



# ACCESSIBLE BY DESIGN: A COMPREHENSIVE PLAYBOOK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

A Practical Guide to Embedding Accessibility Across  
Digital, Physical, and Institutional Systems for  
Learners with Disabilities

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## Coalition on Accessibility for Higher Education

The Playbook was authored by members of and a product from the Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education (Coalition). The Coalition was formed in March 2025 by co-conveners, the Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice at Southern New Hampshire University and the National Center on Learning Disabilities. The Coalition brings together organizations across K-12, higher education, workforce, technology, and disability rights. The Coalition advocates for change in higher education institutional and practitioner policies, as well as state and federal policies, to create a more accessible higher education system. The primary priorities of the Coalition are to connect research, policy, and practice to inform institutions of higher education and expand accessible learning opportunities for all students.



Learn more about the Coalition by clicking this link to the LinkedIn page:  
<https://www.linkedin.com/company/higher-ed-access/>.

## Members of the Coalition Include:

### Co-Convener



Southern  
New Hampshire  
University

### Co-Convener



- Accessible College
- All4ED
- Association on Higher Education and Disability
- Association of University Centers on Disabilities
- Center for American Progress
- CAST
- Complete College America
- EdTrust
- Florida International University Disabled Student Union
- Institute for Higher Education Policy
- National Association for College Admission Counseling
- National College Attainment Network
- National Down Syndrome Congress
- National Skills Coalition
- Nelnet Inc.

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## Preface

Today, more than 21% of undergraduate college students have a disability.<sup>1</sup> Accessibility in higher education is a significant and persistent issue. There are many barriers to an accessible higher education experience, and some include placing the burden of proof and access on learners, a lack of system-wide supports, a lack of belonging and inclusion, and gaps in data collection. These inequitable access challenges span institutional barriers, programmatic and educational needs of staff, technology and procurement, and federal policy.

There are laws that require a baseline of accessibility for institutions of higher education: Section 504 of the [Rehabilitation Act](#) (Section 504) and the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA). But what does it take to truly create an accessible experience for learners with disabilities throughout their entire higher education experience: entry to, access to and in, success in, and opportunity after?<sup>2</sup>

Creating an accessible campus that enables learners with disabilities to truly belong is possible for all colleges and universities. Colleges and universities across the country are already demonstrating best practices today. This Playbook seeks to support institutions of higher education in making changes to create more accessible higher education experiences for learners with disabilities and all learners, building on the foundation of Section 504 and the ADA.

Whether you are a college leader, faculty member, or student support specialist—and whether you are starting at the beginning or are far along on your accessibility journey—this Playbook is for you. Take a moment to review this preface and then dive into the chapter(s) that best fits your needs. Enjoy!

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Fast facts: Students with disabilities*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60#:~:text=In%202019%E2%80%9320%2C%20some%2021,making%20decisions%20because%20of%20a> and U.S.

Government Accountability Office. (2024, July 11). *For Disability Pride Month—We highlight our work on college campus access issues*. GAO Blog. <https://www.gao.gov/blog/disability-pride-month-we-highlight-our-work-college-campus-access-issues>

<sup>2</sup> Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education. (2025). *Why the Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education built a policy roadmap*. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7338587774524026880>

## Who Should Read the Playbook?

The Playbook is about making change inside institutions of higher education. Many individuals are responsible for change across colleges and universities and may find chapters and sections of this Playbook useful and interesting. We recommend that college and university administrators read and use the best practices. We also believe others, including those responsible for policies and procedures, such as provosts, deans, disability support personnel, other leaders and practitioners, student services, information technology (IT) staff, and academic faculty, will find this Playbook useful throughout their daily work. Additionally, college and university students may find this Playbook helpful and informative. This Playbook may also support self-advocacy and student disability organizations in expanding access. Federal and state policymakers may also find this Playbook informative regarding how institutions of higher education meet and exceed existing statutory requirements and what policy changes and investments may support this work.

## How Do I Use the Playbook?

Read through the first two chapters to get the groundwork. Then, determine where you want to begin for your college or in your courses. Pick a chapter and get started!

## What's Next?

There is no perfect entry point. The best option is just to begin. As you read through the Playbook and find ways to implement changes, keep in mind that accessibility is a learning journey and ever evolving. The suggestions and recommendations provided are not static; they take a clear implementation plan with a collection of data to improve accessibility across systems. Each college and university may start at different places. The goal is to find an entry point, begin, and reflect on a continuous improvement cycle. There will always be more ways to improve, especially when our learners today are diverse, technology is changing rapidly, and new data becomes available to inform changes. Keep in mind that small changes have big impacts. Get started!

## Chapter 1: Taking Stock

The goal of this Playbook is to support you on your institution's accessibility journey. You may be reading this Playbook at the beginning of your work, or you may be more advanced, looking to create more inclusive and accessible opportunities for students. Determining where to start and prioritizing actionable plans can be a daunting task. As recommended in the preface, you are encouraged to read Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, and then move through the Playbook as you need, using the chapters as resources. In addition, this Playbook is a primer for deeper learning and application, and it is not reinventing the wheel: embedded throughout are links to further resources, articles, tools, and supports to build on the information provided. This chapter will delve into the necessary tools and steps for the first stages of the work: compliance checks and audits, needs assessments, and surveys and student input. With these elements in mind, you have the tools to move to the next chapter: building allies. To get started, you will take stock of where you stand with accessibility from all perspectives.

### Compliance Checks and Audits

Ensuring that your institution is meeting the legal baseline for accessibility, namely Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), is the first step in the journey. Compliance with these laws will establish your baseline for accessibility. Legal compliance is simply the floor of what needs to be accomplished, not the ceiling. Without establishing clear processes to confirm compliance, later efforts to transform campus physical spaces, culture, procurement, or digital experiences will be built on shaky ground. This Playbook builds upon the ADA and Section 504; Chapters 3–8 cannot be fully embraced without compliance with underlying federal and state laws.

Institutional leadership should establish a process of ongoing compliance checks, not a one-time audit. Accessibility continuously can shift and change, thus ongoing assessment and improvement is needed, even with compliance. One best practice approach is to form a governing body composed of key stakeholders. This body may include student services, academic affairs, facilities and physical access, information technology (IT) and digital, and procurement representation that is dedicated to monitoring compliance with the ADA Title II (state and local governments) and Title III (public accommodations), as well as Section 504. Another option, or in tandem, is to engage outside entities to bring an independent lens to your compliance status. An independent body can help surface issues that individuals within the institution may not recognize, and it can also provide benchmarking against peer institutions.

As part of this work, digital accessibility would be assessed and reviewed, frequently and in an ongoing, deliberative manner. In recent years, higher education has seen shifts in digital accessibility expectations. In April 2024, the Department of Justice finalized a regulation requiring public colleges and universities to, in short, comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1 Level AA) across their websites, learning management systems (LMSs), and mobile applications. As of the writing of this Playbook, this ADA Title II regulation was delayed for one year through an Interim Final Rule<sup>3</sup>. The Interim Final Rule has moved compliance for large colleges and universities (serving over 50,000 people) to April 2027 and compliance for smaller colleges (under 50,000) to April 2028. Technology is part of virtually every dimension of college life, from admissions portals to LMSs, which is why compliance checks must include digital environments, not only physical spaces.

An audit goes further than simply checking the boxes of legality. It is a structured evaluation of current policies, practices, physical environment, technology, procurement, and institutional tools compared to both legal standards and best practices for accessibility. Through an audit, your institution should identify areas of high risk, medium risk, and low risk as key outputs. This risk-tiering will help you prioritize work and allocate resources effectively. For example, a building that has no accessible route for students who may use a wheelchair or other mobility device may be a high risk. A web portal with minor contrast issues might be medium risk. The audit output will give your team a roadmap of where to focus urgent attention and what you can plan for over time.

## Needs Assessments, Surveys, and Student Input

If compliance checks and audits evaluate where colleges and universities are right now, needs assessments, surveys, and student input provide the data to truly improve and refine accessible systems. A needs assessment invites input from across your institution (students with and without disabilities, faculty, academic support staff, IT professionals, and administrators) to review what is being done, what is not being done, what is working, what is not working, and what could be improved. The goal of a needs assessment is to identify gaps between where you are now and where you would like to go, plus identify opportunities to support your goals.

Separately or as part of the needs assessment, feedback channels such as surveys and broader student engagement may be utilized and are especially critical to bringing the lived experience of learners with disabilities into the conversation. Students and faculty can reveal where barriers exist even if they are invisible in policy documents or audit reports. Asking them directly will help surface issues such as inaccessible videos and instructional material, difficult accommodation processes, faculty that are not sufficiently providing accommodations, or a campus culture that does not invite belonging. Student perspectives help your college or university align planning and financial investment with actual student experience rather than assumption.

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<sup>3</sup> Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. (2026, April 20). *Extension of Compliance Dates for Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities*. Federal Register. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/04/20/2026-07663/extension-of-compliance-dates-for-nondiscrimination-on-the-basis-of-disability-accessibility-of-web>

## The Disability Data Problem

In higher education, national, high-quality data on students with disabilities is significantly lacking. Although similar to other settings, such as workforce with self-identified and optional disability disclosure, disability data in higher education likely significantly undercounts the number of students on campus because of how it is collected. Advocates and U.S. Members of Congress have sought to improve data collection to more accurately count and understand disabled student outcomes in higher education, but these efforts have not been fully realized. For example, collecting data on students with disabilities with cohort-based outcomes (i.e., graduation rates), add and drop rates, credit enrollment, and more would improve overall understanding of how to continue to increase access, support, and inclusivity of colleges and universities. Some states and institutions (e.g., the [University of California system](#)) collect this data; however, since it is not federally mandated or aggregated, it does not enable institutional comparisons or identify student success gaps.

## Moving from Assessment to Action and Transparency

By evaluating compliance with the ADA and 504 through audits, assessing the gaps through needs assessments, and centering lived experiences of students through surveys, your institution will establish a baseline of accessibility. This is more than a report card. Reviewing and assessing the information may seem overwhelming, but it is critical for success. This information is a foundation for strategic inclusion and accessibility moving forward, and the information should be transparently communicated to all stakeholders. The next chapter shifts from “what” to “who” to begin cultivating allies in creating system-wide change.

## Key Takeaways

- **Compliance with the ADA is the floor, not the ceiling.** Meeting the legal baselines of Section 504 and the ADA is just the first step. True accessibility requires going beyond minimum compliance to work toward true inclusion and equitable access.
- **Utilize audits for risk and prioritization.** Structured accessibility audits should evaluate physical, digital, and policy environments. This will support identifying high, medium, and low risks to create a roadmap for the necessary changes and how the risks are prioritized.
- **Center the perspectives of learners with disabilities.** Needs assessments and surveys support audit results by uncovering barriers and validating the lived experiences of students. This allows changes and financial investment to be based on actual needs rather than assumptions.

## Chapter 2: Building a Team & Stakeholders

Once you have taken stock of where you are with compliance and student perspectives, you are ready to build a team to begin changing policies and systems. The work described throughout this Playbook cannot successfully happen in isolation. Meaningful, sustainable change requires collaboration among many individuals across departments and leadership levels who share a vision for accessibility, inclusion, and equity in higher education. Whether you are launching accessibility efforts for the first time or building upon years of progress, the key to success lies in identifying allies, engaging leadership, and creating a shared culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

### Who Should Be At The Table



**Figure 1**

Diverse group of stakeholders seated around a table labeled “Accessibility & Student Success,” representing cross-campus and community collaboration. Roles include faculty; local nonprofits and community-based organizations; policy administrators; provosts; deans; chief financial officers; disability support professionals; student services staff; IT leaders; and procurement officers.

## Find Your Allies

Although individual staff and faculty can improve accessibility, no single department or office can solely carry the responsibility for accessibility across the entire college or university. Early success depends on building a team of individuals from different departments who can help design, implement, and sustain policies and improvements. Start by identifying people who are already invested in student success, equity, and innovation. These individuals may include administrators responsible for policies and procedures, provosts, deans, chief financial officers, disability support professionals, student services staff, IT leaders, procurement officers, faculty, and local nonprofits and community-based organizations who have demonstrated interest in inclusive teaching practices.

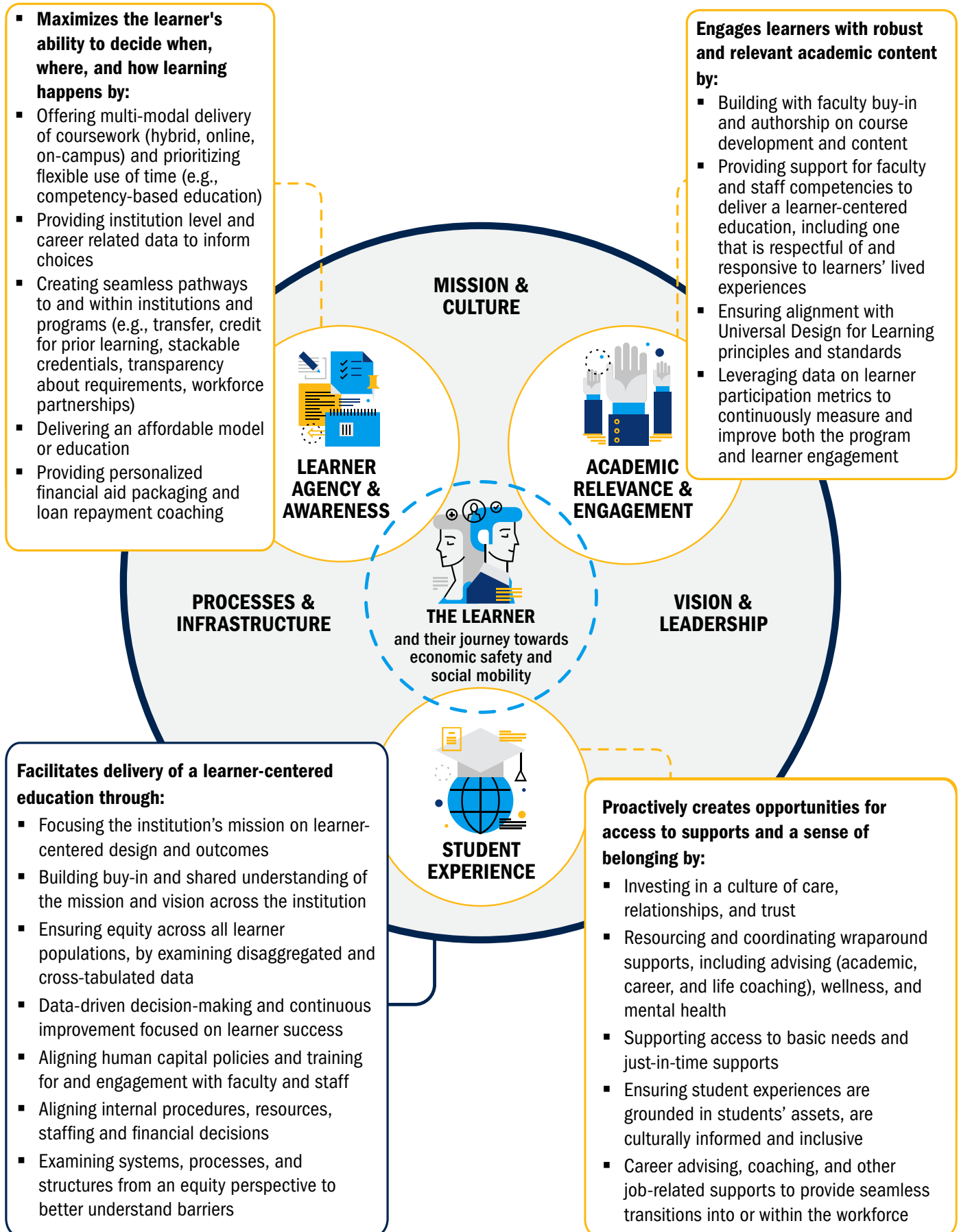
It should be noted that, at this early stage, your goal is not broad buy-in from the entire institution but rather assembling a committed implementation team. This will be a group that can move from ideas to action, plus help draft policies and procedures that will later gain formal endorsement. The earlier you involve allies and advocates from across departments, the more likely your work will gain traction when it reaches leadership review and approval.

Part of your team should also include students, as student perspectives are critical from the beginning and throughout the process. Collaborate with student government, disabled student organizations, and student affinity groups to ensure that you integrate the perspectives of learners with disabilities from the beginning. Their participation helps shape goals that reflect lived experience. Similarly, disability employee resource groups (ERGs) and staff networks can provide valuable institutional memory and guidance on implementing accessibility in day-to-day operations.

## Building Your Case

Accessibility in higher education, regardless of modality, is critical not only to meeting the needs of learners with disabilities but also, as a function of learner-centered design, to providing more inclusive academic programs and cocurricular activities for all learners. The learner-centered design framework (see Figure 2 on page 14) by the Center of Higher Education Policy and Practice (CHEPP) demonstrates how institutions can design systems to center the learner in the institutional mission, vision, and processes. The framework also details the key components of a learner-centered experience—academic relevance and engagement, learner agency and awareness, and student experience.

**Figure 2 A Learner-Centered Design Framework**



## **Case Study: Strengthening Postsecondary Transitions for Students with Learning Differences through Community-Based Organizations and Higher Ed Partnerships (National College Attainment Network)**

In the fall of 2022, the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) received a grant from the [Oak Foundation](#) to strengthen postsecondary transitions for students with learning differences by working with a subset of NCAN member college attainment organizations and their institutional partners. Additionally, NCAN has provided professional development, tools, and resources to all its members and the broader field of college attainment. Through a community of practice model and consultant-led supports, NCAN studied what services their member organizations were providing for students with learning differences and how college access, retention, and completion could be improved for this demographic.

This case study shares a brief overview of findings from NCAN's first cohort and the institutional recommendations their work yielded. The organizations that participated in the first round 18-month community of practice were [Onward We Learn](#) in Providence, RI, [Student U Durham](#) in Durham, NC, and [the SEED Foundation](#) in Washington, DC.

**Onward We Learn:** Onward We Learn expanded staff-wide training on supporting students with individualized educational programs (IEPs) and 504 plans. Staff professional development on learning differences is held once a term and is also embedded into new staff onboarding. Data-sharing agreements with partner institutions, Community College of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College, were updated to include student-level data on IEPs, 504 plans, and college disability services status for all students served by the program. Onward staff assisted students in requesting accommodations for college placement tests, ensuring accurate initial course placement.

**Student U Durham:** Student U Durham staff found their students were overly reliant on access and services and were not adequately building the necessary self-advocacy skills to successfully navigate higher education at their partner institutions like Durham Technical Community College and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. To strengthen self-advocacy, Student U created the Family Support Toolkit, which includes an IEP/504 plan overview, a snapshot of parents' rights, an IEP/504 school meeting prep sheet, and a cheat sheet for communicating with schools effectively.

**The SEED Foundation:** The SEED team concentrated their efforts on accurately capturing qualitative feedback from students and families to ensure program effectiveness and address stigma when utilizing disability offices' resources. Throughout the grant project, they worked to better understand the number of SEED graduates accessing disability services on college campuses and the quality of those services. They implemented students' feedback with several of their institutional partners, eliminating outdated resources and suggesting more streamlined processes to prevent barriers to students getting the help they needed.

**Table 1. Recommendations for Supporting Accessibility**

| Recommendation   | Why It Matters  |
|--|---|
| Partnering with community-based organizations expands institutional staff's capacity by ensuring students have familiar support helping them navigate the new and unfamiliar environment that is a college campus.                               | Community-based organization supported students, especially students with learning differences, are more likely to persist and graduate because they have that additional support from high school. |
| Ensure that disability services support starts with admission.   | Students being placed in the wrong courses is a costly mistake. Starting with admissions also helps students better navigate the non-academic aspects of college.                                   |
| Regularly check the guidelines of professional organizations like the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and gather feedback from your own students to ensure that the accommodations process is up to date and easy to use. | Outdated resources and redundant processes will only further discourage students who overcame their fear of stigma to seek assistance.  |
| Make resources more widely available and clear. Ensure that disability services staff are visible frequently outside of their office, and that the available options are clear.  | Students don't know what they don't know to ask for, and what services their high school offered might be different from what's available to them on campus.  |

## Engaging Leadership and Setting a Vision

A clear commitment, vision, and mission prioritizing accessibility is essential to achieving truly accessible higher education systems. Leadership that prioritizes accessibility will drive expectation setting on organizational decisions and buy-in across stakeholders. Through budgetary decisions and human capital policies, leadership can help facilitate organizational change, including strengthening accessibility systems. Leadership-level decisions shape an institution's accessibility, including how many students individual accommodations specialists should serve, whether accessibility offices are funded through a central budgeting system, and how to integrate accessibility checks into an institution's procurement process. Without clear leadership buy-in, accessibility implementation teams may consider developing a comprehensive proposal demonstrating how their accessibility roadmap aims to improve student belonging and persistence, and ultimately to increase graduation rates for students with and without disabilities. The team may also propose tiered changes that include lower-cost options to build toward full buy-in of the accessibility roadmap.

Investment from leadership will create a clear institutional vision to provide accessible systems. This vision will help accessibility be a consideration across other institutional decision-making processes and investments. To further that vision, a continuous improvement process is essential for institutions to remain nimble as they navigate new standards, as well as technological advancements. This can be done through data on how students access accommodations and disabled student enrollment, persistence, and completion. Colleges may also prioritize cross-system collaboration to implement and maintain accessibility across systems and platforms. Institutions should also develop feedback systems for students and staff to raise accessibility barriers. These may be reviewed and addressed through an accessibility committee. Mechanisms to drive continuous improvement will help ensure that higher education systems meet and exceed accessibility standards.

When possible, accessibility teams should regularly inform leadership on their ongoing work and additional options to bolster accessible systems. Even when there is a lack of institutional leadership, higher education practitioners can still have a significant impact on meeting their learners' accessibility needs. For example, Chapter 3 outlines various practices that can be used at the faculty level to deliver accessible courses and curriculum across modalities.

## **Systems Change Requires Coordination**

Using learner-centered design and ensuring leadership buy-in are central to the accessibility process over time, and teams looking to transform the policies and practices of their colleges and universities should enter this work understanding that it is complex and requires coordination and time. The work to transform systems requires both intentional planning and sustained commitment, shown by the demonstration of patience and persistence. Building an accessible college or university is not achieved through a single policy or training, but through a long-term process of shifting mindsets, modernizing infrastructure, embedding accountability across departments, and leveraging continuous improvement.

The most effective change efforts balance big-picture vision with small, tangible wins, especially at the beginning. The phrase “do not boil the ocean” is relevant because audits and other information may reveal enormous possibilities when clear entry points are needed. Instead, setting a clearly articulated long-term direction while demonstrating progress through achievable short-term actions (e.g., updating digital templates, improving signage and wayfinding, revising procurement language to include accessibility standards) will help build momentum and success. These small changes will generate momentum for larger cultural shifts over time that are ultimately essential for success.

Small changes are key to building momentum, but culture change is ultimately essential for success. As policies and procedures evolve, the college or university must also invest in professional development and training so that faculty and staff understand why accessibility matters and how they can contribute. These opportunities should be continuous and embedded in employee onboarding, teaching development, and leadership training.

Determining how to evaluate policies and procedures, build professional development, and adapt the work is an ongoing process and must be done by identifying trends through the use of data. Such data may be from ongoing compliance checks and audits, as mentioned in Chapter 1. There must also be feedback loops and information gathering to track progress and maintain accountability. Teams should regularly collect and analyze disaggregated student data, such as persistence, retention, and completion rates for learners with disabilities, to identify gaps and evaluate whether the changes are working. Student surveys and focus groups can also provide information on how changes are working and may (or may not) be continuing to work. A continuous improvement mindset means using data not just to report one-time results but also to drive decision-making and ongoing change.

## Key Takeaways

- **Build a cross-functional team.** Accessibility must be a shared responsibility. Success of creating a more accessible college or university relies on a team spanning leadership, student services, IT, procurement, facilities, and faculty.
- **Set a vision with leadership.** Leadership buy-in is essential for continued success. Leadership must prioritize accessibility when setting institutional priorities, securing centralized funding, and establishing a culture of accountability.
- **Embed learners with disabilities.** Learners with disabilities must be involved from the beginning to ensure policies center and reflect their lived experience.

## Chapter 3: Instruction, Training, and Best Practices for Faculty

Once you have implemented systems and aligned teams, the next step is empowering the individuals who have the most daily contact with students: faculty. Faculty play a critical role in shaping the accessibility, inclusivity, and overall success of learners. From designing instruction to implementing accommodations, faculty are at the center of the student experience in higher education. This chapter explores the essential role faculty play in accessibility, effective and inclusive instructional methods, responsibilities in accommodation implementation, and unique considerations in graduate education and mentorship.

### Role of Faculty in the Student Experience

Faculty have the most consistent and meaningful contact with students throughout their higher education journey. According to research from the Education Advisory Board, students spend approximately 200 hours with faculty during a typical semester.<sup>4</sup> These relationships extend beyond the classroom; faculty often serve as mentors, role models, and guides during critical academic and personal transitions. Faculty engagement significantly influences student success through retention, persistence, and career guidance.<sup>5</sup>

Despite playing a central role in students' lives, most faculty receive little to no formal instruction in teaching methods or student development. Faculty are typically hired as content experts, not necessarily as educators trained in pedagogy or accessibility.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, faculty are ultimately responsible for much of what defines student success—engagement, grades, belonging, and persistence. The Association of College and University Educators has published extensive research demonstrating how instructional practices directly influence student learning outcomes, particularly for first-generation students and students with disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Education Advisory Board. (2015). *Defining the faculty role in student success: Building ownership for student progression among individual faculty and distributed academic units*. Washington, DC: The Advisory Board.

<sup>5</sup> Gyurko, J., & Protas, B. (2021, December 16). *Faculty are key to student success*. Strong Start to Finish. <https://strongstart.org/2021/12/faculty-are-key-to-student-success/>

<sup>6</sup> San Francisco Bay University. (2024, September 24). *Behind the curtain of higher education: Faculty aren't trained*. <https://www.sfbu.edu/article/behind-curtain-higher-education-faculty-arent-trained>

<sup>7</sup> Association of College and University Educators. (n.d.). *Impact reports*. ACUE. <https://acue.org/impact-reports/>

For students from marginalized communities, including students with disabilities, faculty influence is even more significant. Faculty are responsible for implementing accommodations, ensuring equitable access to instructional materials, removing barriers, and maintaining confidentiality. Yet barriers, including attitudinal, lack of awareness, and lack of training, persist. A 2015 (noting pre-COVID) study found that many faculty members held negative perceptions about students with learning and mental health disabilities and were unaware of campus support services.<sup>8</sup> Faculty understanding of teaching students with intellectual disabilities also varies greatly.<sup>9</sup> These gaps underscore the need for consistent, structured training to ensure faculty can meet the needs of all learners who enter their classrooms.

## Inclusive and Accessible Faculty Instructional Methods

Inclusive instructional methods are essential to create equitable learning environments driven by a strong message of accessibility from leadership through the vision. Every faculty member and dean, across all disciplines and modalities—online, hybrid, and in-person—should receive professional development on inclusive and accessible instructional design. For example, in a large 2023 study, faculty who received yearlong training in evidence-based teaching practices showed measurable improvements in instructional quality and student engagement.<sup>10</sup> These studies have found that structured faculty development enhances teaching effectiveness, enthusiasm, and learning outcomes of students.<sup>11</sup> In STEM, engagement and inclusivity can often be barriers for students interested in the topic. In research focused on STEM faculty, they were challenged to improve four domains regarding students: promoting a growth mindset, building student self-efficacy, developing student metacognitive skills, and creating a sense of student belongingness.<sup>12</sup> In response, the faculty implemented new teaching practices, different classroom structures, new LMSs, and changed how they fundamentally engaged students to achieve results that improved the domains.

### *Universal Design for Learning*

A key instructional method to improve accessibility and inclusivity in the classroom is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). According to CAST, “UDL is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning based on what we know about the human brain.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sniatecki, J.L., Perry, H.B., & Snell, L.H. (2015). Faculty attitudes and knowledge regarding college students with disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 28 (3) 259-275. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083837.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, R., Domin, D., Papay, C., & Grigal, M. (2021). *More dynamic, more engaged: Postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability*. Think College. [https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/More\\_Dynamic\\_More\\_Engaged\\_TaylorDominPapayGrigal.pdf](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/More_Dynamic_More_Engaged_TaylorDominPapayGrigal.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Mowreader, A. (2023, October 18). *Report: Effective Teacher Training Improves Student Outcomes*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/academic-life/2023/10/18/faculty-development-benefits-professors-students>

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Hempel, B., Kiehlnbaugh, K., & Blowers, P. (2020). Scalable and practical teaching practices faculty can deploy to increase retention: A faculty cookbook for increasing student success. *Education for Chemical Engineers*. 33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ece.2020.07.004>

<sup>13</sup> CAST. (2026). *What we do: Universal Design for Learning*. <https://www.cast.org/what-we-do/universal-design-for-learning/>

UDL focuses on three key categories to improve engagement and address diversity in learners: engagement (why), representation (what), and action and expression (how).<sup>14</sup> Leveraging UDL enables educators to improve instructional techniques and enable all students to demonstrate their understanding of the content. Often, a challenge in the classroom is viewed through a deficit lens of the student; the problem lies within how the student is accessing the content or demonstrating their understanding. Instead, UDL helps educators rethink the classroom and educational environment to meet the needs of all students.

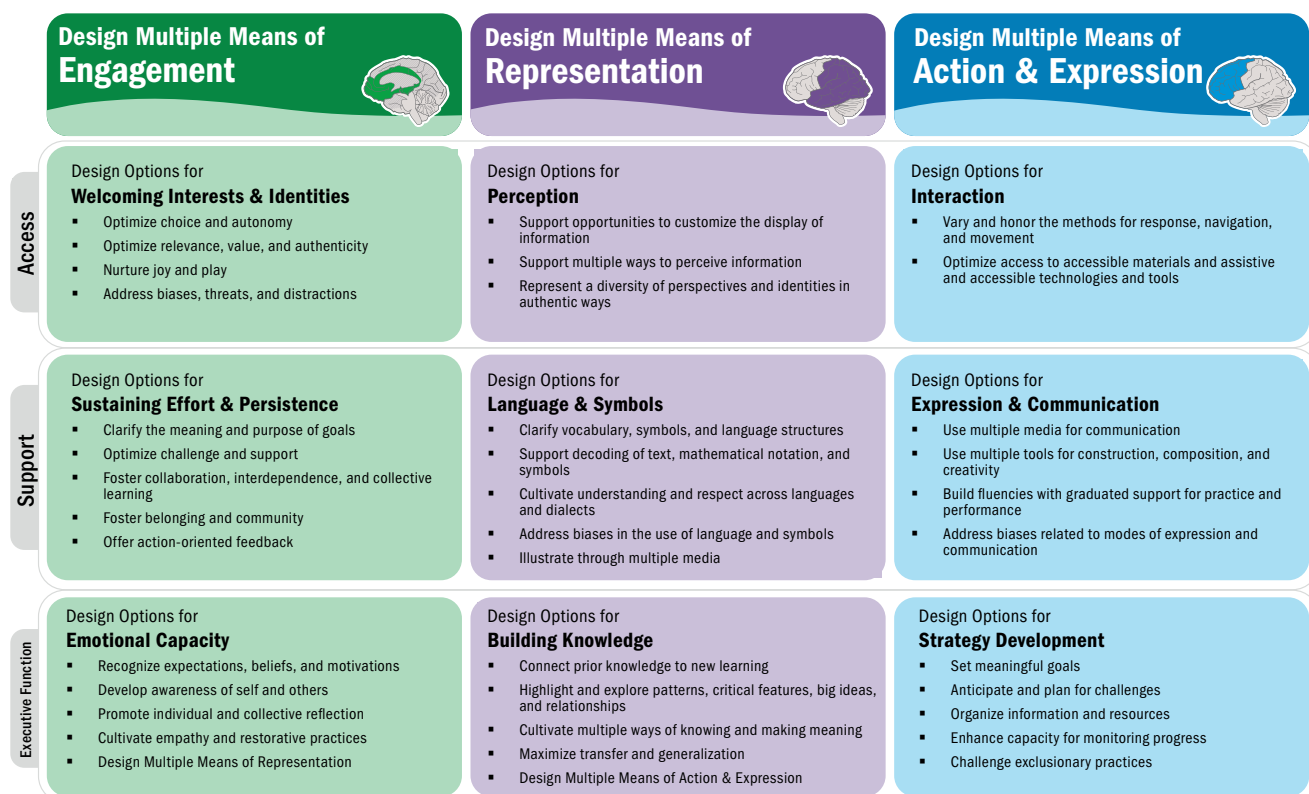
CAST, the leading organization on UDL, has created guidelines for UDL. The guidelines are in their third iteration and go through a rigorous process when changed.<sup>15</sup> The following are the 3.0 guidelines to help support all educators at colleges and universities to develop inclusive and accessible instructional practices.

**Figure 3**

The CAST Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines, showing three principles—Engagement, Representation, and Action & Expression—and related design options that support learner agency.

**Cast Universal Design for Learning Guidelines**

The goal of UDL is learner agency that is purposeful & reflective, resourceful & authentic, strategic & action-oriented.



<sup>14</sup> Johnston, S. C., & Perez, L. (2024). *Creating disability-friendly and inclusive accessible spaces in higher education*. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. [https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27245/Johnston and Perez Creating Disability-Friendly and Inclusive Accessible Spaces in Higher Education.pdf](https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27245/Johnston_and_Perez_Creating_Disability-Friendly_and_Inclusive_Accessible_Spaces_in_Higher_Education.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> CAST (2024). *CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0*. Retrieved from <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

## Instructional Methods for Today's Learners

Students today engage differently than previous generations due to advances in technology and the immediacy of information. The traditional “sit and get” model of instruction rarely supports critical thinking, student growth, or belonging. Students today want to understand the “why” behind what they are learning and engage in different ways with instructional material. Accessible and inclusive instructional methods not only benefit students with disabilities but also enhance engagement and retention for all students—an example of the curb cut effect, a phenomenon further explained in Chapter 6 when accessibility benefits individuals who do not have a disability. Rethinking group work, course expectations, and post-pandemic instructional design further supports accessibility for all learners, as outlined in contemporary inclusive teaching research.<sup>16</sup>

## Faculty and Accommodations

The next chapter will go into extensive detail and discussion about accommodations and how colleges and universities approve and engage with students on accommodations. Accommodations may be needed even if the best inclusive teaching methods, such as UDL, are utilized. Although accommodations are often approved by a disability or accessibility office, it is faculty who actually implement them in practice. See the figure below from a nationally representative survey from the National Center for Learning Disabilities of students with learning disabilities' experiences with accommodations and how they may vary by instructor.

**Table 2. Student Experiences with Accommodations (Percent of Responses)<sup>17</sup>**

| Statement   | Instr. not aware | None of my classes | Some of my classes | Most of my classes | All of my classes |
|---|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| My instructors give me the accommodations I need                          | 1%               | 1%                 | 17%                | 31%                | 28%               |
| My instructors are positive about implementing my accommodations          | 2%               | 1%                 | 19%                | 26%                | 29%               |
| I feel comfortable asking my instructors for the supports I need          | 4%               | 2%                 | 16%                | 26%                | 29%               |
| I get the supports I need without feeling that I am different or a burden | 6%               | 2%                 | 18%                | 28%                | 22%               |

<sup>16</sup> Aquino, K. C., & Lalor, A. R. (Eds.). (2025). *The new accessibility in higher education: Disrupting the system for an inclusive future*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197773482.001.0001>

<sup>17</sup> Note: Percentages represent weighted population estimates based on NCLD's survey sample of young adults who are currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution and who disclosed their LD to their current postsecondary institution (n = 445). Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total to 100%. Source: Rodrigo, S. A., Wong, L. N., Harris, S. L., Wilson, S. E., Malone, A. S., Stelitano, L., Fuller, N., Kubatzky, L., Gage, N. A., Blackorby, J., & LeBoyd, N. (2024). *The State of Learning Disabilities: Navigating the transition to adulthood*. National Center for Learning Disabilities.

Faculty are key to making instruction inclusive and accessible by providing many of the accommodations approved by the college or university—an essential part of instructional methods. This makes all faculty essential partners in ensuring that legal obligations of the college and university are met, as providing accommodations is a shared responsibility between faculty and administration.<sup>18</sup> Despite this critical role, many faculty receive little guidance about the ADA or about educating students with disabilities beyond a required syllabus statement about accommodations, often provided by the disability or accessibility office. Some studies indicate that faculty view the requirement of providing accommodations as the right thing to do but also burdensome.<sup>19</sup> These attitudes may stem from misunderstandings about why accommodations are required, necessary, and important, as well as why they uphold equity rather than provide an advantage. To improve attitudes and understanding toward disability, accessibility, and accommodations, colleges and universities can require training of all faculty and staff.

Faculty misconceptions, such as assuming that accommodations provide an unfair advantage or that they modify the curriculum, can create real harm and risk noncompliance with the ADA and Section 504. Training is, therefore, not optional, as these misconceptions can significantly impact a student's educational experience. All faculty, including tenured professors and those teaching graduate courses, should receive regular and mandatory instruction on disability law, accommodation processes relevant to their college or university, and inclusive pedagogy. Improperly administered accommodations, or a lack of administered accommodations, can result in complaints to the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education, which can expose the college and university to legal and reputational risks, in addition to creating inaccessible experiences for students. Accessibility training should be tied to performance evaluations and tenure review processes as a reflection of faculty accountability.

## Graduate Degrees: Accessible Courses and Mentorship

The concepts and ideas described in this chapter apply to graduate faculty; however, graduate programs, including law and medical programs, present distinct challenges related to accessibility. Since graduate students are not moving into their programs directly from high school, an individualized educational program (IEP) or 504 plan may not be relevant, timely, or accessible to them for getting accommodations. In addition, graduate students often rely heavily on mentoring and research relationships with faculty, which can be complicated by disclosure concerns or stigma. The “hidden curriculum” or the unwritten norms, expectations, and power dynamics in academia can disproportionately disadvantage students with disabilities.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Disability Resource Center. (n.d.). *Ten things faculty should know about students with disabilities*. Cal Poly. <https://drc.calpoly.edu/content/ten-things-faculty-should-know-about-students-disabilities> and TED. (2015, September 24). *The role of faculty and administrators in the accommodation process* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNICijvI7Pk>

<sup>19</sup> Goodwin, E. C., Pais, D., He, J., Gin, L. E., & Brownell, S. E. (2024). Perspectives from undergraduate life sciences faculty: Are we equipped to effectively accommodate students with disabilities in our classrooms? *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 23(2), ar18. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.23-05-0094>

<sup>20</sup> University Affairs. (2022, July 12). *Navigating the hidden curriculum as a graduate student with disabilities*. <https://universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/navigating-the-hidden-curriculum-as-a-graduate-student-with-disabilities/>

The intensity and high pressure of graduate studies can cause flares for learners with disabilities or require new accommodations that they did not need in high school or during undergraduate studies. Graduate studies often introduce new stressors and instruction changes, requiring the student to have greater independence and apply new study techniques. Faculty mentors should be trained to recognize, support, and address these evolving needs, rather than unintentionally facilitate the often challenging dynamic of students' apprehension of disclosure. Programs can improve equity and access by emphasizing clear communication, more structured mentorship, and proactive accommodation planning.<sup>21</sup>

Graduate programs are also the gateway into academia. Thus, accessibility in graduate education impacts the pipeline of disabled faculty. Young prospective faculty may decide not to enter academia, or faculty with disabilities may choose to leave, given the mounting systemic barriers.<sup>22</sup> Promoting accessibility and inclusion in graduate programs and improving mentoring relationships not only supports student success but also strengthens diversity within faculty ranks.

### **Case Study on Strategic Staffing: Neurodiversity and Student Success Specialist at the University of Maine at Augusta**

At the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA), Dylan Sullivan works as the Neurodiversity Liaison and Student Success Specialist. In this role, he supports all students, especially those with Learning Disabilities (LD), to better understand their needs. The Neurodiversity Liaison is a key component of the Neurodiversity Initiative at UMA. This initiative arose out of a desire to better serve neurodiverse students through informed course design, training of staff and faculty, and the development of resources. The Neurodiversity Liaison chairs the Space and Resources subcommittee of the ND Initiative and, in addition to his work with students, consults with faculty on responding to the needs of students.

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<sup>21</sup> Esch, J. & Blaser, B. (2024). *Improving equity and access for graduate students with disabilities*. National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT) in collaboration with AccessComputing. <https://accesscomputing.uw.edu/brief/improving-equity-and-access-for-graduate-students-with-disabilities/>

<sup>22</sup> Burke, L. (2021, May 11). *A Difficult Pathway: Faculty members with disabilities say stigma prevents some from being open about their conditions, and the path to the academy still has its barriers*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/12/faculty-disabilities-say-academe-canpresent-barriers>

## Faculty as Partners in Systems Change

Faculty are at the core of the implementation of accessibility in higher education. They are not only instructors but also mentors. Their attitudes and decisions about the learning environment will directly shape students' experiences and success. Ensuring that faculty are trained, supported, and empowered to deliver accessible instruction is essential to enacting the broader vision of accessibility developed by colleges and universities.

### Key Takeaways

- **Require and support faculty training.** Faculty are key to student success and the primary implementers of accommodations. Regular training and resources on disability law, inclusive pedagogy, and accommodations are needed. Strategic staffing decisions, such as the role of a neurodiversity and student success specialist who supports both students and faculty, can be valuable.
- **Implement inclusive and accessible teaching practices.** Faculty should adopt and utilize inclusive and accessible teaching practices, such as the principles of UDL. Through more inclusive practices, all learners have better access to the curriculum.
- **Recognize the unique challenges facing graduate students.** Graduate programs must be thoughtful of accessibility, from mentorship to navigating the “hidden curriculum” associated with most programs.

### Reports and Resources

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## Chapter 4: Accommodations

### The 101 of Accommodations

In any environment, whether educational, employment, or civil service such as jury duty, people with disabilities often need reasonable accommodations to participate. Under Section 504 and the ADA, colleges and universities are legally required to provide reasonable accommodations, provided that they do not fundamentally alter the nature of a program, such as the course or curriculum, or learning outcome. Accommodations can include physical supports, such as adaptive equipment or housing modifications, as well as academic accommodations. The goal of accommodations is to remove barriers that would limit a student's ability to access an environment or learning, enabling them to participate fully and demonstrate knowledge.

### The Accommodations Process

Accessing accommodations begins with student disclosure, usually to the institution's office of disability services (or similarly named office), and the onus is on the student to provide this disclosure. This is different from the K-12 education system, where the onus was on the school to identify and accommodate students with disabilities, so this may be the first time a student with a disability is disclosing and requesting specific accommodations. Due to factors such as stigma or not knowing the process, some students may not disclose their disability at all. National data found that only about one-third of students informed their college of their disability.<sup>23</sup> While many students may not wish to share their disability status when they enter higher education, they should base their decision on personal choice rather than a lack of awareness, as highlighted in Chapter 5 of *The New Accessibility in Higher Education*.<sup>24</sup>

The accommodations process should not be overly complicated or place unnecessary burdens on the student, including providing documentation of a disability. Colleges and universities should have clear processes and procedures for accepting documentation and approving accommodations, as well as for providing adequate training for staff. One student reported that institutions she attended for her current PhD program, master's degree program, and undergraduate program all had vastly different processes for accessing accommodations. When possible, institutions within a state should standardize and streamline accommodations processes.

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<sup>23</sup> Adam, T., & Warner-Griffin, C. (2022). *Use of supports among students with disabilities and special needs in college* (NCES 2022-071). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2022/2022071/index.asp>

<sup>24</sup> Aquino, K. C., & Lalor, A. R. (Eds.). (2025). *The new accessibility in higher education: Disrupting the system for an inclusive future*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197773482.001.0001>

## Documentation

Under federal law, institutions of higher education may determine their own process and requirements for a student to qualify for reasonable accommodations. Many colleges and universities require documentation of a disability, which may include a formal diagnosis from a qualified professional, a description of how the disability currently impacts academic functioning, recommendations for accommodations, and/or a student's high school IEP or 504 plan. For students with learning disabilities specifically, psychoeducational or neuropsychological evaluations are often required. Many colleges require these evaluations to be conducted in the last 3–5 years with adult scales, and they generally require documentation for health conditions/mental health from the last 6 months to 1 year (depending on the condition). It is also important for institutions to implement processes for students who have changing accommodations needs during their enrollment due to a new disability diagnosis or changes to functional limitations. The Association on Higher Education and Disability ([AHEAD](#)) provides guidance for disability offices to help develop their disability documentation process.

A national survey from the National Center for Learning Disabilities of young adults with learning disabilities asked about documentation requirements for attending postsecondary education.

**Table 3. Documentation Requirements for Postsecondary Accommodations (n = 445).**

| Response   | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| The school or program accepted my IEP, 504 plan, or existing evaluation.                 | 57%        |
| I completed a new full evaluation.   | 32%        |
| The school or program required a new full evaluation, but I was not able to complete it. | 8%         |
| None of the above.   | 3%         |

**Note:** 44% had to pay out-of-pocket.

Source: Rodrigo, S. A., Wong, L. N., Harris, S. L., Wilson, S. E., Malone, A. S., Stelitano, L., Fuller, N., Kubatzky, L., Gage, N. A., Blackorby, J., & LeBoyd, N. (2024). *The state of learning disabilities: Navigating the transition to adulthood*. National Center for Learning Disabilities.

## Legislative Efforts at the Federal and State Levels: RISE Act

At the federal level, there have been bipartisan efforts to streamline the accommodations process and ensure that institutions accept a student's IEP or 504 plan as documentation. This bill, called the RISE Act, has been proposed in Congress – introduced in the House and Senate during the 119th Congress [H.R.3939](#)/[S.3589](#). State-level legislation has passed in [Arizona](#), [Illinois](#), [Minnesota](#), and [Virginia](#).

## Access to Information

It is critical that prospective and current students have ready access to information about how to access accommodations through their college. This includes making disability office contact information prominent on an institution's public-facing website, sharing information during the recruitment and admissions process, and including it on an individual's letter of acceptance. Once enrolled, institutions should consider featuring disability services during orientation. Faculty should be required to include disability office contact information on their course syllabi, and institutions should train faculty, alongside advisors and other student-facing staff, on how eligible students can connect with the disability office and access accommodations. Institutions can improve consistency of information across programs by providing sample language for faculty syllabi and other student-facing outreach.

### *Transparent Accommodations Information Empowers Students*

Some students highlight the differences between high school and college and how they find it challenging to self-advocate when they don't fully know what accommodations may be available. One student tried to ask their institution for a list of accommodations without success, only obtaining such information through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. Schools can share information about commonly offered accommodations to both prospective and current students so that students can understand the types of accommodations that they may benefit from and better communicate their needs during the accommodations process. Institutions should explain this information clearly so that students do not equate it to automatic eligibility and are aware that accommodations decisions are an iterative process between the student and disability services staff. The information should not be exhaustive either.

## List of Sample Accommodations:



### Academic & Testing Supports

- Extended time on tests
- Quiet test-taking environment
- Flexible attendance
- Adjusted deadlines
- Reduced course load
- Priority registration for courses
- Early access to materials
- Class waivers/substitutions
- Calculator use



### Assistive Technology & Materials

- Screen readers
- Text-to-speech programs
- Large print text
- Alternative formats (*laptop, oral, large print*)
- Assistive and adaptive technologies
- Accessible desk in dorm



### Communication & Instructional Access

- Allowing class lecture to be recorded
- Sign language interpreters
- Interpreters
- Closed captioning
- Receiving copies of notes from classmates
- Alternative interviewing time



### Support Services & Campus Access

- Help with study habits and time management
- Mentoring programs and student support groups
- Regular meetings with accessibility counselor or learning specialist
- Accessible housing
- Accessible parking
- Service animals
- Preferred seating
- Remote attendance at meetings
- Breaks from class

## Resources for Accommodations and Support Staff

According to Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS)<sup>25</sup>, the percentage of institutions reporting that more than 6% of the undergraduate population had formally registered with disability services has grown from 9% in 2010–2011 to 27.9% in 2021–2022. While this demonstrates the shift that more students are comfortable disclosing, it also means that more resources are required to support disabled students sufficiently.

While there is not a research-based formula for staffing in disability resource offices or equivalent offices, AHEAD has defined a *reasonable staffing level* as “one that provides enough professional staff to meet the office workload in such a way that (a) the needs of students are addressed in a timely way, (b) faculty and staff receive responsive and suitable guidance regarding access and accommodation implementation, and (c) staff are not chronically overworked to meet basic office requirements.”<sup>26</sup> With high caseloads, many offices are likely falling short of these parameters, with 2022 data from AHEAD showing that staff at most institutions have at least 130 students on average on their caseload, with up to 205 students at some fairly large institutions (see table below).

**Table 4. Average Student to Disability Resource Office (DRO) Staff Ratios by Institutional Size (Data from AHEAD)**

| Average Student-Staff Ratios by Institutional Size | Average Number of Registered Students | Average Number of Full-Time DRO Staff | Student to Full-Time DRO Staff Ratio |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <1,500 students                                    | 144                                   | 1                                     | 144:1                                |
| 1,500–9,999 students                               | 385                                   | 3                                     | 128:1                                |
| 10,000–19,999 students                             | 1,053                                 | 6                                     | 176:1                                |
| 20,000–29,999 students                             | 1,642                                 | 8                                     | 205:1                                |
| 30,000 or higher students                          | 2,554                                 | 17                                    | 150:1                                |

Source: AHEAD

<sup>25</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Table 312.80. *Number and percentage distribution of degree-granting postsecondary institutions with first-year undergraduates by control and level of institution and percentage of students with disabilities: 2021-22* [Data table]. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/redirectdigest?tableId=202367>

<sup>26</sup> Scott, S., Meyer, A., Awoniyi, B., Braselmann, E., Sullivan, L., & Trezell, E. (2024). *Understanding and assessing disability resource office staffing needs* (White paper). Association on Higher Education and Disability. [https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AHEAD/38b602f4-ec53-451c-9be0-5c0bf5d27c0a/UploadedImages/Information\\_Portal/docs/7-8-24/Understanding\\_and\\_Assessing\\_DRO\\_Staffing\\_Needs\\_FINAL.pdf](https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AHEAD/38b602f4-ec53-451c-9be0-5c0bf5d27c0a/UploadedImages/Information_Portal/docs/7-8-24/Understanding_and_Assessing_DRO_Staffing_Needs_FINAL.pdf)

AHEAD's 2022 survey also found that nearly half (49%) of campuses reported that they do not have a budget specifically for accommodations such as alternate formats, notetaking, or CART services. Among campuses that do have a fixed annual accommodation budget (44% of campuses), respondents frequently commented that funds for accommodation budgets are supplemented as needed for individual student needs, such as interpreting.

Institutions should provide and plan for accessibility and accommodations through a centralized budget process, such as an institution's general fund, to ensure more consistent and equitable access to accommodations and assistive technology across programs and systems. They should collect data from both students and disability resource office staff that helps determine resource allocation to ensure that offices are sufficiently equipped to support students. They should also develop, evaluate, and invest in a robust office of disability support or office of accessibility to centralize accommodations across the systems and provide proactive outreach to students.

## Leveraging Data and Striving for Continuous Improvement

While providing accommodations is driven by legal requirements and compliance is a necessity, there is still room for improvement beyond what is legally required. Colleges and universities should consider:

- *Reviewing the accommodations process annually and any available data* that shows the strengths and weaknesses. For example, leveraging the data in the taking stock exercises (audit, needs assessment, student surveys) can shed light on processes and procedures that are working well and can be improved.
- *Analyzing data on students who have disclosed and other demographic data, such as race/ethnicity or Pell grant status*, to determine if there are any persistent inequities in reaching certain students with disabilities who may benefit from accommodations but are not currently accessing them.
- *Using data to continuously improve available accommodations* based on student success, including assessing and evaluating emerging best practices to support learners with mental health disabilities, such as leaves of absence or other forms of release time. Student surveys, including exit interviews and surveys, are a key tool for collecting this data.
- *Collecting data on accessibility writ large, not only on accommodations and experiences with disability services*. By developing accessibility assessment processes, colleges can improve accessibility across all colleges, programs, labs, and specialized settings.
- *Coordinating and evaluating policies within and across offices*, including disability services. The office should collaborate with other student-facing offices within the institution of higher education to ensure that students receive support across the continuum of their needs and not in silos; aligning policies and procedures can support this.
- *Continuously reviewing best and emerging practices* from the field that can support learners.

## Key Takeaways

- **Make clear that accommodations provide equitable access.** There is often significant misunderstanding about accommodations by other students and faculty. Colleges and universities should clearly communicate how accommodations improve access to all aspects of a student's learning.
- **Streamline accommodations documentation.** Colleges and universities should simplify the accommodations process (such as accepting IEP and 504 documentation as proposed in the [RISE Act](#)) to reduce the burden and ensure access to needed accommodations and guarantee compliance with new legislation in relevant states.
- **Ensure disability services offices are sufficiently resourced.** To effectively provide accommodations and collect data, disability services offices need sufficient staffing and financial resources to operate.
- **Proactively communicate about accessibility and accommodations opportunities.** Many students in college are unaware of available supports. Colleges and universities can list example accommodations and clearly communicate supports available from orientation throughout a student's academic journey.

## Reports and Resources

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## Chapter 5: Procurement

In Chapter 1, we took stock of policies and procedures with compliance checks, audits, and needs assessments. Related to these processes is an institution's procurement process. Institutions of higher education rely on third-party contracting to deliver academic and student experience programming across online platforms and in person, making it essential to have a robust procurement process with embedded accessibility standards.

### Accessibility in Procurement

Ensuring that externally sourced services and platforms meet the same accessibility requirements as direct services fosters accessibility across systems and provides students with a more seamless user experience. Consistent accessibility includes things like whether students can access all institutional platforms through keyboard demands and are not reliant on mouse navigation, videos have closed captions and audio descriptions, assessments can be adjusted for student pace, and students have the necessary hardware in order to maximize accessibility features across platforms.<sup>27</sup>

To do this, institutions must consider accessibility at every stage of the requests for proposals (RFPs) and procurement process, including purchase requisition, approval, bidding process, contract review and purchasing, and payment.<sup>28</sup> To start, vendors and contractors should address basic legal compliance by meeting requirements under applicable laws regarding accessibility, including Titles II and III of the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Beyond compliance, institutions should determine if new technology meets the same accessibility standards employed across institutional platforms and strive to build on those systems as new technology becomes available.

#### Procuring Accommodations Tools

To offer a full suite of accommodations, institutions will use their procurement process to acquire things such as alternative formats, assistive technology (e.g., screen readers), and adaptive tools (e.g., accessible lab equipment), and classroom and dorm modifications. To ensure institutions can acquire the accommodations that best meet their learners' needs, it is important that they do not run into prohibitive budget restrictions. Universities can often mitigate this by using a centralized budgeting process for procuring accommodations and other accessibility office operations.

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<sup>27</sup> American Foundation for the Blind. (2026). *Digital inclusion toolkit: Buying for inclusion: Focusing on accessibility in procurement*. <https://www.afb.org/research-and-initiatives/research/toolkits/digital-inclusion/buying-inclusion-accessibility-procurement>

<sup>28</sup> E&I Cooperative Services. (2023, December 7). *How does higher education procurement work?* <https://www.eandi.org/resources/ei-blog/how-higher-education-procurement-works/>

## Embedding Accessibility into an Institution's Procurement Processes

Institutions can use various approaches to embed accessibility reviews into their procurement process. The EDUCAUSE IT Accessibility Community Group lays out an approach that integrates accessibility reviews alongside other review processes, such as the security risk analysis, including the Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT). To help determine a contractor's commitment to accessibility, they can be asked to conduct a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) to demonstrate their product's accessibility features. With that VPAT, the contractor should provide an Accessibility Conformance Report (ACR) that identifies any accessibility gaps. The institution can then require the contractor to provide a roadmap to close these accessibility gaps that meet the accessibility criteria used by the institution such as WCAG 2.1 AA.<sup>29</sup>

Similar processes can apply to existing contracts, both during regular reviews and contract renewals. If they identify gaps during reviews, contractors should be required to address them. Institutions should also consider making contract addenda aligned with new accessibility standards to ensure all contractors, both existing and those in the future, meet the same requirements.

## Cultivating Accessibility by Design

Accessibility should not be a "check-the-box" compliance issue, but a foundational design element informed by ongoing technology development and evolving needs. With that in mind, institutions should consider whether contractors are committed to not only meeting the existing compliance requirements but also developing their technology and platforms with integrated accessible design going forward. To achieve this, institutions may consider asking the following questions during the procurement process:<sup>30</sup>

- Who is your accessibility point of contact?
- How do you ensure that your product complies with the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act?
- Are your products' accessibility features integrated across your platform, or do they require add-on features?
- Can you provide an accessibility demonstration, such as navigating your platform solely by keyboard?
- When developing a product update, how will you ensure accessibility?
- Who is responsible for reviewing and testing product updates for accessibility and what tests determine that accessibility standards are met?
- What is the process for users to raise accessibility concerns and how are these issues addressed?

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<sup>29</sup> Shachmut, K. (2021, October 25). *Asking the right questions for procuring inclusive, accessible technology*. EDUCAUSE Review. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2021/10/asking-the-right-questions-for-procuring-inclusive-accessible-technology>

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

## Accessible Procurement in Practice:

- The University of Washington has a procurement policy outlining how accessibility is included in the university's procurement process. In early 2025, the university released updated standards to ensure compliance with the new guidelines (WCAG 2.1) that at the time were scheduled to go into effect on April 26, 2026. As part of this process, they also requested all vendors to prepare an ACR for each product or service by July 1, 2025. Vendors were required to provide an accessibility roadmap to address the accessibility gaps identified during this process.<sup>31</sup>
- The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Digital Accessibility Program<sup>32</sup> offers a suite of tools to use throughout the procurement process, including resources on how to [purchase accessible technology](#) and "[Make It Accessible](#)," guidelines on web content, course materials, and more. When universities consider a vendor, they may request a digital accessibility procurement evaluation to identify accessibility gaps and outline the necessary accommodations for disabled students to fully access the product.

## Key Takeaways

- **Embed accessibility early in procurement.** Accessibility must be a requirement at the beginning of the procurement process, and policies should reflect this commitment.
- **Create vendor accountability.** Colleges and universities should require vendors to meet minimum accessibility requirements under the ADA and Section 504, and they should go beyond the minimum to ensure that vendors are in line with continually improving digital accessibility recommendations.
- **Adopt clear, centralized policies for procurement.** System-wide, standardized procurement policies that include accessibility will prevent the purchase of inaccessible items. This reduces legal risks for the entire college or university.

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<sup>31</sup> University of Washington. (2025). *New procurement standards: What you need to know*. Accessibility at the UW. <https://www.washington.edu/accessibility/2025/06/04/new-procurement-standards/>

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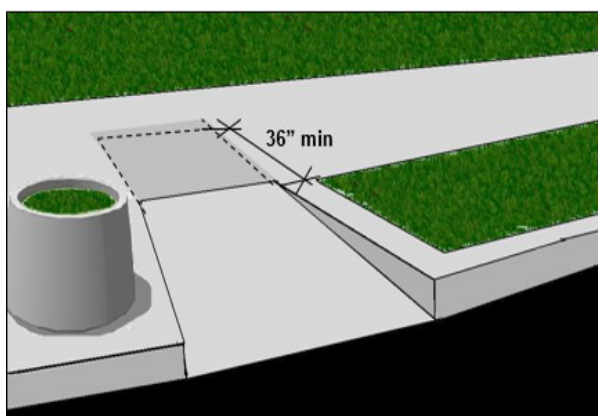
## Chapter 6: Physical Spaces

Often, when reflecting on or hearing about the ADA or accessibility, many people immediately visualize the built environment, which may include ramps, automatic doors, and elevators. As outlined in previous chapters, true accessibility spans much further than code compliance. This chapter will delve into the importance of physical accessibility and all aspects of physical accessibility that apply to higher education.

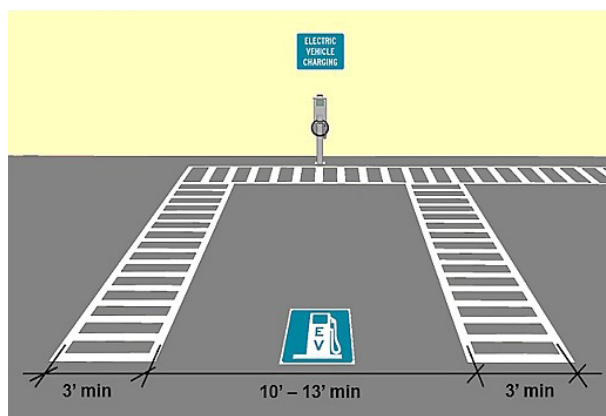
### Curb Cut Effect

As with accessibility in other spaces, making physical spaces accessible benefits everyone. The common example is the curb cut. Initially designed for people with mobility devices to navigate from a sidewalk to the street, curb cuts have become a requirement for public spaces. Today, it is rare to find a curb without one, and nearly everyone uses them: delivery workers with push carts, parents with strollers, cyclists and scooter riders, travelers with luggage, and more.

This phenomenon, known as the Curb Cut Effect, demonstrates that accessibility features often solve problems for people who were not the original target audience. On a college or university campus, this effect is amplified. Automated doors help a student carrying an armful of books, and they help a student using a mobility device. Good acoustics in a lecture hall help a student who may be hard of hearing, and they also support a student sitting in the back row due to a full classroom. An accessible built environment improves spaces for everyone to belong and be included meaningfully.



**Figure 3**  
Curb ramp with returned sides and top landing (36" minimum). Source: U.S. Access Board



**Figure 4**  
Accessible parking space with access aisles (3' minimum) and width requirements (10'-13'). Source: U.S. Access Board

### From Compliance to Inclusive Design

Historically, higher education architecture treated accessibility as an afterthought and a problem to be solved through retrofitting. Due to older buildings or the absence of prioritizing accessibility, a ramp was commonly added to the back of a building or a lift was installed over a staircase.

In this model, compliance with ADA standards was viewed as the ceiling: the goal to reach to avoid litigation. Colleges and universities have been striving to reach compliance, with accessibility secondary to design and renovations. We challenge colleges and universities to shift their mindset. **The ADA is the floor, not the ceiling.** It is the bare minimum requirement for civil rights, but it does not guarantee access, inclusion, or an equitable higher education experience.

Designers and architects are increasingly moving toward Universal Design. Universal Design is the idea of creating one solution that works for everyone, including people with disabilities. A curb cut is an example of universal design. An automatic door opener is another example of universal design. However, another methodology that many more architects and designers use today is Inclusive Design. Inclusive Design methodology enables *choice* within a space and supports how each person navigates a space. It centers disability from the beginning of the design process, focusing on how the space does or does not work for people with disabilities. Inclusive Design methodology considers the full spectrum of disabilities and needs: (a) mobility and reach, (b) dexterity and manipulation, (c) vision, (d) hearing, (e) cognitive, and (f) neurodiversity. Specifically included within these categories of disabilities are permanent disabilities, permanent disabilities, temporary disabilities, chronic illnesses, aging, and caregiving. By applying inclusive design to remodels and new construction on college and university campuses, institutions can create more inclusive and welcoming environments for everyone.

Inclusive design methodology can and should be applied to all aspects of college and university spaces. As noted above, the ADA is the floor, not the ceiling, thus inclusive design methodology helps colleges and universities move from compliance to true inclusivity and accessibility of their campuses. Chapter 1 suggests that it is best practice to conduct accessibility audits, and institutions can and should conduct audits of the physical space. Administrators, leaders, and/or accessibility coordinators can work together to move through spaces on campus and first determine if the space meets the baseline of legal compliance and then assess if the space is usable, truly accessible, and creates an equitable experience for all students.

### **Inclusive Design Methodology**

“Inclusive Design is a methodology [...] that enables and draws on the full range of human diversity.”<sup>33</sup> When building physical spaces, Inclusive Design uses lived experience to help guide the process.<sup>34</sup> Instead of a “one-size-fits-all” approach, choices and an understanding of the diversity of the human experience are embedded into the design. Unlike Universal Design, which is based on seven core principles—(1) equitable use, (2) flexibility in use, (3) simple and intuitive use, (4) perceptible information, (5) tolerance for error, (6) low physical effort, and (7) size and space for approach and use—Inclusive Design draws on engaging with people with disabilities, leveraging lived experience, and embedding disability and the needs of people from the beginning. To support designers and architects in this process, a [coalition of retailers](#) has come together, led by Starbucks Coffee Company, Walmart, CVS Health, and the American Association of People with Disabilities, to create resources for those building physical spaces with inclusive design. The Access Coalition has released an [Inclusive Spaces Framework](#) and an [Inclusive Spaces Playbook](#).

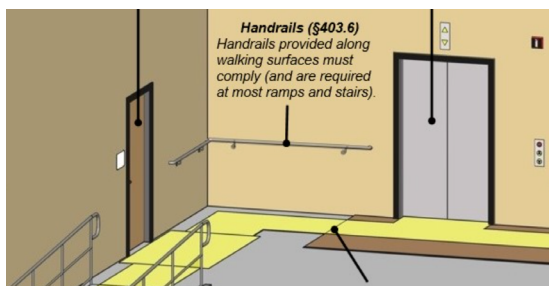
<sup>33</sup> Microsoft. (n.d.). *Microsoft inclusive design*. <https://inclusive.microsoft.design/>

<sup>34</sup> Starbucks (n.d.). *Welcome to Inclusive Spaces*. <https://www.designinclusivespaces.com/inclusive-spaces/overview>

## Inside the Classroom: Keeping Spaces Accessible

The classroom is often the first space we think about when reflecting on a college and university campus. The classroom is the core of the student experience and where most learning takes place. However, the college and university classroom often presents some of the most significant physical accessibility barriers:

- **Seating and Furniture:** Stadium-style seating is often the most inaccessible design, forcing students with mobility disabilities to sit in segregated areas, such as isolated at the very front or the very back. Furthermore, standard tablet-arm desks are often too small or are fixed in place. A best practice: incorporate flexible furniture. Use tables and chairs that you can move to create clear paths of travel. Ensure a mix of seating options, including height-adjustable desks that accommodate wheelchair users or students who need to stand.
- **Resetting Spaces as a Standard:** In active learning classrooms, furniture is frequently moved for group work. A major barrier occurs when a class ends and the room is left in disarray, making it impossible to navigate for the group of students, in particular students with mobility disabilities, blind students, or students who may not be able to move heavy objects. A best practice: institutions must hold faculty responsible to reset the room by ending class early so they can get help from students or reset it themselves. This is a zero-cost policy change that ensures that the next students can enter safely.
- **Elevators and Maintenance:** Many college and university campuses have multiple story buildings, and a broken elevator is not just an inconvenience; it is a barrier to education.<sup>35</sup> A best practice: elevator maintenance should be proactive, not reactive. If an elevator goes down, immediate communication is required, and it should not just be a sign on the door, but a digital alert sent to students so they don't trek across campus only to find they cannot reach their class.
- **Accessible Parking and Entrances:** In addition to elevators that move students within buildings, accessible entrances and parking are additional critical elements for an accessible classroom experience. Accessible parking that is on the opposite side of the building from the accessible entrance is a barrier. A best practice: institutions must prioritize accessible parking near accessible entrances, which they should maintain and manage during various weather conditions (snow, ice, rain, extreme heat).



**Figure 5**  
Interior accessible route with ramp, handrails, and elevator access connecting different levels within a building. Source: U.S. Access Board



**Figure 6**  
Raised seating area with surrounding accessible route, illustrating how level changes can impact access in shared spaces. Source: U.S. Access Board

<sup>35</sup> Campus Safety. (2023, November 29). *Ensuring equal access to education: The importance of reliable elevators*. Campus Safety Magazine. <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/insights/ensuring-equal-access-to-education-the-importance-of-reliable-elevators/160781/>

## Physical Accessibility in Campus Life: Sporting, Arts, Media, and Recreational Spaces

Campus life extends beyond the classroom. True inclusion means a student with a disability can spontaneously decide to grab coffee, attend a basketball game, receive an award on stage, or audition for a play without extraordinary effort.

- **Campus Maps:** Navigating campus is often a difficult task, even for students who have lived on campus for several years. A key to creating more accessible college and university campuses is having a widely available campus map highlighting accessibility. Colleges and universities should create and have accessible maps available on their websites. These maps should include accessible routes, accessible entrances in every building, entrances in buildings with automatic openers (push buttons), accessible restrooms in the buildings, accessible parking near each building, and a description of each building. This will support students and visitors to the campus. Examples of such accessible maps include one from [Oregon State University](#) and another from [University of California Berkeley](#).
- **Sporting Events:** It is not enough to have an accessible seating section. Students want to sit with their friends. Inclusive design creates dispersed accessible seating throughout the stadium—at field level, in the bleachers, and near concessions—so students with disabilities have the same choice of vantage point and price as their peers.
- **Arts and Media Spaces:** Theaters and art studios are often in older, historic buildings. The "charm" of these buildings often masks exclusion:
  - Ensure stages are ramped so a student using a mobility device or who cannot access stairs can utilize the stage.
  - In art studios, verify that sinks, pottery wheels, and darkroom equipment are at accessible heights and reach ranges.
- **Eating Spaces (Quads, Cafes, and More):** Consider the ambience and overall experience of campus dining spaces, coffee shops, and lounges.
  - **Acoustics:** Use sound-absorbing materials to reduce reverberation, which aids students with neurodiversity or hearing loss.
  - **Lighting:** Install adjustable lighting to reduce glare and shadow patterns that interfere with visual communication.
  - **Counters:** Ensure service counters have a lower section for equitable face-to-face interaction for wheelchair users.
  - **Seating:** Consider a variety of seating options that provide opportunities for accessibility. This includes different heights of tables, chairs that are light and can be maneuvered, and co-working tables that allow for multiple people to roll up or access the space.

## Emergency Preparedness

Colleges and universities, in addition to any organization with a physical space, often prioritize safety over all else, including accessibility. Safety of students, staff, visitors, and surrounding neighborhoods is critical. This includes safety from medical emergencies, weather-related events, natural disasters, or campus emergencies such as active shooters. Fire safety is often a top priority in dorms given the density of living for young adults. Active shooter safety has become an increasingly important element of safety for all campuses since the early 2000s. Natural disasters are impacting campuses more and more, with less “off” seasons throughout the year.

The physical environment often has elements of safety built into it due to code requirements: fire alarms, sprinkler systems, tornado shelters, and more. However, campuses also have emergency plans for many different scenarios. Unfortunately, most of these emergency plans ignore accessibility considerations. Safety and accessibility can blend together to ensure the evacuation or protection of everyone, rather than exclusion of a few. Too often, during fire emergencies, students with disabilities who use mobility devices are told to wait while others evacuate, or they are carried down stairs when an elevator is perfectly fine to use. Or in an active shooter or refuge situation, students may huddle together, leaving out a student with a disability who either cannot get close to others or cannot fit in the space designated.

Emergency planning must intentionally include accessibility and students with disabilities. Here are a few elements to consider:

- **Evacuation Planning:** Every building on a campus must have an evacuation plan that specifically addresses the inclusion of students with disabilities. This should not include requiring students with disabilities to wait in a space for the fire department to arrive.
- **Alarms:** All alarms on campus should include visual and auditory cues such as sounds and lights to alert students who are Deaf and hard of hearing.
- **Drills:** Include students with disabilities in all safety drills rather than instructing them to stay in their dorms. Do not exempt them. A plan that includes students with disabilities is a successful plan.

Want to learn more or have support creating a campus-wide accessible emergency plan? [The World Institute on Disability](#) specializes in emergency, disaster, and climate preparedness and resilience. Find resources, links, and contact information.

## Key Takeaways

- **Embrace the Curb Cut Effect.** Designing for accessibility benefits every student, faculty, and employee at the college and university.
- **Move from compliance to inclusive design.** While compliance with the ADA is the floor, colleges and universities should strive to go beyond minimum compliance and embrace inclusive design. This will center disability and choice from the beginning, ensuring more accessibility.
- **Create accountability for classroom and campus accessibility.** System-wide policies about classroom and campus accessibility will make clear expectations and allow for accountability mechanisms when the policies are not followed.

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- ADA National Network. (2017). *Postsecondary institutions and students with disabilities*. <https://adata.org/factsheet/postsecondary>
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## Chapter 7: Digital Spaces and AI

Creating accessible colleges and universities does not end with physical spaces. Technology and digital spaces are now integrated into nearly every aspect of higher education. While technology has long played a role in instruction and campus operations, its presence has expanded dramatically. In the early 2000s, LMSs were becoming more widespread, and presentation tools like PowerPoint technology and SMART boards became standard in classrooms. Today, technology is deeply embedded in how students learn, collaborate, communicate, and navigate their academic programs and lives on and off campus. Most recently, the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools over the past few years, often introduced without clear guidelines or accessibility standards, has added new urgency to ensuring digital equity and inclusive design across all technological platforms.

For learners with disabilities, technology can expand opportunities or create additional barriers, depending on whether or not the digital systems and tools are accessible. A 2025 national survey found that disabled students rated the ease of using online materials in college only 3.07 out of 5.<sup>36</sup> Inaccessible technology is a current roadblock toward an inclusive college and university experience.

This chapter will explore the evolution of technology in higher education, the growing role of advanced technology and artificial intelligence, the distinction between accessible and assistive technology, and the legal and practical obligations of institutions around ensuring all students can access technology and engage in digital learning environments.

### Advancing Technology in the Classroom

In the education world, we have seen technology change the landscape at a rapid pace. Only a few decades ago, “portable” computers weighed nearly 25 pounds, and online research required plug-in dial-up connections. While the internet was only developed in the 1990s, we are now in the depths of the AI boom, only a few decades later. Classrooms, libraries on campus, and coffee shops are filled with students working on their laptops, tablets, and—often by necessity due to cost—their phones as they leverage digital platforms and submit assignments digitally. Students today use technology to take notes, conduct research, and increasingly complete entire programs online.

Remote and online learning existed before the pandemic, but COVID-19 and school closures accelerated the normalization of online, hybrid, and multi-modal instruction. Technology is now inseparable from how students and faculty engage with one another.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> National Disability Center. (2025, February). *Access leads to achievement: A national report on disabled college student experiences*. <https://nationaldisabilitycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Student-Access-Report-2025-Accessible.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Purdue University. (2024, January). *The evolution of technology in the classroom*. College of Education. <https://education.purdue.edu/2024/01/the-evolution-of-technology-in-the-classroom/>

In fact, digital and physical learning environments have become so deeply integrated that pedagogy is being reshaped.<sup>38</sup> Virtual collaboration tools, the ability to pre-record lectures, and information leveraged from around the world can enhance instruction in a way that was not possible when the faculty were students. Now today, the expansion of AI is only further accelerating changes to the digital world in higher education.

## AI and the Higher Education Classroom

AI presents many opportunities, when implemented with guardrails,<sup>39</sup> and students as well as faculty are trained on the benefits and challenges AI presents. AI is advancing faster than we can learn to use it in the classroom, but it presents advancements for learners with disabilities and may help support faculty to create more accessible instruction.

The use of AI in higher education has existed long before students and faculty started using applications such as ChatGPT. It started with LMSs such as Canvas, Blackboard, and personalized learning systems, leading to improved course design and predictive analytics for academic advising. In recent years, adaptive courseware, such as Pearson MyLab, speech-to-text, chatbots giving advice, and automatic grading of certain subjects, has been more widely adopted. Consequently, AI is an integral part of the student experience, but it is still behind the scenes. Since applications such as ChatGPT and Gemini were released, AI has been able to produce text, code, and even create drafts for students, causing AI to become a part of teaching and advising.

The rise of AI has allowed teachers to use it for lesson plans, revise syllabi, and design course materials more efficiently. Students have used AI as an on-demand resource for tutoring, brainstorming, study support, career guidance, and even mental health assistance, accessing services during times that work for their schedules when human support may be unavailable. This highlights a critical insight: students still need human connection and personalized support; AI can help offload routine tasks so that faculty and staff can focus on the relational, mentoring, and developmental work that truly supports the whole learner. AI has also expanded accessibility in higher education through real-time captioning, screen reading, and alternative text generation. However, concerns persist about academic integrity, the authenticity of student work, and the need for updated policies and practices that ensure AI serves as a tool for supporting learning rather than as a replacement for it.

AI has led to opportunities for students with disabilities. Aside from the aforementioned real-time captioning and alternative text generation, it has also helped students take notes. It has allowed learners with disabilities to better manage assignments and deadlines, reducing cognitive load and enhancing executive functioning. For students with visual impairments, it describes images, interprets graphs, and generates audio descriptions for videos. These technological advancements improve day-to-day accessibility.

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<sup>38</sup> McKinsey & Company. (2024, May 22). *How technology is shaping learning in higher education*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-technology-is-shaping-learning-in-higher-education>

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2024, May). *Artificial intelligence and the future of teaching and learning: Insights and recommendations*. Office of Educational Technology. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/ai-report/ai-report.pdf>

Overall, when used with guardrails, AI can make higher education more accessible for students with disabilities. It has gone from a niche tool to a partner in students' education, and if used well, AI could create unprecedented opportunities for colleges and universities. Technology has opened opportunities and, at times, provided more access for many students. But, without *accessible* technology, training, and implementation with best practices, it provides just another roadblock for student success.

## Compliance vs. Accessibility in the Digital Environment

As emphasized throughout this Playbook, the ADA and Section 504 provide a compliance baseline for accessibility for colleges and universities. Colleges and universities must ensure that digital environments do not discriminate against students with disabilities under these laws. Although these laws are the compliance floor, they have historically been viewed as the ceiling – a compliance goal to reach rather than working to create technology that truly meets the needs of all learners.

Until recently, students had few options for holding colleges and universities accountable if they faced inaccessible digital content. The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights complaints system was a primary method of holding colleges and universities accountable for inaccessibility in this space under Section 504. Students had a more difficult time leveraging the ADA as it was written in 1990 and not updated to *clearly* align with digital content.

Given the growing use of digital technologies, as outlined earlier in this chapter, the Biden-Harris administration updated the regulations of the ADA to strengthen digital accessibility requirements for public colleges and universities.<sup>40</sup> They finalized a new ADA Title II regulation April 2024. After an Interim Final Rule announced on April 20, 2026, compliance dates have been extended a year with the first compliance deadline in April 2027. The goal of the rule is “to help make sure people with disabilities have access to state and local governments’ services, programs, and activities available on websites and mobile apps.”<sup>41</sup> The rule aligns with WCAG 2.1 Level AA, which is the new technical standard for web content and mobile apps. This alignment with WCAG 2.1 moves in the direction of many other countries around the world that are far more advanced than the U.S. in this area and have aligned to more stringent standards in the digital space.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (n.d.). *ADA Title II regulations: Requirements for web and mobile accessibility*. ADA.gov. <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/regulations/title-ii-2010-regulations/#-35200-requirements-for-web-and-mobile-accessibility#section74>

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (2024, April 24). *Fact sheet: New rule on the accessibility of web content and mobile apps provided by state and local government entities*. ADA.gov. <https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/>. Noting that public colleges and universities are classified under state government.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission. (2024, September 11). *Digital inclusion*. Digital Strategy. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-inclusion>

Colleges and universities around the country are moving forward with compliance and setting a course to improve access to learners with disabilities and make this work transparent to faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. The following are examples of digital accessibility statements and publicly available policies, specifically referencing the ADA, from many colleges and universities:

- [Boise State University](#)
- [Kansas State University](#)
- [Northwestern](#)
- [Seattle University](#)
- [The Ohio State University](#)
- [University of Florida](#)
- [University of Maryland](#)
- [University of Michigan](#)
- [University of Missouri System](#)
- [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#)
- [University of Washington](#)
- [University of Wisconsin System](#) (check out their fun quiz to test your knowledge!)

## Accessible Technology and Assistive Technology: What's the Difference?

In addition to ensuring all students can utilize accessible technology, colleges and universities must also provide assistive technology as an accommodation for learners with disabilities when necessary and appropriate.

However, while accessible and assistive technology are often confused and mixed up, they are actually quite different. Let's break down the difference.

Assistive technology refers to “an item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve” a disabled learner’s ability to carry out tasks.<sup>43</sup> Assistive technology can include screen readers for blind or visually impaired students, text-to-speech programs that convert written material into audio, voice recognition tools to support students with processing disabilities, note-taking apps that help with organization and understanding, screen magnifiers to help enhance visual clarity, special-purpose computers, special keyboards or pointing devices, and specialized software.

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<sup>43</sup> Assistive Technology Industry Association. (2026). *What is AT?* <https://www.atia.org/home/at-resources/what-is-at/>

These technologies improve access to the curriculum and instruction without modifying the curriculum or instruction. Assistive technology is unique because it is individualized to a specific person or task and may be an accommodation requested from the college or university. Assistive technology is not a generalized tool that allows access for everyone in the class as it supports the specific needs of an individual learner with a disability.

Accessible technology eliminates barriers at the design and systems level. In contrast, assistive technology is created or selected to meet the specific needs of an individual student whose disability requires additional or specialized support. For example, a well-designed digital textbook with searchable text is accessible, but a blind student might also need a screen reader, which is a form of assistive technology, which helps the student navigate text effectively. Another example is videos with built-in captions, which are accessible for many learners, while speech-to-text tools would primarily be used by a visually impaired student. Ultimately, both accessible technology and assistive technology work together in improving the higher education experience for learners, especially those with disabilities.

In summary, the continued growth of technology in higher education requires universities to prioritize technology that improves a student's learning experience. When universities invest in accessible design and provide assistive technology for learners with disabilities, they create an environment in which all students have the belief that they can succeed and graduate.

## Key Takeaways

- **Embrace accessibility in digital environments and comply with new rules.** The digital space is a part of every college and university student's experience. Accessibility must be a central part of digital environments, starting with compliance with the new ADA Title II regulations.
- **Provide accessible technology and assistive technology.** Learners with disabilities need accessible AND assistive technology. Accessible technology benefits all students, while assistive technology supports access to the campus and learning environment.
- **Use AI responsibly and teach guardrails.** AI can increase access and create many tools to improve accessibility. However, guardrails and training will ensure that it is used responsibly and ethically.

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## Chapter 8: Building Belonging

### What Is Belonging & Why Belonging?

In its working definition of belonging, CHEPP explains how belonging is a fundamental human need for all people, and it takes effect in new contexts where belonging uncertainty kicks in—do I belong here?<sup>44</sup> There is not one way to measure belonging, as it is informed by one’s own lived experiences and comes into play when an individual questions whether they belong and looks for cues in their environments—including their academic settings—to make that determination. When a learner feels like they belong, they are more likely to stay in college and complete their degree, especially when specific resources are attached.<sup>45</sup>

Students with disabilities face unique challenges in finding belonging due to persistent inaccessible systems that directly and indirectly convey that they do not belong and leave them asking, “whether people like me can belong.” When disabled learners are fully included, it is often achieved through their own self-advocacy efforts which can make them feel othered from their peers. Learners with disabilities may also struggle to connect with peers with like-experiences, which can make them feel even more isolated and less likely to seek out needed accommodations due to a perceived stigma. By designing accessible systems and addressing inaccessibility head-on, colleges will improve feelings of belonging among all learners, including those with disabilities. Belonging is ultimately a campus-wide effort, and its success depends on shared ownership across faculty, staff, disability services, institutional leadership, students, and other student-facing stakeholders.

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<sup>44</sup> Fasteau, J., Matthews, B., & Rajkumar, M. (2024, October). *Online by design: Cultivating a culture of care and belonging is critical to learner persistence and success* [White paper]. The Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice. [https://www.chepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CHEPP\\_BELONGING\\_WHITE-PAPER.pdf](https://www.chepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CHEPP_BELONGING_WHITE-PAPER.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Rangel, E. (2023, June 9). *One key to success in college? A sense of belonging, according to new research*. Pittwire. <https://www.pittwire.pitt.edu/pittwire/features-articles/college-retention-belonging-lrldc>; Teaching + Learning Lab. (2025, February 16). *Students’ sense of belonging matters: Evidence from three studies*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <https://tll.mit.edu/sense-of-belonging-matters/>; Brady, S. T., & Gopalan, M. (2025). College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Graduation Update. *Educational Researcher*, 55(2). <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X251393248>

## Case Study: Belonging through Inclusive Postsecondary Education

Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/D) in the United States has evolved from exclusion to a growing national movement driven by legislation, advocacy, and societal change. IPSE programs are highly valued on campuses and positively impact administrators, faculty, staff, and peers.<sup>46</sup> Administrators report that these programs strengthen and connect campus communities. Faculty say that they improve instructional skills and confidence in supporting diverse learners. Other students note that interactions with program staff and students enhance their understanding of disability and college life.

Today, 361 colleges and universities in 49 states offer IPSE programs serving approximately 8,000 students.<sup>47</sup> These programs focus on academic access, independent living, employment preparation, and full campus participation. Students take college courses aligned with their personal and career goals, guided toward earning credentials. IPSE programs combine inclusive coursework with individualized supports, such as peer mentoring, academic coaching, and person-centered planning. Students may enroll in standard university classes, specialized seminars, and experiential learning opportunities like internships or campus employment. Supports are designed to scaffold success within inclusive learning environments rather than segregate students. Program durations range from one to four years.

Research and evaluations show that students with ID/D in inclusive higher education achieve better employment outcomes, expanded social networks, and increased confidence:

- Graduates of the federally supported Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) programs have a 65% employment rate one year after graduation, compared to 17% for adults with ID/D generally.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Think College. (2025). *A resource guide for inclusive postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability*. [https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/TCcampaign%2520resource%2520booklet\\_update2\\_2025.pdf](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/TCcampaign%2520resource%2520booklet_update2_2025.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Think College. (n.d.). *Think Higher Ed*. <https://thinkhighered.net>

<sup>48</sup> Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Migliore, A. (2025). *Postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability: Employment and credential outcomes*. Think College National Coordinating Center; National Core Indicators. (2024, May). *Intellectual and developmental disabilities national report 2022-23: Employment*. National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and Human Services Research Institute. [https://idd.nationalcoreindicators.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/IPS-22-23-Ch02-Employment\\_FINAL.pdf](https://idd.nationalcoreindicators.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/IPS-22-23-Ch02-Employment_FINAL.pdf)

## Case Study: Belonging through Inclusive Postsecondary Education (continued)

- Retention and completion rates are high: the 2023–2024 first-year retention rate was 84%. Of students who began at a Cohort 2 TPSID program in 2015–2016, 74% had completed a program by 2019–2020, the final year of funding for this cohort. Of students who attended a Cohort 2 TPSID program, 72% had completed a program by August 2023.<sup>49</sup>
- TPSID programs support meaningful credentials (certificates, associate degrees, industry certifications) recognized by employers and colleges. In 2023–2024, 99% of 151 program completers earned at least one credential.<sup>50</sup>

IPSE affirms that students with intellectual disabilities deserve equal opportunities for learning, relationships, and career development. By fostering high expectations and inclusive campus cultures, IPSE programs contribute to a more equitable and diverse higher education landscape where all students are valued members of the academic community.

For more information, visit <https://thinkcollege.net/>.

## Building a Culture of Belonging and Accessibility

Creating a place of belonging at college starts before a student applies, during the recruitment process. Specifically, the externally facing websites of universities should be fully accessible (see Chapter 7), and disability offices and the services they provide should be easy to locate and navigate. Beyond accessibility standards, marketing and recruitment platforms and tools should include images of disabled students alongside their peers. They should also offer information about how students with disabilities can connect with the disability office to learn about accommodations available, as well as the accessibility features integrated across the university. In addition, when listing student extracurricular activities, platforms should also include disabled student affinity groups and other activities like Paralympic sport opportunities. Once accepted, and during orientation, all learners should learn about the disability services of the university, and disabled students should be connected with those services before starting their coursework.

In Chapter 2: Building a Team & Stakeholders, we discussed the importance of having leaders who are committed to cultivating fully accessible and inclusive higher education environments. Leadership buy-in is also essential to achieve a culture of belonging.

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<sup>49</sup> Bukaty, C. A. & Papay, C. (2023). *Completion rates of students attending colleges and universities via a TPSID program*. Think College Fast Facts, Issue No. 35. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion; Bukaty, C., & Papay, C. (2023). *Outcomes of students enrolled in TPSID programs*. Think College, University of Massachusetts Boston

<sup>50</sup> Grigal, M., Papay, C., Bukaty, C., Choiseul-Praslin, B., Weir, C. & Lazo, R. (2025). *Annual report of the cohort 3 TPSID model demonstration projects (Year 4, 2023–2024)*. University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion. <https://thinkcollege.net/resource/program-evaluation-student-outcomes/annual-report-of-the-cohort-3-tpsid-model-2>

When leadership sets an expectation of acceptance, prioritizes accessibility practices, values robust accommodations, and expects faculty and staff to do the same, students will be less likely to rely on their own advocacy to access their programming and will more often be included, increasing their feelings of belonging. To further support these objectives, faculty and staff across the student experience, including recruitment, enrollment, and academics, should receive training on the barriers faced by learners with disabilities, the accessibility features of the university, and how students can access accommodations for programming alongside their peers without disabilities.

To make the classroom, in person and virtual, accessible and welcoming, professors should support the use of assistive technology for learners with disabilities. Robust accessibility standards for internally delivered technology and procured platforms and tools are essential to meet this goal. As discussed in Chapter 5, colleges and universities should adopt procurement policies to ensure that any software, digital tools, and instructional materials meet accessibility standards before they are acquired.

To support a culture of belonging through inclusion, colleges must consider accessibility across all settings and programming, including on campus, in online spaces, and throughout academic and extracurricular programming. More inclusive college environments will also result in students being less likely to fear stigma and more willing to seek out any accommodations they need to fully access programming alongside their peers—through both the accommodations approval process and working with faculty to use their approved accommodations in their courses.

Beyond the classroom, universities should create peer mentorship programs and support groups, including student-led affinity groups, so that disabled learners not only feel connected to their university but have ways to participate and contribute to it. Colleges and universities should immediately provide opportunities to connect students with the disability office on campus and help facilitate activities such as social events, workshops, and advocacy projects in partnership with the disability office. When accessible, groups such as Student Government, Greek Life, Residence Life, and other leadership organizations allow students with disabilities to make connections. In addition, recommendations from a national collaborative suggest that colleges and universities can “(1) center the perspective and experience of students in efforts to improve student success, (2) gather real-time data to continuously improve student experience using an iterative approach, (3) partner with faculty to support their role as change agents promoting equitable student experience, and (4) commit to accountability that centers equitable student experience in every division at the institution.”<sup>51</sup> These connections will allow disabled students to have shared experiences with their peers and build friendships, and they will help cultivate ways to provide feedback to help shape a college’s culture and policies.

Through accessible design, inclusive language, data-driven improvement, and active efforts to fight negative stigma, universities can create an environment in which all students feel welcome and ready to learn. However, a continuous improvement model must guide this work. Institutions should regularly collect and analyze data for belonging on campus, which may include campus climate surveys and accommodation request patterns. To support this, the disability office should have a process to collect feedback from learners with disabilities on how they are feeling about what is going on around campus so that the office can understand where activities, classroom involvement, and community building are succeeding and where improvement is needed.

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<sup>51</sup> Student Experience Project. (2022). *Increasing equity in student experience: Findings from a national collaborative*. <https://s45004.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Increasing-Equity-in-Student-Experience-Findings-from-a-National-Collaborative.pdf>

## **Case Study: Building Belonging through Student Power—The Disabled Student Union Bureau at Florida International University**

At Florida International University (FIU), students have demonstrated how belonging is built through collective action, policy engagement, and intentional community-building. The Disabled Student Union Bureau (DSU) represents a replicable model for how student-led organizations can transform institutional culture and create lasting systemic change for Disabled students at universities nationwide. What began in 2023 as a [Student Body Senate Bill](#) evolved into a fully recognized, funded student Bureau with institutional reach, policy influence, and a sustainable infrastructure—all within one year. The DSU's success offers a blueprint for other institutions seeking to move beyond compliance-based accessibility toward genuine inclusion and belonging.

### ***Building Awareness and Education: Identifying the Barriers***

The foundation of FIU's DSU was laid through student-driven awareness and education initiatives that identified systemic barriers impacting Disabled students' sense of belonging. In the fall of 2022, student leaders recognized that, while FIU had a Disability Resource Center (DRC) serving approximately 4,000 students, there was no organized Disabled student community, and issues persisted with accommodation implementation across campus. In 2022, the [Panthers with Disabilities Act](#) was finalized by the Student Body Senate, which created institutional documentation that Disability issues were worthy of attention and resources. This act shifted the narrative from individual accommodation requests to systemic accessibility as a shared responsibility.

### ***Advocacy and Policy Change: Leveraging Institutional Power***

The DSU became an engine for ongoing policy advocacy. When properly structured and supported, student organizations can drive institutional change. Further, beyond its own establishment, DSU leaders championed additional legislation focused on belonging and accessibility.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Creating Educational Spaces***

Parallel to formal policy work, students created targeted workshops and educational programming. The Pride Center's Annual People Forum in 2021 provided an early platform where students at the intersection of LGBTQIA+ and Disabled identities shared their experiences with faculty and administration. The event served as a catalyst, making visible the experiences of multi-marginalized students and the need for dedicated organizing space. Through the forum, students built a shared understanding of Disability as an identity and accessibility as a collective responsibility. Conversations shifted Disability from an individualized accommodation issue to broader campus culture concerns and created allies among faculty, staff, and non-disabled students who would later support DSU initiatives.

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<sup>52</sup> Florida International University Student Government Association. (2024). *Senate Resolution 04 017: Equal Restrooms Access (ERA)*. [https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/student-government-association/archives-and-minutes/assets/senate-legislation/2023-2024/s.r.04\\_017\\_era.pdf](https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/student-government-association/archives-and-minutes/assets/senate-legislation/2023-2024/s.r.04_017_era.pdf); Florida International University Student Government Association. (2024). *Senate Resolution 04 019: STOP Addiction Fatality Epidemic (SAFE)*. [https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/student-government-association/archives-and-minutes/assets/senate-legislation/2023-2024/s.r.04\\_019\\_safe\\_resolution.pdf](https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/student-government-association/archives-and-minutes/assets/senate-legislation/2023-2024/s.r.04_019_safe_resolution.pdf)

## **Case Study: Building Belonging through Student Power—The Disabled Student Union Bureau at Florida International University (continued)**

### *Creating Supportive Spaces: Finding Community*

Before the DSU existed formally, students created informal networks through the Pride Center's Disabled & Queer Affinity Group. This space was transformative for students living at the intersection of multi-marginalized identities. As noted in the founding story, it was here that students "for the first time, had the chance to truly know people like themselves"—particularly students who identified as both transgender and on the Autism Spectrum.

These affinity spaces served several critical functions:

- **Reduced isolation** by connecting students with shared experiences
- **Decreased stigma** around Disability disclosure in a supportive environment
- **Built leadership skills** as students practiced advocacy in lower-stakes settings
- **Created the social infrastructure** that would later become DSU's membership base

In addition to creating community on campus, DSU sought external partnerships such as the Florida Neurodiversity Chamber of Commerce, Miami Dade College STAR Academy, Center for Independent Living of South Florida, and many others. Universities seeking to replicate this model should invest in creating multiple entry points for Disabled students to find community before expecting them to engage in formal advocacy.

### *Funding and Long-Term Sustainability*

To successfully advance the goals of DSU, stable funding was needed. Thus, DSU secured funding through multiple streams, such as [SGA budget allocation](#), an external scholarship fund, and grants.

In addition to funding, organizational sustainability was critical as shifts in DSU leadership would evolve as students graduated. To maintain support and vision, DSU established an advisory council and a manual for operations.

## Case Study: Building Belonging through Student Power—The Disabled Student Union Bureau at Florida International University (continued)

### *Principles for Replication: A Model for Other Universities*

The FIU DSU's success offers transferable lessons for universities seeking to support Disabled student organizing.

1. **Start with student leadership and lived experience:** The DSU was conceived, designed, and driven by Disabled students themselves. Institutional support is critical, but students hold the vision.
2. **Use institutional systems strategically:** Understanding SGA structures, budget processes, and policy mechanisms allowed students to achieve lasting change rather than temporary wins.
3. **Secure knowledgeable advisors early:** DSU's co-advisors Dr. Amanda Niguidula and Dr. Mario Lewis provided essential guidance while respecting student autonomy.
4. **Build coalitions across identity groups:** The DSU's intersectional approach—particularly partnership with the Pride Student Union Bureau—strengthened both organizations and demonstrated solidarity.
5. **Document everything:** From Senate resolutions and bills to operating manuals, the DSU is creating a written record that ensures sustainability and enables replication.
6. **Balance immediate needs with long-term vision:** The DSU provides immediate community and support while simultaneously working on systemic policy change.
7. **Invest in public presence:** A website, social media presence, news coverage, and conference presentations make the work visible and inspire others.
8. **Plan for leadership transition:** Advisory boards and operational manuals ensure the organization outlives its founders.

## Key Takeaways

- **Belonging and accessibility are connected.** Accessibility and belonging are deeply linked. Accessibility is critical for students with disabilities to feel a sense of belonging.
- **Start at orientation.** Belonging and accessibility start before enrollment. Creating belonging starts during the recruitment process and crosses the entire student experience.
- **Belonging fosters success.** Increasing belonging will support student success and will take a system-wide approach. Once they invest in a commitment to improve belonging and accessibility, students and faculty will create a stronger community.

## Reports and Resources

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## Conclusion: Creating Lasting Change

With more than 21% of undergraduate students having a disability, the need for accessible higher education is not a niche issue but a necessity across entire college and university systems. Throughout this Playbook, we have explored the journey from establishing a legal baseline—where ADA compliance is the floor, not the ceiling—to creating an environment of true inclusion. From "taking stock" of your institution's current compliance to reimagining physical spaces and digital environments, the strategies and best practices outlined in this Playbook are designed to move beyond retrofitting and toward a model of designing policies and practices with accessibility at the forefront. Whether you are a faculty member refining instructional methods or an administrator embedding accessibility into procurement, every stakeholder plays a vital role in dismantling current barriers.

The key takeaway for creating lasting change in your college or university is that accessibility cannot happen in isolation; it requires building a team of allies and engaging leadership to foster a shared culture of accountability. Just as the Curb Cut Effect demonstrates that accessible physical features benefit everyone, building in accessibility across all aspects of the higher education experience improves the experience for all learners. This systemic shift must be grounded in data and the lived experiences of students, ensuring that their perspectives guide the decision-making process, rather than relying on assumptions. By centering the learner and fostering a culture of belonging, institutions can ensure that students with disabilities are not just present but are valued members of the campus community.

Looking forward, remember that building an accessible college and university is a long-term process that requires both patience and persistence. You are not expected to "boil the ocean" by fixing everything at once; instead, focus on identifying entry points and achieving small, tangible wins that generate momentum for larger cultural shifts. Accessibility is an ever-evolving learning journey, particularly as technology and student needs change. By committing to a continuous improvement mindset and regularly evaluating your progress, you can transform your campus into a space where every student has the opportunity to succeed, belong, and thrive.





# **ACCESSIBLE BY DESIGN: A COMPREHENSIVE PLAYBOOK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**A Practical Guide to Embedding Accessibility  
Across Digital, Physical, and Institutional Systems  
for Learners with Disabilities**

Compiled by the Coalition On Accessibility In Higher Education