



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

### CENSUS OVERVIEW

In 2023, 13.6% of the civilian population reported having some form of disability.<sup>2</sup> There are considerable differences in disability reporting by race/ethnicity, with American Indian and Alaska Native (15.9%), Black (15.0%), and non-Hispanic White (14.6%) populations the most likely to report having a disability.<sup>2</sup> Asian (8.4%) people are the least likely to report having one.<sup>2</sup> Among the 40.5 million people who are 25 or older and report having a disability, 8.6 million (21.2%) held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2023, up from 15.1% in 2013.<sup>2</sup> However, this is considerably lower than the rate of 38.7% among the population of 195 million people who did not report a disability in 2023.<sup>2</sup>

### 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.<sup>7</sup>

- 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.<sup>6</sup>
  - 28% of undergraduate student veterans and 20% of graduate student veterans.<sup>6</sup>
  - 24% of Native American, 23% of Pacific Islander, 21% of white, 22% of Hispanic, 18% of Black, and 14% of Asian undergraduates.<sup>6</sup>
- There is a discrepancy between the rate of students reporting having a disability, and the rate of students registering with their campus disability center.<sup>6</sup>
  - In 2019-20, 8% of students registered as having a disability with their institution.<sup>6</sup>
    - This rate was 10% at non-profit institutions, 7% at for-profit institutions, and 7% of students at public institutions.<sup>6</sup>

### FINANCIAL AID

- 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.<sup>6</sup>
  - 45% of students with a disability received a Pell Grant, compared to 39% of students who did not report having a disability.<sup>6</sup>
  - 36% of students with a disability received a federal student loan, similar to all students.<sup>6</sup>
- 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.<sup>6</sup>
  - The average Pell Grant amount for students with a disability was \$4,035.<sup>6</sup>
  - The average federal student loan amount for students with a disability was \$8,181.<sup>6</sup>

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- 23% of undergraduates who reported having a disability in 2012 graduated with a bachelor's degree by 2017, compared to 38% of undergraduates who did not report a disability.<sup>4</sup>

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- Ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, graduates with a disability who reported having an income averaged a gross income of \$69,064, compared to an average gross income of \$77,008 for graduates who did not report a disability.<sup>3</sup>
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.<sup>10</sup> Ten years after graduating:
  - 55% of graduates with a disability and 63% of graduates without a disability reported owning a home.<sup>3</sup>
  - 80% of graduates with a disability and 87% of graduates without a disability had some form of a retirement account.<sup>3</sup>

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Students with disabilities identified these 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.<sup>1</sup>
  - 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.<sup>1</sup>
  - Campus access and support issues including uneven, poorly marked walkways, buildings with external stairs but no ramp, and gaps in programs and services.<sup>1</sup>
  - Students with disabilities were less likely to feel welcome on campus or supported by their institution than students without disabilities.<sup>8</sup>
- Students with disabilities were more likely to experience financial hardships and food and housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic than students without disabilities.<sup>9</sup>
- 70% of students with mental health disabilities were not registered to receive accommodations on campus.<sup>5</sup>
  - One-third of students with mental health disabilities stated they were not aware they were eligible for accommodations.<sup>5</sup>

## DATA SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> [Access & Participation in Higher Education](#). National Center for College Students with Disabilities, April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> [American Community Survey & Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, April 2025.

<sup>3</sup> [Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

<sup>4</sup> [Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> [Inaccessible Accessibility](#). Mental Health America, 2021

<sup>6</sup> [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

<sup>7</sup> [Students With Disabilities: Fast Facts](#). National Center for Education Statistics, December 2023.

<sup>8</sup> [Supporting Undergraduate Students with Disabilities](#). National Center for College Students with Disabilities, June 2021.

<sup>9</sup> [The Experiences of Undergraduate Students with Disabilities During the Pandemic](#). SERU Consortium, October 2020.

<sup>10</sup> [Wealth Analysis FAQ](#). Urban Institute, 2021.