



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students with disabilities are those who report deafness or serious difficulty hearing; blindness or serious difficulty seeing; serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition; or serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs. Research has found that students with disabilities are an increasing subpopulation at postsecondary institutions. In the 2015–2016 academic year, the most recent data available, 19% of all enrolled undergraduate students reported having a disability.

Although students with disabilities in higher education are protected by state, federal, and local laws that prohibit discrimination and mandate access to appropriate services and resources for people with disabilities, postsecondary institutions still face challenges in supporting them.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Students with disabilities comprised different proportions of undergraduate and postbaccalaureate programs. In the 2015–16 academic year:
 - 19% of all enrolled undergraduates reported having a disability, compared to 12% of all enrolled postbaccalaureate students;
 - 19% of male undergraduate students and 20% of female undergraduate students reported having a disability, compared to 10% of male and 13% of female postbaccalaureate students;
 - 26% of undergraduate student veterans and 17% of postbaccalaureate student veterans reported having a disability;
 - 23% of undergraduates ages 30 and older, 22% of undergraduates ages 24 to 29, and 18% of undergraduates ages 15 to 23 reported having a disability;
 - 14% of postbaccalaureate students ages 30 and older, 11% of postbaccalaureate students ages 24 to 29, and 8% of postbaccalaureate students ages 15 to 23 reported having a disability;
 - Among undergraduates, 28% of Native American students, 15% of Asian students, 24% of Pacific Islander students, 17% of Black students, 18% of Hispanic students, and 21% of white students reported having a disability; and
 - Among postbaccalaureate students, 12% of Native American students, 6% of Asian students, 15% of Pacific Islander students, 10% of Black students, 14% of Hispanic students, and 13% of white students reported having a disability.

ENROLLMENT & COMPLETION

- Students with disabilities are a larger proportion of students enrolled either part-time or for only part of the academic year.
 - 21% of undergraduate students and 12% of postbaccalaureate students enrolled part-time or for part of the academic year report having a disability.
 - 17% of undergraduate students and 12% of postbaccalaureate students enrolled full-time through the year report having a disability.
- 40% of undergraduate students with disabilities who started in 2011 graduated with a bachelor's degree from the same institution by 2017, compared to 57% of students without disabilities.

CHALLENGES

- Students with disabilities identified the following barriers to access and participation on campus:
 - Being unaware of their campus disability resource office and its services; challenges navigating campus procedures; and inadequate accommodations.
 - Classroom and instructional environment barriers including faculty unaware of disability accommodations; faculty who push back against accommodations; and instructors who do not respond to requests for accommodations.
 - Campus access and support issues including uneven walkways, poorly marked crosswalks, buildings with external stairs but no ramp, and gaps in programs and services.
 - Negative interactions with fellow students; the stigma of disability; and the added work of seeking support and accommodations for their disability.
- According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, applying for accommodations can be a cumbersome process, and students who don't receive support early face an increased risk of not graduating.
- Students with disabilities were more likely to experience financial hardships and food and housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic than students without disabilities.
- Students with disabilities are less likely to feel welcome on campus or supported by their institution than students without disabilities.
- According to a 2020 survey, 70% of students with mental health disabilities were not registered to receive accommodations on campus.
 - One-third of students with mental health disabilities stated they were not aware they were eligible for accommodations.

SOURCES

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