

POLICY SOLUTIONS: INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

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In the United States, more than 21% of undergraduate college students identify as having a disability (NCES, 2023). Unfortunately, because of inaccessible higher education systems, disabled learners often choose to not enroll, stop out, or struggle to connect their degree to career opportunities after graduation. As a result, only 18% of disabled adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree—half the rate of adults without a disability (Field, 2023). As college degree attainment continues to be a leading indicator of economic stability and overall well-being, this disparity is even more alarming. Federal policymakers must support changes to make higher education systems more accessible, providing a door to such opportunity instead of an obstacle. In doing so, they will increase college access, degree attainment, and career outcomes for learners with and without disabilities.

Fast Facts

- 1 in 4 adults has a disability (CDC, 2023).
- Over 21% of undergraduate students and 11% of graduate students report having a disability (NCES, 2023).
- 18% of disabled adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree—half the rate of adults without a disability (Field, 2023).
- The labor force participation rate of people with disabilities is 41.4% compared to 77.8% of people without disabilities (Kessler Foundation, May 2025).
- The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 8.2% as compared to 3.9% for people without disabilities (Department of Labor, May 2025).

Key Barriers in Postsecondary Accessibility

Students with disabilities face accessibility barriers throughout their entire higher education experience, from entry to exit of higher education. The following table describes the common barriers of students with disabilities at each point of their journey, based on a roadmap created by the Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education (Coalition, 2025).

Category	Common Barriers
Entry to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of accommodations in college admissions testing. • Inaccessible college websites with difficult to find college accessibility information. • Poor transition planning from K-12 to higher education.
Access to & in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodations provided in K-12 are refused by colleges. • Inaccessible college technology systems, including required student software.
Success in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial aid denied or taken away when academic pacing needs to change or adjust for student needs. • Lack of use of evidence-based instructional practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that better support all learners. • Faculty that refuse to provide required accommodations.
Opportunity after	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor coordination between colleges, vocational rehabilitation programs, and workforce development programs to support transition from college to career for students with disabilities. • Lack of accommodations provided in workforce development programs and work-based learning opportunities.

Key Elements to Building Accessible Systems

To determine areas of focus and improvement when working toward fully accessible learning, institutions of higher education should consider these key elements (CHEPP, 2024a).

- Transparent availability of resources and access to a disability office
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles applied throughout course and program design and delivery
- Centralized systems and consistent use of technology across courses and departments
- Feedback channels and continuous improvement processes
- Accessibility committee and governance policies
- Regular engagement of faculty and student services professionals

Federal Policy Recommendations

Federal policymakers have a critical role in creating accessible systems and addressing the barriers faced by students with disabilities in higher education. Using CHEPP's learner-centered design framework (CHEPP, 2024b), the following are recommendations for Congress to address the long-standing gaps to make higher education more accessible and equitable for all learners.

Mission & Culture:

- Congress should establish an office of postsecondary access within the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Responsibilities should include ensuring that data from institutions regarding graduation rates, degree completion, access, and accommodations are made public to students to ensure effective and responsible decision-making in selecting institutions to attend (e.g., College Scorecard data).

Academic Relevance & Engagement:

- Congress should require institutions to accept certain documentation as evidence of a disability, including individualized education programs (IEPs) [e.g., such as those outlined in the RISE Act (Respond, Innovate, Succeed, and Empower Act)].
- Congress and the Administration, in all efforts related to artificial intelligence (AI), should ensure that algorithmic bias against people with disabilities is addressed and guardrails are in place. As new tools are developed, best practices in the use of AI should be shared as AI can and will continue to be an accommodations tool for learners with disabilities.

Learner Agency & Awareness:

- Congress should ensure that students with disabilities who receive accommodations for their pace of study are eligible for Title IV financial aid grants aligned with their academic pacing (e.g., such as those proposed by the Pell Grant Flexibility Act and the Higher Education Grant Flexibility Act).
- Congress should allow institutions to test and learn how to distribute Title IV financial aid for learning based on knowledge and subject mastery in lieu of time using the credit or clock hour (e.g., such as that proposed in the Empowering Learners Through Competency-Based Education Act).
- Congress should create monetary incentives or rewards for institutions of higher education that excel at meeting the needs of students with disabilities regarding accommodations and accessibility in an accountable and measured way and for institutions that commit to continuing to do such work.

Student Experience:

- Congress should require institutions of higher education to have an office of accessibility. In addition, they should develop a pilot program that provides funding for institutions to expand their accessibility and disability services, including accessible technology, a broadened range of accommodations, additional staff, and alterations to physical spaces through centralization of budgeting and prioritization of accessibility budgets within the institution of higher education.

For more information and further recommendations, read our full research and policy brief: [Online by Design: How Accessibility Is Fundamental to Learner-Centered Design and Policy Recommendations](#).

Sources

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