


GAO Study on Students with Disabilities in Higher Education


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Introduction

- Research suggests that more students with disabilities are pursuing higher education.
- Recent legislative changes may increase the number and diversity of this population:
 - Higher Education Opportunity Act
 - Post-9/11 GI Bill
- GAO issued our report to House Committee on Education and Labor in October 2009.

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Study Questions

- 1) What is known about the population of postsecondary students with disabilities?
- 2) How are postsecondary schools supporting students with disabilities?
- 3) What challenges, if any, do postsecondary schools face in supporting students with disabilities?
- 4) How is the Department of Education assisting postsecondary schools in supporting the needs of these students?

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Scope and Methodology

- Analyzed federal survey and some state data.
- Conducted site visits and phone interviews with 25 postsecondary schools to interview school disability officials and students.
- Interviewed Department of Education officials and education and disability groups.
- Reviewed relevant laws, regulations, and literature.

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Question 1: Population of Postsecondary Students with Disabilities

- Students with disabilities represented nearly 11 percent of all postsecondary students in 2008 and this population appears to have increased.
- Students with disabilities had similar demographic characteristics as their peers without disabilities in 2008.
- Distribution of disability types had changed since 2000 (for example, the proportion of students with attention deficit disorder had increased).

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Question 2: Schools Use Different Approaches to Support Students with Disabilities

- Schools are required to provide reasonable accommodations tailored to individual students' needs.
- Examples include academic adjustments (such as extended time on tests) and auxiliary aids (such as note takers).

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Question 2: Schools Use Different Approaches to Support Students with Disabilities (cont.)

- Assistive technology has expanded educational opportunities for students with disabilities.
- Disability offices collaborate with other campus offices (such as academics, counseling, housing, student activities) to provide full range of services.

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Question 2: Schools Use Different Approaches to Support Students with Disabilities (cont.)

- Some schools offer more comprehensive services than are required by law.
- Examples of such services include:
 - Disability screenings and assessments
 - Special programs to supplement academic instruction
 - Counseling, tutoring, and mentoring
 - Workshops on study skills, time management, and social interaction
 - Campus dorms staffed with personal attendants

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Question 3: Schools Face Challenges in Supporting Students with Disabilities

- Some students are unaware of their rights and responsibilities regarding accommodations.
- Some students choose not to disclose disability and then later need accommodations.
- Some faculty members lack awareness about legal requirements for supporting students with disabilities.

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Question 3: New Challenges Are Likely in Supporting Emerging Populations

- Providing services that involve specialized knowledge and intensive resources is challenging—especially given recent increases in specific populations (psychological disabilities, autism, chronic medical conditions).
- Schools anticipate challenges in supporting growing populations:
 - veterans with newly acquired disabilities
 - students with intellectual disabilities

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Question 4: Education Provides Assistance to Postsecondary Schools about Disability Issues

- The Department of Education offices that assist schools have different missions and priorities, focus on different clients, and provide different types of assistance to schools:
 - Office for Civil Rights (OCR)
 - Office of Special Education & Rehabilitative Services
 - Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE)
- OCR has taken the lead in providing assistance to postsecondary schools about disability issues.
- OPE has focused assistance primarily on schools that received grants related to students with disabilities.

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Question 4: Education Lacks a Coordinated Approach in Providing Assistance

- Education has no mechanism to systematically share information across offices and coordinate their technical assistance efforts.
- School officials told GAO they need more guidance and information about serving students with disabilities.

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GAO Recommendation and Education Response

- GAO recommended that Education develop and implement a coordinated approach to optimize agency resources and knowledge in providing technical assistance to postsecondary schools in supporting students with disabilities.
- Education agreed with GAO recommendation and plans to create a work group to develop and implement a coordinated approach to providing technical assistance.

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Questions?

Any questions?

- GAO's report, Higher Education and Disability: Education Needs a Coordinated Approach to Improve Its Assistance to Schools in Supporting Students (GAO-10-33) is available at www.gao.gov

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