

# Students with Disabilities at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions

First Look



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# First Look Summary

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## Introduction

Growing enrollments of students with disabilities in postsecondary education (Newman et al. 2010; Snyder and Dillow 2010), along with recent key legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 and the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act,<sup>1</sup> have generated considerable interest in research on accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities. This report provides national data collected from degree-granting postsecondary institutions about students with disabilities, the services and accommodations provided to these students, and various aspects of institutional accessibility. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) previously reported results from a similar survey conducted in 1998 (Lewis and Farris 1999).<sup>2</sup> The estimates presented in the current report are based on a survey of 2-year and 4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions conducted during the 2009–10 academic year. For the current study, a disability was defined as a physical or mental condition that causes functional limitations that substantially limit one or more major life activities, including mobility, communication (seeing, hearing, speaking), and learning. Information in this report about students with disabilities represents only those students who had identified themselves in some way to the institution as having a disability, since these are the only students about whom the institutions could report. The survey also included questions about institutional practices and accessibility that were completed by all institutions regardless of whether they enrolled any students with disabilities.

This study, requested by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in the U.S. Department of Education, collected information from postsecondary institutions in the United States on the enrollment of students with disabilities, services and accommodations provided, documentation accepted as verification of a disability, educational and accessibility materials and activities provided, and Universal Design.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the survey covered the following:

- Whether institutions had any students enrolled who identified themselves to the institution as having a disability during the 12-month 2008–09 academic year, and if so, the total number of students with disabilities enrolled at the institution and the number of students in each of 11 specific disability categories;<sup>4</sup>
- Whether enrollments provided by institutions were unduplicated (each student with a disability was counted only once regardless of the number of disabilities he or she has) or duplicated (students with multiple disabilities were counted multiple times) to reflect differences in institutions' record-keeping practices;
- Whether the enrollment counts included students who identified themselves as having a disability to the institution, received services and accommodations, and/or whose disabilities were verified;

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<sup>1</sup> The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 broadened the interpretation of disability relative to the original law. More information can be found at <http://www.access-board.gov/about/laws/ada-amendments.htm>. The 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act reauthorized the Higher Education Act of 1965 and included financial assistance for individuals with intellectual disabilities and the creation of new programs for students with disabilities. More information can be found at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/leg/hea08/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> While some items across the surveys are comparable, the specific disability categories are different. Only data from the current survey are included in this report.

<sup>3</sup> Universal Design is an approach to the design of all products and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or situation.

<sup>4</sup> Disability categories used in the survey were developed in consultation with NCES and OSERS and are based on categories established in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

- Types of support services and accommodations provided to students with disabilities during the 12-month 2008–09 academic year;
- Types of documentation institutions accept as sufficient, stand-alone verification of a disability;
- Extent to which institutions work with a state vocational rehabilitation agency;
- Institutional materials and activities designed to assist students with disabilities, including materials designed to encourage students with disabilities to identify themselves to institutions, and materials and activities to assist faculty and staff in working with these students;
- Extent to which institutions’ main websites follow accessibility guidelines for users with disabilities;
- Whether institutions conduct various activities related to accessibility and provide various services and accommodations to the general public; and
- Barriers to Universal Design, an approach that integrates accessibility features into the overall design of products and environments.

The survey was conducted for NCES during the 2009–10 academic year using the Postsecondary Education Quick Information System (PEQIS). PEQIS is a survey system designed to collect small amounts of issue-oriented data from a previously recruited, nationally representative sample of institutions with minimal burden on respondents and within a relatively short period of time. Questionnaires were mailed to approximately 1,600 Title IV eligible, degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.<sup>5</sup> The unweighted survey response rate was 91 percent and the weighted response rate was 89 percent. Data were adjusted for questionnaire nonresponse and weighted to yield national estimates that represent the estimated 4,200 2-year and 4-year Title IV eligible degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (see appendix B for more information about weighting and response rates).

Because the purpose of this report is to introduce new NCES data through the presentation of tables containing descriptive information, only selected findings are presented. These findings have been chosen to demonstrate the range of information available from the PEQIS study rather than to discuss all of the observed differences; they are not meant to emphasize any particular issue. The findings are based on self-reported data from postsecondary institutions. Respondents were asked to report counts of students with disabilities, and the services and accommodations provided to students with disabilities, for the 2008–09 12-month academic year. For the remaining questions, respondents were asked without reference to a specific time frame. Some of the survey response categories (e.g., minor, moderate, and major extent) were not defined for respondents. Tables of standard error estimates are provided in appendix A. Detailed information about the survey methodology is provided in appendix B, and the questionnaire can be found in appendix C. Appendix B also includes definitions of the analysis variables (e.g., institutional type) and terms used in the report.

## Selected Findings

This section presents key findings on students with disabilities at 2-year and 4-year Title IV eligible degree-granting postsecondary institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Institutions participating in Title IV federal student financial aid programs (such as Pell grants or Stafford loans) are accredited by an agency or organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, have a program of more than 300 clock hours or 8 credit hours, have been in business for at least 2 years, and have a signed Program Participation Agreement with the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), U.S. Department of Education. Degree-granting institutions are those that offer an associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, doctor’s, or first-professional degree (Knapp et al. 2001).

- During the 12-month 2008–09 academic year, 88 percent of 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting postsecondary institutions reported enrolling students with disabilities (table 1). Almost all public 2-year and 4-year institutions (99 percent) and medium and large institutions<sup>6</sup> (100 percent) reported enrolling students with disabilities.
- Institutions reported enrolling approximately 707,000 students with disabilities in the 12-month 2008–09 academic year, with about half of these students reported enrolled in public 2-year institutions (table 2). While the reported number of students with disabilities is overestimated due to duplicated student counts, this estimate largely reflects unduplicated counts of students with disabilities; most institutions (94 percent) provided an unduplicated count of the total number of students with disabilities at their institution.<sup>7</sup>
- A large percentage of institutions that enrolled students with disabilities during the 12-month 2008–09 academic year reported enrolling students with specific learning disabilities (86 percent), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (79 percent), mobility limitations or orthopedic impairments (76 percent), or mental illness/psychological or psychiatric conditions (76 percent) (table 3).
- Regarding the types of student disabilities reported by institutions, about one-third of disabilities reported by institutions were specific learning disabilities (31 percent) (table 4). Eighteen percent of disabilities reported by institutions were for students with ADD/ADHD, 15 percent of disabilities were mental illness/psychological or psychiatric conditions, and 11 percent of disabilities were a health impairment/condition. For the institutions reporting duplicated counts, students with more than one disability were counted more than once.
- About half (55 percent) of institutions reported that the counts of enrollments they provided included students who provided verification of their disabilities, regardless of whether services and accommodations were provided in the 2008–09 academic year (table 5).
- Among institutions that enrolled students with disabilities during the 2008–09 academic year, 93 percent provided additional exam time as an accommodation to students with disabilities (table 6). Large percentages of institutions also provided classroom notetakers (77 percent), faculty-provided written course notes or assignments (72 percent), help with learning strategies or study skills (72 percent), alternative exam formats (71 percent), and adaptive equipment and technology (70 percent).
- When asked about the types of documentation that institutions accept as sufficient, stand-alone verification of student disabilities, 92 percent of institutions reported that they require verification of student disabilities for some purpose, although the specific purpose of the verification was not requested (table 7). Of these institutions, 44 percent accepted an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and 40 percent accepted a 504 Plan from a secondary school as sufficient, stand-alone verification,<sup>8</sup> while 80 percent accepted a comprehensive vocational rehabilitation agency evaluation.
- About one-third (37 percent) of institutions reported working, either formally or informally, with the state vocational rehabilitation agency regarding students with disabilities to a minor extent (table 8).

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<sup>6</sup> Small institutions were those that enrolled less than 3,000 students; medium institutions enrolled 3,000 to 9,999 students; and large institutions enrolled 10,000 or more students.

<sup>7</sup> During development of the questionnaire, respondents indicated that not all institutions are able to provide unduplicated counts of enrollments of students with disabilities. Thus, the questionnaire was structured to allow institutions to provide duplicated, unduplicated, or some other types of counts of their institutions' students with disabilities depending on their record-keeping system. Reported enrollments include all types of counts and therefore are overestimates of the number of students with disabilities due to duplicated student counts.

<sup>8</sup> An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a written plan that is designed for any student who receives special education and related services. A 504 Plan is developed for each student who meets the eligibility guidelines under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and specifies the nature of the impairment and the accommodations necessary to meet the student's needs. More information can be found in appendix B in the section on definitions of terms used in the report.

An additional 26 percent reported working with the state vocational rehabilitation agency to a moderate extent.

- About three-quarters (79 percent) of institutions reported distributing materials designed to encourage students with disabilities to identify themselves to the institution (table 9). Most institutions (92 percent) provided one-on-one discussions when requested to assist faculty and staff in working with students with disabilities.
- Almost all institutions (93 percent) reported using a main website to post information about the institution (table 10). Of those institutions, 24 percent reported that the institution's main website follows established accessibility guidelines<sup>9</sup> or recommendations for users with disabilities to a major extent.
- Many institutions reported integrating accessibility features during major renovation and new construction projects (89 percent); offering students, faculty, and staff the opportunity to provide input on accessibility features during project planning stages (65 percent); and conducting needs assessments pertaining to accessibility (64 percent) (table 11). About a third of institutions reported providing various services and accommodations to the general public, for example, publicizing the availability of adaptive equipment, technology, or services at institution-sponsored events open to the public (35 percent).
- A few of the barriers cited by institutions as hindering implementation of Universal Design to a moderate or major extent were limited staff resources to provide faculty and staff training on accessibility issues (52 percent), costs associated with purchasing appropriate technology (46 percent), and other institutional priorities (45 percent) (table 12).

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<sup>9</sup> One example of accessibility guidelines is provided by the World Wide Web Consortium at <http://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG20/versions/guidelines/wcag20-guidelines-20081211-letter.pdf>.

**Table 1. Number of 2-year and 4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and number and percent that enrolled students with disabilities, by institutional characteristics: 2008–09**

Institutional characteristic	Total number of institutions	Institutions enrolling students with disabilities	
		Number	Percent
All institutions .....	4,170	3,680	88
<b>Institutional type</b>			
Public 2-year .....	1,040	1,040	99
Private not-for-profit 2-year .....	110	90	76
Private for-profit 2-year .....	480	310	63
Public 4-year .....	630	620	99
Private not-for-profit 4-year .....	1,510	1,340	88
Private for-profit 4-year .....	390	290	74
<b>Size of institution</b>			
Less than 3,000 .....	2,720	2,230	82
3,000 to 9,999 .....	960	960	100 <sup>1</sup>
10,000 or more .....	490	490	100

<sup>1</sup> Rounds to 100 percent.

NOTE: Information about students with disabilities represents only those students who identified themselves to their institution as having a disability, since these are the only students about whom the institutions could report. Data are for the 12-month 2008–09 academic year. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Postsecondary Education Quick Information System (PEQIS), “Students With Disabilities at Postsecondary Education Institutions,” 2009.

**Table 2. Number of students with disabilities and the percentage distribution of 2-year and 4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions that enrolled students with disabilities, by the type of count used by the institution for the number of students with disabilities and institutional characteristics: 2008–09**

Institutional characteristic	Maximum number of students with any disability <sup>1</sup>	Type of count used by the institution for the number of students with disabilities					
		Number of students with disabilities reported by institutions using this type of count			Percentage distribution of institutions using this type of count		
		Unduplicated	Duplicated	Other <sup>2</sup>	Unduplicated	Duplicated	Other <sup>2</sup>
All institutions .....	707,000	645,700	46,500	14,800	94	5	1
<b>Institutional type</b>							
Public 2-year .....	354,200	317,500	25,400	11,300	92	7	1
Private not-for-profit 2-year .....	1,400	1,400	‡	#	97	3!	#
Private for-profit 2-year .....	9,500	9,500	‡	#	100	#	#
Public 4-year .....	215,000	202,200	9,400	3,400	96	3	1
Private not-for-profit 4-year .....	116,400	105,600	10,800	#	95	5	#
Private for-profit 4-year .....	10,400	9,500	‡	#	93	7!	#
<b>Size of institution</b>							
Less than 3,000 .....	109,400	98,700	10,600	#	96	4	#
3,000 to 9,999 .....	230,400	209,100	17,900	3,500	92	7	1
10,000 or more .....	367,200	337,900	18,000	11,300	94	5	2

# Rounds to zero.

! Interpret data with caution; the coefficient of variation is greater than 50 percent.

‡ Reporting standards not met.

<sup>1</sup> Enrollments provided by institutions were unduplicated (each student with a disability was counted only once regardless of the number of disabilities he or she has), duplicated (students with multiple disabilities were counted multiple times), or another type of count. Reported enrollments include all types of counts and therefore are overestimates of the number of students with disabilities due to duplicated student counts.

<sup>2</sup> A small number of institutions reported student counts that did not meet the survey definitions of unduplicated or duplicated. Most commonly, these institutions reported counts in which students were duplicated by semester rather than by disability (i.e., students with disabilities were counted for each semester that they were enrolled during the 2008–09 12-month academic year).

NOTE: Percentages are based on the 88 percent of institutions that enrolled students with disabilities in the 12-month 2008–09 academic year. Information about students with disabilities represents only those students who identified themselves to their institution as having a disability, since these are the only students about whom the institutions could report. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Postsecondary Education Quick Information System (PEQIS), “Students With Disabilities at Postsecondary Education Institutions,” 2009.

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