



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

### CENSUS OVERVIEW

According to the U.S. Census' American Community Survey (ACS), in 2021 [13%](#) of the civilian population reported having some form of disability. Among the disability types listed by the ACS (hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living difficulties), ambulatory difficulties are the most reported (7%). There are also considerable differences in disability reporting by race/ethnicity, with Native American (15%), non-Hispanic White (14%), and Black (15%) populations the most likely to report having a disability. Asian (8%) people are the least likely to report having one.

Among the 38 million people who are 25 or older and report having a disability, [6.7 million](#) (18%) held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2019, up from [13%](#) in 2010. However, this is considerably lower than the 36% of the population who does not report a disability in 2019.

### ENROLLMENT

The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) defines students with disabilities as 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.

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.

- In the 2015-16 academic year, the following groups reported having a disability:
  - [19%](#) of all enrolled undergraduates and [12%](#) of all enrolled graduate students
  - 19% of male undergraduates and 20% of female undergraduates, and 10% of male and 13% of female graduate students
  - 26% of undergraduate student veterans and 17% of graduate student veterans
  - 23% of undergraduates ages 30 and older, 22% of undergraduates ages 24 to 29, and 18% of undergraduates ages 15 to 23
  - 14% of graduate students ages 30 and older, 11% of graduate students ages 24 to 29, and 8% of graduate students ages 15 to 23
  - Among undergraduates, 28% of Native American students, 24% of Pacific Islander students, 21% of white students, 18% of Hispanic students, 17% of Black students, and 15% of Asian students
  - Among graduate students, 15% of Pacific Islander students, 14% of Hispanic students, 13% of white students, 12% of Native American students, 10% of Black students, and 6% of Asian students
  - 18% of full-time undergraduate students and 12% of full-time graduate students
  - 21% of undergraduate students and 12% of graduate students enrolled part-time for

some part of the academic year

- There is a discrepancy between the rate of students reporting having a disability, and the rate of students registering with their campus disability center.
  - In 2015-16, on average, 8% of students registered as having a disability with their institution<sup>1</sup>:
    - 9% at non-profit institutions, 8% at for-profit institutions, and 6% of students at public institutions

## FINANCIAL AID

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, [45%](#) of students who reported having a disability received some form of Title IV financial aid in the 2015-16 academic year, which is a similar rate to the total student population.
  - [41%](#) of students with a disability received a Pell grant, and 39% of students without a disability received one.
  - [37%](#) of students with a disability received a federal student loan, a similar share to all students.
- Among students with a disability who received federal Title IV aid, the [average amount](#) received was \$8,411, and \$8,611 for students without a disability.
  - The average Pell grant amount for students with a disability was \$3,662.
  - The average Federal student loan amount for students with a disability was \$7,987.

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- According to the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, [23%](#) of undergraduates who reported a disability in 2012 and 38% of students without disabilities when they entered graduated with a bachelor's degree by 2017.
- Bachelor's degree graduates with a disability were [more likely](#) to have majored in Social Sciences (18% vs. 15%) and Humanities (18% vs. 11%) than bachelor's degree graduates without a disability.
  - Bachelor's degree graduates without a disability were [more likely](#) to major in Science, Engineering, or Math fields than bachelor's degree graduates with a disability (28% vs. 20%).

## OUTCOMES OF GRADUATES

- According to the Baccalaureate & Beyond study, ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, graduates with a disability who reported having an income averaged a gross income of [\\$69,064](#), and an average gross income of \$77,008 for graduates without a disability.
- Wealth accumulation can be [measured](#) differently from income. Ten years after graduating:
  - [55%](#) of graduates with a disability and 63% of graduates without a disability reported owning a home
  - [80%](#) of graduates with a disability and 87% of graduates without a disability had some form of a retirement account

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

In a series of research briefs by the National Center for College Students with Disabilities, 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

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<sup>1</sup> Based on authors' calculations of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

- instructors who do not respond to requests for accommodations
- Campus access and support issues including uneven, poorly marked walkways, 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
- [Students](#) with disabilities were less likely to feel welcome on campus or supported by their institution than students without disabilities
- [Applying](#) for accommodations for learning disabilities 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.
- [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.

## DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, October 2022.

[Baccalaureate & Beyond Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[Beginning Postsecondary Students Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[Mental Health America](#). 2021.

[National Center for College Students with Disabilities](#). 2021.

[Student Experience in the Research University \(SERU\) Consortium](#). 2020.

Updated October 2022

