Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

CENSUS OVERVIEW

According the U.S. Census’ American Community Survey (ACS), in 2022 13% of the civilian population reported having some form of disability. There are also considerable differences in disability reporting by race/ethnicity, with Native American (16%), 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 40 million people who are 25 or older and report having a disability, 8.2 million (21%) held a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2022, up from 14% in 2012. However, this is considerably lower than the 38% of the population who does not report a disability in 2022.

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.

- In the 2019-20 academic year, the following groups reported having a disability:
  - 21% of all enrolled undergraduates and 11% of all enrolled graduate students
  - 28% of undergraduate student veterans and 20% of graduate student veterans
  - 24% of Native American, 23% of Pacific Islander, 21% of white, 22% of Hispanic, 18% of Black, and 14% of Asian undergraduates
- 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 2019-20, on average, 8% of students registered as having a disability with their institution:
    - 10% at non-profit institutions, 7% at for-profit institutions, and 7% of students at public institutions

FINANCIAL AID

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, 58% of students who reported having a disability received some form of Title IV financial aid in the 2019-20 academic year, compared to 54% of students who did not report having a disability.
  - 45% of students with a disability received a Pell grant, compared to 39% of students who did not report having a disability.
  - 36% of students with a disability received a federal student loan, a similar share to all students.

1 The ACS lists hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living difficulties as disabilities.
2 Eligible conditions such as “serious learning disability, depression, ADD, or ADHD” were included in the NPSAS-16 question on disabilities but was removed in NPSAS-20.
3 Based on authors’ calculations of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).
Among students with a disability who received federal Title IV aid, the average amount received was $8,499, and $8,782 for students without a disability.
  - The average Pell grant amount for students with a disability was $4,035.
  - The average Federal student loan amount for students with a disability was $8,181.

**Completion/Degree Attainment**

According to the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, 23% of undergraduates who reported a disability in 2012 graduated with a bachelor’s degree by 2017.
  - 38% of undergraduates who did not report a disability in 2012 graduated with a bachelor’s degree by 2017.

**Earnings and Wealth**

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**

According to 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 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
  - Students with disabilities were less likely to feel welcome on campus or supported by their institution than students without disabilities

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 2023.
Mental Health America. 2021.
National Center for College Students with Disabilities. 2021.