2), 244-258.

10. Kerschbaum, S. L., Eisenman, L. T., & Jones, J. M. (Eds.). (2017). Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education. University of Michigan Press.

11. Kurth, N., & Mellard, D. (2006). Student perceptions of the accommodation process in postsecondary education. Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19(1), 71-84.

12. Lowenthal, P. R., Humphrey, M., Conley, Q., Dunlap, J. C., Greear, K., Lowenthal, A., & Giacumo, L. A. (2020). Creating accessible and inclusive online learning: Moving beyond compliance and broadening the discussion. Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 21(2).

13. Marchetti, S., Schley, S., O'Neil, J., Elglaly, Y., Zuchegno, A., Mousley, K., Atkins, S., & Cawthon, S. (2019). Faculty perspectives on developing strategies to improve access in diverse post-secondary classrooms. Learning Communities Journal, 11(1).

14. Mata, R. A., & Borrego, M. (2024). Disabled students in U.S. postsecondary education. National Disability Center for Student Success.

15. Mead, C., Price, C., Gin, L. E., Anbar, A. D., Collins, J. P., LePore, P., & Brownell, S. E. (2023). A comparative case study of the accommodation of students with disabilities in online and in-person degree programs. PloS One, 18(10), e0288748.

16. Merchant, W., Read, S., D'Evelyn, S., Miles, C., & Williams, V. (2020). The insider view: Tackling disabling practices in higher education institutions. Higher Education, 80(2), 273-287.

17. Newman, L. A., Madaus, J. W., Lalor, A. R., & Javitz, H. S. (2021). Effect of accessing supports on higher education persistence of students with disabilities. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 14(3), 353.

18. Nunes, Laliberté, N., & Rawle, F. (2023). The case for flexibility in online science courses: Strategies and caveats. Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education, 51(1), 89-93.

19. Singer, S., & Bacon, J. (2020). Ableism in the academy: A series about disability oppression and resistance in higher education. Critical Education, 11(14), 1-13.

20. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2020 Undergraduate Students.

21. Valle, J. W., Solis, S., Volpitta, D., & Connor, D. J. (2004). The Disability Closet: Teachers with Learning Disabilities Evaluate the Risks and Benefits of "Coming Out." Equity & Excellence in Education, 37(1), 4-17.

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National Disability Center
for Student Success

nationaldisabilitycenter.org

Research Measure Companion Report

In addition to this national report, there is a separate companion report for researchers, The Faculty Accessibility Measure: Toward Better Research and Understanding of How Faculty Shape Accessibility 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/FAM)