

# NCCSD Research Brief

## Access and Participation in Higher Education: Perspectives of College Students with Disabilities

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Students with Disabilities



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## Abstract

The National Center on College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD) is charged with providing training and technical assistance for college students with disabilities and the campuses that serve them. In order to better understand the experiences of college students with disabilities and establish priorities for the work of the Center, the NCCSD conducted a series of seven student focus groups. The groups were comprised of a total of 46 students with a variety of disabilities. Students were located on diverse campuses across four regions of the country. Research questions included: (1) What barriers do students with disabilities encounter in accessing and participating in higher education? (2) What are the supports and strategies promoting equitable participation? and (3) What are recommendations for training and resource materials related to access and equity for college students with disabilities? Results of prominent themes that emerged from five or more focus groups are reported. Implications of the data are presented in four primary areas for training and technical assistance. (Contains 4 tables)

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## Executive Summary

The National Center for College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD) conducted focus groups with college students with disabilities across the country in order to better understand their experiences in higher education and establish priorities for the work of the Center. Seven focus groups including a total of 46 student participants were conducted on diverse campuses in four regions of the country. The results reported in this research brief reflect prominent findings identified by students across campuses.

**Common barriers** identified by students included:

- **Work with the disability resource office** (e.g., unaware of services, difficulty navigating office procedures, inadequate accommodations, and lacking support for self-advocacy and disclosure skill development)
- **Classroom and instructional environment** (e.g., instructors who were ununiformed about campus procedures, unresponsive to students, or challenged student requests for accommodations)
- **Campus access and supports** (e.g., physical barriers as well as gaps in services and programs across campus)
- **Campus climate** (e.g., negative interactions with peers, experiences of stigma related to disability, and the added work of addressing physical, curricular, and attitudinal barriers across campus)

**Supports** commonly identified by students included:

- **The disability resource office** (e.g., supportive interactions, easy procedures, and effective accommodations)
- **Inclusive classrooms** (e.g., informed instructors and positive interactions with faculty)
- **The disability community** (e.g., support from peers, and campus structures that promote community)
- **Self-determination skills** (e.g., acquired confidence for self-advocacy and claiming disability)

## Recommendations

The findings and recommendations of this study will guide the work of the NCCSD. They are also relevant to campus administrators and disability resource professionals working to improve the accessibility and campus environment for individuals with disabilities.

**Continue work on the basic elements of campus access**, including monitoring and improving physical accessibility across campus buildings, structures and spaces; training faculty on basic competencies for discussing and providing student accommodations; extending outreach and awareness of the availability of disability resources; and assuring accessibility of electronic information technology such as web pages and course management systems.

**Support campus-wide work on access**, by improving the information, services, and practices related to students with disabilities across campus offices and services. Particular focus may be needed on campus counseling services, libraries, career development offices and teaching and learning centers.

**Reduce the work of being a disabled student on campus**, by streamlining non-essential campus procedures and requirements for attaining accommodations; using electronic management systems and other means of making information quick and easy to access; and actively engaging the campus community in discussion of access barriers.

**Promote a positive climate on campus**, by including disability as an aspect of student diversity, providing training and resources to garner administrative support, infusing disability concepts into the academic curriculum, and supporting groups and structures that promote disability communities.

## Acknowledgements

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- Richard Allegra, NCCSD
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## Introduction

Equal access to higher education for people with disabilities has been a federal mandate for over 40 years, and colleges and universities provide accommodations and services for students with disabilities in a variety of ways (GAO, 2009). After decades of growth in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's the reported presence of students with disclosed disabilities on college campuses appears to have stabilized at approximately 11% of the college population nationwide in recent years according to federal data (NCES, 2015). Depending on methods of data collection however, incidence figures vary including a reported 17.7% of undergraduates who identify themselves as having a disability at large public research universities (Zehner, 2018). Data on student success and outcomes are not conclusive, however, and available research reports persistence and graduation rates that are not on par with non-disabled peers (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Newman et al., 2011).

As a national center charged with providing training, technical assistance, and support for college students as well as institutions of higher education, the National Center on College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD) conducted research to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of students. Our intent was to better understand the current status of college students with disabilities and identify priorities for the work of the NCCSD. The study had three primary research questions: (1) What barriers do students with disabilities encounter in accessing and participating in higher education? (2) What are the supports and strategies promoting equitable participation? and (3) What are recommendations for training and resource materials related to access and equity for college students with disabilities? This publication reports the findings from one aspect of the project, a series of focus groups conducted with college students with disabilities across the country.

### Research Questions

- 1) What barriers do students with disabilities encounter in accessing and participating in higher education?
- 2) What are the supports and strategies promoting equitable participation?
- 3) What are recommendations for training and resource materials related to access and equity for college students with disabilities?

## Method

Student focus groups were conducted on college campuses in different regions of the country to better understand the experiences of students with disabilities. Focus group methodology was selected as it is well-suited to the task of gathering participant experiences, perceptions, and beliefs as current college students. The collectivist nature of focus group interviews has also been described as particularly useful in understanding experiences related to social justice as the group conversation and interaction can serve to validate everyday experiences of discrimination as well as strategies for support (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Student focus groups were held on six college campuses. The varied host institutions were located in four regions of the country (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West) and included two research universities, a master's university, two baccalaureate colleges, and a community college. Four institutions were public and two were private.

The focus groups were conducted by members of the NCCSD research team. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to encourage students to think broadly about their college experiences. In addition to the academic environment, prompts encouraged reflection and conversation about the full scope of campus life and activities including such areas as housing, dining services, recreation, libraries, and a variety of campus supports and resources. (See the interview protocol in Appendix A). Each focus group was 60-90 minutes in length and was audio recorded as well as transcribed with Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) transcription services. Field notes were used to document observations during the sessions.

The focus groups were comprised of 4-9 students with disabilities per group for a total of 46 student participants. Two focus groups were held on one campus—one consisting of undergraduate students and one of graduate students. Professionals from campus disability resource offices were instrumental in identifying and communicating with potential participants for the study on five of the six campuses. Professionals were asked to identify students who were perceived as campus leaders as these individuals were believed to have important insights into student access across campus. Participants on the sixth campus were identified through an active student group with a focus on disability activism and access.

All participants were informed of their rights as voluntary participants and signed informed consent forms acknowledging the confidentiality of shared information as well as granting permission to record and transcribe the conversation. Each participant was given a \$10 gift card to a local coffee shop.

Demographic information was provided by participants (see table 1 and description of all tables in Appendix B) including self-disclosed disabilities (see table 2). Two of the focus groups were comprised entirely of graduate students, four groups were solely undergraduate students, and one group included graduate and undergraduate student participants.

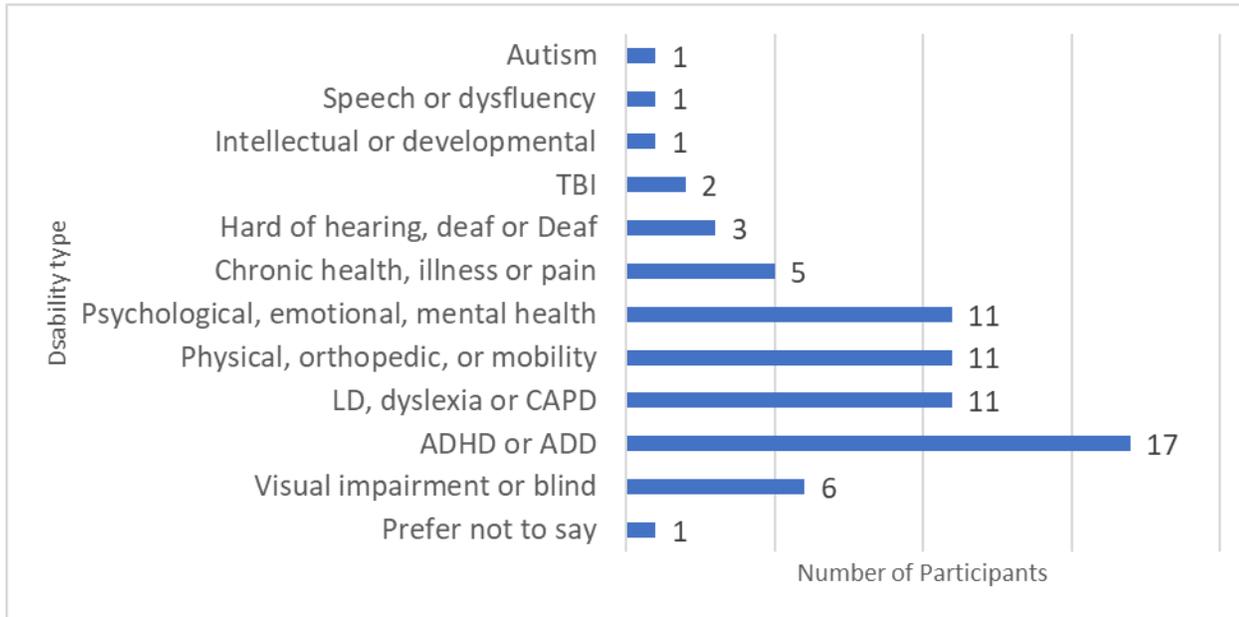
Table 1: Demographic characteristics reported by participants.

Characteristic	Percentage	Frequency
<u>Role on Campus*</u>		
Undergraduate student	59%	26
Graduate student	38%	17
TA or instructor	4%	2
<u>Race/Ethnicity**</u>		
American Indian	2%	1
Asian or Asian-American	16%	7
Black or African American	9%	4
Hispanic or Latino	9%	4
Middle Eastern	2%	1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
White or Anglo	66%	29
Bi-racial or Multi-racial	2%	1
Prefer not to say	0	0
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	66%	29
Male	27%	12
Trans, Non-Binary, Intersex	7%	3
Prefer not to say	0	0
<u>Age</u>		
18-25	59%	26
26-30	16%	7
31-35	7%	3
36-40	4%	2
over 40	7%	3
Prefer not to say	7%	3
<u>Total number of focus group participants providing demographic information</u>	96%	44

\*Note: One participant indicated graduate student and GA.

\*\* Note: One participant selected multiple responses.

**Table 2:** Frequency of disability types disclosed by participants.



Note: 20 Participants disclosed two or more disabilities

Transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed and coded by the project team using NVivo, a software program supporting qualitative analysis. Using a grounded theory approach, inductive open and axial coding were used to identify emergent categories and themes (Saldana, 2016). Reliability of the data was bolstered through an iterative coding process and including reflective memos. Themes and subthemes were then grouped into broader categories related to barriers, supports, and recommendations.

## Key Findings

In the process of conducting the student focus groups, the research team heard many compelling stories and accounts documenting a wide range of experiences encountered by students with disabilities. While 43 different themes and subthemes were identified across the seven focus group conversations, some prominent themes became apparent during analysis. The findings presented here reflect highlights of the most commonly reported themes that emerged from five (71%) or more of the seven focus groups.

A list of prominent themes and subthemes is provided in tables 3 and 4 and organized by the areas of barriers and supports. While organization of the themes in this manner is useful in addressing the research questions, it is apparent that barriers and supports are often interwoven and interconnected. For example, students identified work with the campus disability resource office as both a barrier and a significant source of support. Similarly, interactions with faculty were described as creating barriers as well as being a source of inclusive classrooms for participation and learning.

## Barriers

The barriers most commonly identified by students reflected four broad areas: work with the disability resource office, classroom and instructional environment, campus access and supports, and campus climate.

**Table 3:** Barriers to campus access and participation.

Work with the Disability Resource Office	Classroom and Instructional Environment	Campus Access and Support	Campus Climate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unaware of office and services</li> <li>• Difficulty navigating procedures</li> <li>• Inadequate accommodations</li> <li>• Lacking support for self-advocacy and disclosure skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uninformed faculty</li> <li>• Instructor pushback</li> <li>• Non-responsive instructors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical barriers</li> <li>• Gaps in programs and services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative interaction with peers</li> <li>• Stigma of disability</li> <li>• Added work of disability management</li> </ul>

**Work with the Disability Resource Office.** All students face transitions as they enter college. For students with disabilities, this transition also entails becoming familiar with and working within an entirely new system for accessing support and communicating disability-based needs. Under the ADA, college students with disabilities are required to disclose and request accommodations typically by reaching out to the campus-based disability resource office. Students must take on the role of self-advocate, in many cases for the first time and often with little or no training. All seven (100%) of the focus groups identified barriers in different aspects of work with the campus disability resource office.

*Unaware of office and services.* At the most basic level, students in six focus groups (86%) shared experiences where they or their friends entered college unaware that disability services or accommodations were offered in higher education. Several students described learning about the availability of services through friends. As one student shared, “I had a family friend who went here, and she's like, ‘You know, (the university) has disability stuff there.’ I’m like, What? Like that's a thing in colleges? I didn't know that.”

Students expressed confusion about what forms of “disability” were eligible for accommodations and services. For example, one student explained, “So a student in a wheelchair or other mobility aids like you can see it. So... of course it makes sense you can see I'm disabled so I can ask for help. For other folks who don't have like easily visible disability ... it's hard to go in [to the disability resource office] because it's like, but I don't need those [services] like other people do. I feel like ...in some ways it could be clearer that way. No disability is too small.” Another student described receiving accommodations as an undergraduate student and being uncertain whether these would “carry over” into her graduate program of study.

*Difficulty navigating procedures.* Students who had connected with the disability resource office provided accounts of challenges they faced in complying with policies and procedures of the office for receiving accommodations. Some words used to describe procedures for documenting a disability, or receiving testing or notetaking accommodations for example, included “added burden,” “frustrating,” “hard to get done,” and “extra stressors.”

Documentation requirements asking for information beyond the high school Individualized Education Programs (IEP) were a point of confusion for some students. As one student noted, “I knew my IEP wouldn't transfer so I thought how am I going to prove I have a disability?” Students expressed concern over expectations for new or updated disability evaluations and reports. “Well, if you want to like get things [accommodations] beyond here, you're going to have to pay like \$1,200 and go through this extensive testing. And grad school's something I really want to do, but I don't know if my health insurance will cover it and stuff.”

Other students described confusion about new procedures for acquiring accommodations. One student explained, “I knew I could get accessible books, textbooks -- no one explained the process and I ended up not getting my books for about a month into the semester because no one had explained the steps that it took...It turned out I had to go buy the books at the bookstore and then go get the accessible books but no one had told me this is how it works. So, my first semester here I was in tears, often, because things weren't falling into place.”

One aspect of self-advocating for services at the college level includes making requests for accommodations in a timely manner. While reasonable timeframes are essential for staff or faculty making logistical arrangements, students described sometimes getting caught in untenable situations while trying to follow procedures. Arranging test accommodations was a frequent challenge. One student explained, “You have to put all the test forms in [at the disability resource office] three days in advance, and most of your professors honestly don't give you enough notice for that.” Or another student noted, “And so when you're taking exams when everybody else has to as well, like sometimes if you don't do it [sign up for testing space] early enough, then you can't take it there.”

*Inadequate accommodations.* Disability Resource Offices are typically the entity on campus that is charged with working with individual students to determine the accommodations a student is eligible to receive. While the purpose of accommodations is to circumvent barriers, students in five (71%) of the focus groups reported challenges with the quality of accommodations they were provided.

Inadequate notetaking accommodations were mentioned on several occasions. For example, as one student described, “I have accommodations for note taking services... but I like rarely get the notes from people [peer volunteer notetakers].” Testing accommodations are at times inadequate. One student, while describing his reduced distraction testing space observed that “even when I'm at my individual cubby, like hearing other pencils going and people leaving and stuff like that, it's easy for me to get caught up in that instead of what I'm supposed to be doing.”

Others described frustration that accommodations may be limited in scope and not responsive to individual need. One student expressed appreciation for extended time for tests but observed, “I have also needed extra time in lab because moving from one task to another...I am still slower than a lot of people and that's not going to change. [We need] some recognition of that just as a possibility of actually making one of the accommodations that the school can offer.”

*“You know, when I first started, my problem was I don't know what to ask for...and DRC kept saying let us know what you need.”*

*Lacking support for self-advocacy and disclosure skills.* As students enter the postsecondary environment, they need to be able to self-advocate and make informed decisions about when and how to disclose disability related information. Lack of knowledge and experience in this area was a concern expressed in all seven (100%) of the focus groups.

One student explained, “When they [students with disabilities] apply to a university, it comes almost as a shock to them that they are the ones that are responsible for giving a letter [of accommodations] to their professors.” And while the disability resource office typically notifies students of their role in self-advocacy, some students described not being sure how to successfully meet this expectation. “You know, when I first started, my problem was I don't know what to ask for. I didn't know what I need to be a student here and DRC [the disability resource office] kept saying let us know what you need.”

Students described the process of disclosure to others on campus as challenging and often filled with uncertainty. One student explained “And so it's a little lonely [having a disability] sometimes. Like I don't like to tell people.” One student described her conversation with a faculty member about mental health concerns this way, “I felt like I went out on a limb to like share that about myself too, so it's already kind of exposing yourself; it's kind of awkward.” Another student described, “I found myself on the bad days having to e-mail my professors and be like, so here's my long explanation that I wish I could have just had with you at the beginning of the semester so that you would like see where I'm coming from to begin with if anything is ever off... I hate to have that conversation later when I'm using it as an excuse.”

*“...faculty just assume that a student is asking [for accommodations] for the wrong reasons.”*

A graduate student reflected on the broader institutional structure for requiring disclosure and the lack of information for students noting “...navigating that system and questions of disclosure... there's no information on this campus about that, and students aren't provided with any opportunity to think through the consequences and ramification of disclosing or if you have to disclose...”

**Classroom and instructional environment.** When students talked about their experiences in the classroom, they mentioned a variety of course formats and elements of teaching that created barriers. For example, students in one group reported online classes created challenges because of the increased demands for independent time management. Other students talked about the intense nature of summer school courses that compressed content of a semester-long class into a two-week period. A few students talked about difficulties with maintaining focus in large lecture classes. Instructional strategies such as required class participation, in-class quizzes, and use of limited learning styles by instructors were mentioned by two focus groups.

Most of the conversation around barriers in the classroom, and the prominent themes that emerged across the focus groups however revolved around the tone and nature of interactions with the instructor. All seven (100%) of the focus groups described interactions with faculty who lacked knowledge and awareness of disabilities or projected negative attitudes about student accommodation requests.

**Uninformed faculty.** A common refrain across the focus groups was that many faculty are unaware of the needs of students with disabilities and the institution's procedures for providing accommodations. Comments included “Most of them just don't know what the protocol is,” and “they feel very uncomfortable sometimes when you approach them with that kind of thing because they don't know what they're expected to do.”

Students described a range of responses from faculty. One student explained, “Some [faculty] shy away and don't know how to deal with it and are annoyed. Not because they are really... negative or bad intentioned to begin with. Because you don't know something you try to stay away from it.” Conversely, this lack of awareness may result in an intrusive response from the faculty. As described by one student, “I've had professors get excited about me having MS [Multiple Sclerosis]. And they'll be like, ‘Can I interview you?’ I'm just like, ‘No. Please don't.’ And then they'll just like start asking me a ton of questions even though I'm completely uncomfortable. And they just don't know how to not ask me those questions, I guess.”

The absence of information can also lead to false assumptions and misunderstanding as described by this student, “And I don't think faculty understands that that takes time, right, to secure a diagnosis, to get the accommodations in check, and to make sure the accommodations are working. And because there's no basic training in that, faculty just assume that a student is asking for the wrong reasons.”

*Instructor pushback.* Another common experience described by students involved faculty who challenge student accommodation requests. One student explained, “There's always some [instructors] that are like, ‘Oh, like why do you need this?’... And they really like to argue... it probably makes it more awkward for you and you really just want to give them the [faculty notification] letter and run out the door.”

Another student describes, “And part of why the invisibility can happen is because the professor says, ‘Okay. You're anxious. Everyone here is anxious. Why do you need six different accommodations when... your peers don't need any?’” The impact of these interactions is explained by one student: “when students are having these negative encounters with professors, ... they just end up feeling defeated.”

*Non-responsive instructors.* Another barrier that students identified were instructors who did not readily respond or communicate about accommodation requests. For some faculty, this may reflect extremely busy schedules and heavy workloads. Not responding to e-mails, forgetting accommodation requests made by students, and failing to follow up with necessary paperwork were among the barriers described by students. One student explained, “Collaborating with the faculty is hard because it is stressful when it is your exam day and they don't seem to know you asked for accommodations, or it is hard getting in contact with them, or the fact you presented them with a [accommodations request] letter but they still forget.”

Students talked about the frustrations of trying to complete accommodation arrangements with non-responsive faculty. For example, “Sometimes I don't think they know I have to get this done so I can register for a test. I had teachers that I had to remind six or seven times, and you resend it [the test center form] to them because they don't understand it is urgent.” Within an institutional context that requires students to communicate with faculty in order to coordinate accommodations, this lack of follow through in a timely way magnifies the challenges of student self-advocacy.

And in some instances, students described the lack of timely communication and collaboration with instructors as more than a faculty work load issue. “It's definitely been quite a few [instructors] that are very ambivalent, don't really care, and aren't going to put a lot of effort in.”

*Campus access and support.* Equal access to higher education is not limited to interactions with the disability resource office and the instructional environment. It became apparent in all seven (100%) of the focus group conversations that barriers are experienced across a variety of aspects of campus and student life.

*Physical barriers.* All of the focus groups mentioned basic physical barriers that are experienced daily. Examples included campus grounds with uneven brick walkways; poorly marked crosswalks; buildings with external stairs, but no ramp; access ramps that are consistently blocked by garbage dumpsters or student bikes; and doorways with non-functioning automatic door openers. A student who uses a wheelchair explained, “That's a problem that kind of like starts at the root...If you can't even get to class, then all your problems are kind of done with. You can't even get to the point where you have other problems.”

Physical barriers were described in campus housing. Students reported limited options for living in campus residence halls. As one student explained, she had to choose whether to live in the “handicapped housing area” or live in the residence hall with her friends, but her choices were mutually exclusive. A graduate student noted, “Living on the [main campus quad] is a privilege as a graduate student, but it is inaccessible, so handicapped students are unable to do so.” Some students described the social isolation of inaccessible residence halls, “if you wanted to go visit a friend and you were in a wheelchair, you couldn't because the rooms are too small, or you couldn't get up to that room.” Other physical barriers included insufficient accessible parking spaces causing delays getting to class, and inaccessible busses provided for cross-campus and community transportation.

*Gaps in programs and services.* As students reflected on barriers they have encountered, they described fundamental gaps in crucial campus services that are typically assumed to be available to all students. While a variety of services were mentioned as inaccessible during the different focus groups, three areas emerged more frequently across the groups. *Career services* that support the important transition to employment after college often overlook specific information needs of students with disabilities, including awareness of rights in the employment setting, and informed decision-making for disability disclosure and accommodation requests. As one student asked, “So what’s the connection here between the campus, the DS [disability services] office, and the employment [services]? The employment material is [designed for] non-disabled students.”

*Counseling and psychological services* were described as limited and inadequate to meet student needs. Students expressed frustration with limits on the number of individual student sessions available and extensive wait lists for services. A student explained, “the first time that I called to get like a counseling appointment, I was in a pretty bad place, and they told me the first appointment was in two weeks.” Another student asked, “if they can have counselors that focus on LGBT students, why can’t they have counselors that understand the issues we [students with disabilities] are facing?”

*Library* accessibility was a concern for students. Physical barriers remain for some students, including areas such as books located on high shelving, rows of shelving that were too narrow to navigate in a wheelchair, and stacks within the library separated by extremely heavy doors. Students also described some confusion in how to attain reading material at the library in accessible formats. “There is a system, actually, but I think often times, students are not taught or they’re not familiar with how, actually, the system works, you know, like, um, borrowing books or ...just getting it in the form that they can access.”

*Another student asked, “if they can have counselors that focus on LGBT students, why can’t they have counselors that understand the issues we [students with disabilities] are facing?”*

*Campus climate.* Students in all seven (100%) of the focus groups talked about the barriers they encounter in their day-to-day interactions with others across campus. Words such as “unaware,” “being treated differently,” “questioning,” “burden,” “resentment,” and “judgement” were used to describe these exchanges. Barriers were identified in interactions with peers, the stigma sometimes associated with disability, and the added work of navigating college life as a student with a disability.

*Negative interactions with peers.* Students in six (86%) of the focus groups described negative interactions with non-disabled peers. Many students reported that using their accommodations sometimes leads to inadvertent disclosure and subsequent questioning from peers. For example, as one student described, “For me, it’s really awkward when people ask why I have two beds [but no roommate] in my single room [in the residence hall].”

Students report the questions from peers often go beyond curiosity to include a tone of judgement or resentment. A student shared that peers sometimes ask “Why do you need notes? Are you going to be lazy and like not go to class?” Another student replied, “And the same thing happens when they say, ‘Hey, why weren’t you here for the test?’ And I say, ‘Oh, I was here. I was just in the Office of Disability.’ And I don’t mind sharing that, but it just kind of does sometimes feel like I’m being stigmatized because the person kind of looks at you different after that. Like ‘Oh, well, you have a disability. I’m so sorry.’”

Sometimes peers challenge the legitimacy of the disability itself, particularly with less visible disabilities. “They kind of question the extent to which I need accommodations. It’s like, well, you can’t see? Why don’t you just get

glasses?” Or “when I tell somebody I have central auditory processing delays, you know, they think, well, you can hear me. Or what bugs the crap out of me is when people will like mouth words and not say anything and like mock it, kind of.”

At times the responses from peers are more pointed as reflected in this exchange between two students during one of the focus groups: “There's definitely times...when somebody, like, knows I have extra time, or like taking my exam at the DRC [Disability Resource Center], and I get like a funny look or like somebody's, ‘Oh, you have extra time? Like that's F'ing BS,’ or whatever.” And another student concurred, “The one I get all the time is, ‘Oh, you have priority registration? That's bullshit.’”

*Stigma of disability.* Students experience stigma associated with disability in several ways. While the field of postsecondary disability is increasingly embracing a model that recognizes disability as an aspect of student diversity, not all campuses or community members have recognized this. As one student described, “I would say it [disability] is one that we kind of like nudge under the table, and it doesn't necessarily get talked about because I think people with disabilities are considered lesser for some reason, a little bit.” Another student observes, “... it's tough, like, disability is the best word we have right now, but it has connotations outside of it, and I think a lot of times, when people think of disability, they think of, like, oh, what's wrong with me or it's medicalized.”

This stigma is described as having a chilling impact on students' ability to disclose and advocate for removing campus barriers. One student shared that “It's a really awkward thing to do because the second you say you have a

*“These [conversations about access] have been going on... since the ADA came into place [in 1990] and still I can't go into a class trusting that all of my energy is just going to be put into being a good student. It's going to be about having to tweak and educate and everything else sometimes. I had to drop two classes this semester due to accessibility things.”*

disability you are disregarded.” And another observed “I agree with wanting to speak up, but also I don't want to feel like the odd person out and have it affect being a student here or have a teacher look at me as less because I don't think like everyone else.”

Campus assurances of confidentiality don't necessarily ameliorate the concern around this stigma. One student noted, “...I don't really feel comfortable talking to someone I don't know [about my disability] even though they say it's confidential. Who knows if it's confidential?” Another student expressed concern about disclosure through student records at the school. “Students are so afraid to request [accommodations] for disabilities because they think they are going to mark their files and when they ask for a job they are ‘You are disabled, nobody is going to hire you. I don't know if that's true.’”

*Added work of disability management.* Talking with students and hearing about the many forms of barriers encountered across different aspects of their college experience, it became apparent that an additional barrier the students were describing was the cumulative impact of these barriers on their daily college experience, or as one student described it, “the amount of work it takes to be a disabled student.”

Self-advocacy and disability disclosure are an essential part of life as a college student with a disability, but this ongoing role is challenging for some students. As one student shares, “I think that's ours. It's a burden. It's something that I find difficult, but just like with being upfront with the teacher beforehand, I have to be a little more outgoing than I normally would be.” Or another student experiences it this way, “I really feel like there's this burden to disclose all the time and...to almost try to comfort everyone else when I need an accommodation... I feel like there's this burden of making everyone else feel comfortable about my disability on campus.”

Considerations of intersectionality also come into play for some students as they decide how to manage disclosure of their disability. A graduate student described these more nuanced complexities, “So I’m an ethnic minority and LGBT, and I have a disability. So I think it definitely heightens -- they kind of feed off each other because like every time, you know, you’re like in a new place with new people, they’re like, okay, can I reveal that part of myself to these people? What will happen? Will they accept me? Will I be rejected? All those things.”

Another student observed, “I would think anybody who is outside of the majority group in any kind of way, obviously there’s more stress on them. And the more you add on kind of the plate of how you are different from a majority group, you know, the more stressful that’s going to be and the more difficult things are going to be in general because people -- you know, let’s face it. People are very judgmental.”

Beyond the personal work inherent in self-advocacy and decisions regarding disclosure, students described the cumulative work of confronting campus barriers. Whether navigating difficult procedures through the disability resource office, educating faculty about campus protocols, seeking campus services that do not include students with disabilities, or responding to queries from peers, these institutional barriers were described as “time-consuming” and “exhausting.” One student noted, “I feel as [disabled] students we have to take upon a much larger responsibility [beyond personal accommodations] to advocate for ourselves constantly on campus in that way which is just an extra stressor.” Another student expressed, “My only wish is that what’s required by law to be in place. I don’t want to have to fight for those things. I don’t want to have to break through that wall because those things are supposed to be in place now...”

A non-traditional aged student described his experience this way, “These [conversations about access] have been going on... since the ADA came into place [in 1990] and still I can’t go into a class trusting that all of my energy is just going to be put into being a good student. It’s going to be about having to tweak and educate and everything else and that takes away -- I mean I don’t mind doing it. I’m an advocate, but it’s wearing and it is quite draining sometimes. I had to drop two classes last semester due to accessibility things.”

One focus group talked about reasonable expectations for student self-advocacy versus the institution’s responsibility for identifying and addressing barriers. A graduate student provided this thought-provoking comment, “Placing the barrier on the student, again, saying they don’t have the self-advocacy skills needed, takes away the attention from the institution, and it’s putting it [the responsibility for campus accessibility] on the individual ...placing the blame on the student is just not okay.”

**Supports**

Table 4: Supports for campus access and participation.

Disability Resource Office	Inclusive Classrooms	Disability Community	Self-Determination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive interactions with staff</li> <li>• Easy procedures</li> <li>• Accommodations that meet the need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informed instructors</li> <li>• Supportive interactions with faculty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support</li> <li>• Campus structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence with self-advocacy</li> <li>• Claiming disability</li> </ul>

Students also talked about positive experiences and inclusive aspects of campus. They described supportive features and resources in four broad areas. Some of the barriers described previously were also sources of support including interactions with the disability resource office and faculty. In addition, students identified the disability community and their own self-determination skills as important sources of support.

**Disability resource office.** Students in each of the focus groups (100%) talked about the important role of the disability resource office in providing an inclusive and welcoming college environment.

*Supportive interactions with staff.* The most commonly mentioned support was the connection students experienced with disability resource office professionals. One student explained, “The Office of Disabilities is really cool. They'll work with you to help you get what you need. Even if you don't have a name for the issue you're having, they're like, ‘Okay, well, we're going to see how we can help you.’” Another student noted, “They genuinely do seem to care about me and what's going on with me.”

Students were also aware of the work of the disability resource office to encourage student self-advocacy. “They're not here to hold your hand... but if you do take that step [to disclose the disability], they are more than willing to assist you.”

*Easy procedures.* Students described positive encounters with office and campus procedures that were easy to manage. Often these procedures reflected streamlined steps or effective communication between offices. One student shared, “I didn't have an IEP from high school... But SDS referred me to a psychologist and everything and it went super smooth and it was really helpful. Now I have all the paperwork [disability documentation] that will last me until adulthood and everything.” Another student described effective communication across offices for providing testing accommodations. “The way that they do everything is confidential so in advance you get an e-mail from the [testing office] that you have to show up that day and that time. You don't go to the classroom. You go to the [testing office] and they take you to the room and it is chill and relaxed.”

Several students described online accommodations systems as useful. “And so this semester they switched over to it [faculty accommodation letters] being online. That was really, really convenient...We didn't have to worry about taking it to our teachers, having them sign them, bring them back. That's fewer trips for us, it's fewer things get lost, and everybody gets the information.”

*Accommodations that meet the need.* While perhaps an obvious support, students spoke enthusiastically about the positive experiences they have when effective accommodations are in place. As one student explained, “I started not doing well and second semester [when I started using accommodations] my grades improved so much-- the extra time. You are by yourself taking the exam and it's so good and you get the extra time. It is going to reflect in your grades.” Another student described “One [testing space] has like individual cubbies, kind of where you are like kind of on your own. You're a little more like closed off from other people. And you know, I think those are really, really nice.” One student described the experience of effective accommodations this way, “it's like meeting me where I need to be met, which is what's the most important for me.”

**Inclusive classrooms.** Students in some focus groups mentioned positive classroom features they found supportive such as smaller classroom sizes, varied teaching strategies, and flexible testing options. But similar to discussions about barriers in the classrooms, the prominent themes that emerged across the groups related to the classroom focused on interactions with instructors. In contrast to the barriers created by some faculty, students talked about the powerful impact of faculty who are aware of disability procedures on campus and are supportive in their interactions with students. Positive encounters with faculty were mentioned by students in six (86%) of the seven groups.

*Informed instructors.* There were numerous accounts of faculty who recognized that a student was encountering difficulty and needed to connect with the disability resource office. For example, one student explained, “I thought first semester I can handle it and that was really stupid because I did poorly. I did not do as well as I know I

could do. Second semester I was going to try to do the same thing and when I talked to a professor, she walked me down [to the disability resource office] and I took a quiz there and I did well on it so she helped me figure out what to do." As another student described, "I kind of struggled for years and it took a professor to tell me to like I guess make me feel better about the fact it's confidential and stuff like that. That was big for me."

*Supportive interactions with faculty.* Students talked about the experiences they had when faculty responded to conversations about disability and requests for accommodations in positive ways. Comments such as the following reflect this theme, "My teachers, my administrators are pretty open about, you know, to someone who has disabilities. They care and they accommodate." Another student noted, "Professors are very accommodating. They give you the accommodations you need. All you have to do is talk to them."

In addition to an accepting attitude, students appreciated faculty who talked with them about how to support their learning in the class. A student described, "The faculty member was really educated, and she happened to be my psychiatric rotation teacher. She said I see you have the study guides and asked if I had anxiety. That impacted my life so greatly. I'm so glad I came across her." One student described the tone of these interactions as "making it more of a conversation between us and more like working together rather than being like this authoritative figure." Other examples of supportive dialogue included, "I gave her the [faculty notification] letter, and she said, "Okay. Sit down with me, talk with me, explain how this really affects you. How can I help you succeed? So that was really great." Another student shared, "The instructor asked me, 'Is there anything I can do to make this class more accessible to you?' So, I've had a wonderful experience with my professors."

*Disability Community.* Students in six (86%) of the seven groups talked about the importance of having a disability community on campus. While some students described a structure or resource that was already in place on campus, other students spoke of ways that promoting a disability community would create a greater sense of belonging.

*Peer support.* An important role of a disability community is to provide a connection with others experiencing disability. As one student noted, "I think that would be really helpful because you would feel not like the outsider, but you feel like you have support or at least someone else is in the same boat as you and you can help each other out." Another student explained, "I feel like there should be an orientation that could kind of help you feel like you have allies of like other students, because a lot of times you see faces around campus and you have no idea that they have a disability too. And although like there is some privacy, it's kind of like comforting to know there's others."

Connecting with other disabled individuals was also described as important to providing a way on campus to extend thinking about disability—both for disabled students and the broader campus community. "So I just kind of feel like having a student group on campus...and people know there is a community of students with disabilities and they're interacting with each other and talking about what they can do instead of only talking at the [disability resource] office where you don't get to meet each other-- it's confidential which is cool but you need to get to know each other and I feel like having a group will give campus an excuse to be like, oh, hey, maybe we should pay a little more attention than going to the [disability resource] office. I feel like everybody can be doing some work there."

*Campus structures.* Beyond individual connections and support, students talked about the importance of providing campus structures to promote a larger sense of disability community. Students mentioned a variety of useful structures and approaches. For example:

- "I think, like it's good to meet and talk to other disabled people and have a space and be able to do your thing and stuff, so I think that's really important, to have those groups that are there for people."
- "It would be nice if we had... our own group and you don't have to join it, but it is the same as Black History Month. We would have a place to come together."
- "We have peer mentors for the freshmen coming in to kind of like help them navigate campus. And I think it would be really cool to have like a separate one for [students with disabilities] and have sophomore, junior, and senior disability students mentor the freshmen coming in."

- One group talked about the presence of a disability culture center on campus. “One thing I was really excited about when I came to [this campus] was that there was actually a disability cultural center here on campus, which told me that they are more aware of disability and disability issues than the previous campuses I've been on, just the fact that they acknowledge disability as a culture and as an identity and something to be thought of as, like, an inclusion measure.”

**Self-Determination.** Another source of support described by students was their own internal awareness and growth in managing daily advocacy and access across campus. Student experiences reflecting the ability to recognize and claim personal strengths and speak on their own behalf are compelling supports.

*Confidence with self-advocacy.* For some students, working with the campus disability resource office was empowering. One student with recently acquired blindness shared this experience, “That's what they [the disability resource office professionals] are there for--to provide help with the accommodations and stuff, and in working with them and being here, it built up my confidence to be able to do some of that on my own and I mean, honestly, that's what it took, losing my sight to have a voice.”

For other students getting over the first hurdle of having to self-advocate was what led to greater confidence and initiative in speaking out. One student noted, “I had to [go to instructor office hours as a course requirement] and that got me over that bridge of feeling uncomfortable doing those types of things. It was really, really helpful with breaking those barriers that sometimes a disability can keep you kind of a little resistant to things or a little -- I just didn't want to take that space is the best way I can explain it and it forced me to do that. Being able to take that first step really helped me.” Another student shared, “I know I always meet with my instructors before the semester starts so that they -- I can tell them what I need, how they can help with stuff and I found -- I didn't do it the first semester I was here and I kind of learned as I've gone and it made a huge difference in any experience and it helps the teacher get comfortable too.”

*Claiming disability.* Some students talked about an internal shift in how they perceived their disability in the context of college. An undergraduate student described his initial concerns and embarrassment about having a disability and needing accommodations in a competitive academic environment. In explaining his own self-doubt about whether he was qualified to be a college student he described this shift, “Yes and once I was there it all went away. I realized this is for me. This is not -- this is not like no one is -- no one cares if I go [to the disability resource office]. This is for me. This is something that I need to -- I'm different than most of our people here. So because of that, you know it's help for me. And I didn't get that I had to get through that barrier.”

Another student described her experience, “I'm on about it now but forcing myself to say I'm hard-of-hearing and you have to look at me when you speak and that has helped me to actually you know get more what I need and answer questions when people have questions... I have a diagnosis that says I have this thing I can talk about now.”

## Discussion and Implications

Student participants were generous in sharing their time and experiences related to access and participation in college. The barriers that were described by students were wide ranging, yet many common concerns were found across the seven focus groups. Similarly, students described varied supports and inclusive practices that have enhanced their experiences as college students with prominent themes suggesting ways to enhance campus access and inclusivity. Findings in four broad areas are highlighted for future training and resource development.

**Continuing work on the basic elements of campus access.** While the field of postsecondary disability has made many advances over the last four decades of development, it is clear that students continue to experience barriers in some of the most fundamental aspects of campus.

- Physical accessibility, including doors, ramps, cross walks, curb cuts, academic buildings, residence halls, and parking among other areas, still presents barriers. These are not new issues but require oversight and vigilance to assure continual campus monitoring, enforcement, and improvement. Rather than segregate disabled students into certain accessible buildings, classrooms, residence halls, and green areas, universities need to plan how to make all of campus accessible.
- Faculty awareness of the basic procedures involving their role and responsibilities in providing accommodations for students are still reported as lacking. Aside from larger attitudinal barriers, all faculty, instructors, and teaching assistants need to be comfortable and competent in discussing and providing accommodations for students with disabilities in their classes.
- The presence and value of the work of disability resource offices is not widely known among students. While this may be confounding to disability resource professionals who work hard to provide outreach and orientation efforts on campus, too many students still report they were not aware of this resource or were not aware they had a disability that might entitle them to services.
- While not highlighted by a large number of students in this study, the comment of a few students regarding access of electronic information technology (EIT) such as websites and course management systems warrant mention in the list of basic access needs.

**Supporting campus-wide work on access.** One of the most significant changes in how the field of postsecondary disability understands campus access has been the evolution of the role of the disability resource office over time. While early approaches to campus access placed the disability resource office at the center of any disability-related need or conversation for students, it is now much more widely understood that effective campus access-- to curriculum, to events, to information, to resources-- involves the work of a cross-section of campus members (Evans, 2017; Kim 2017).

Students highlighted campus counseling services, libraries, and career development offices as three such resources needing to be more attuned to the information and access needs of students with disabilities. A smaller number of students however also talked about the need for faculty to receive more support in designing inclusive classroom instruction. This suggests another important candidate for additional resources are campus teaching and learning centers that work with faculty to promote effective teaching on campus.

**Reducing the work of being a disabled student on campus.** It is common practice on college campuses for students with disabilities to be expected to be self-advocates for identifying personal access barriers, requesting accommodations as needed, and monitoring the effectiveness of those services. This framework originated with federal laws in place since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. While these expectations are defensible under the country's legal framework, the comments of students across each of the focus groups provide another perspective. When campus procedures for requesting or receiving accommodations are unclear, cumbersome,

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## Areas for Future Training and Development

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Continuing work on the basic  
elements of campus access.

Supporting campus-wide  
work on access.

Reducing the work  
of being a disabled student  
on campus

The climate on campus.

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or ineffective do expectations for student self-advocacy become burdensome? When students encounter apathy or non-responsiveness from faculty, what is a reasonable level of self-advocacy to expect from students and at what point is this more appropriately a larger campus responsibility for training or administrative support?

Student accounts of disability resource offices that have streamlined campus procedures suggest new possibilities. As the field explores, improves, and validates new procedures using electronic management systems for disability resource offices, better coordination with campus-wide student data systems, or refined office policies for reviewing and using disability documentation for example, there is potential for reducing what may at times become excessive expectations for self-advocacy.

Another aspect of the “work” of disabled students relates to easy access to information. Students need ready access to contact information for the disability resource office and the typical kinds of services and accommodations they may expect to receive on campus. The NCCSD is currently developing a national online database of this information to support student awareness of these resources even prior to beginning college. Students also need simple and straightforward explanations of their changing legal status as they enter college. Quick and easy online tutorials explaining the changing roles and responsibilities and delivered by peers who have been through the transition process were promising suggestions made during the focus groups.

**The climate on campus.** Comments about the ongoing stigma of disability and the negative encounters experienced by students in common interactions with faculty, staff, and peers require increased attention. Beyond accommodations and services, these microaggressions— the subtle and not so subtle slights and derogatory experiences reported by students-- create a sense of hostility around disability-based needs and conversations (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Other marginalized groups have widely reported the chilling impact these experiences have on campus (Sue, 2010) creating an environment that is far from equitable. Approaches to this barrier require training and resources to garner top administrative support and inclusion in the work of other diversity initiatives on campus (Krause, 2018; Meeks & Jain, 2018). Intentional work to infuse disability concepts and issues into the broader academic curriculum, similar to successful practices with other marginalized groups is also essential.

An area with great promise for enhancing campus climate is the interest students expressed in building a greater sense of disability community at their institutions. Given the diverse college campuses across the country, it will be important to provide campuses with a variety of promising practices for enhancing disability community. Strategies suggested by students such as infusing student orientation with disability-related information, developing mentoring programs by and for disabled students, and establishing a student disability group are useful starting points. More exploration of the role of disability cultural centers on campus is needed to understand the potential of this resource to change the dialogue about disability and the resulting climate for students as well as faculty and staff with disabilities.

## Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations that need to be considered in understanding the implications of this work. Focus group methodology is a qualitative approach to research and as such the data gathered are based on individual student perceptions and self-report. The students who participated in the groups were volunteers who were identified by campus disability resource professionals. The experiences of these students may not reflect the perceptions of college students who have not disclosed and are not known to the disability resource professionals on campus. While focus groups were conducted on varied types of college campuses in different regions of the country, the number of campuses and student participants is small. This was an intentional aspect of the design of the study in order to gather grounded descriptive data, but it does limit the ability to generalize findings to broader populations.

## Conclusion

In some ways, the findings of this study provide a stark reminder that basic work of campus accessibility remains to be done. But at the same time, student comments about self-determination and campus climate demonstrate that our understanding of access and participation in higher education now includes awareness of equity and social justice issues. The shared experience and work of students with disabilities are helping the field of postsecondary disability raise the bar for campus access that is more fully inclusive.

In each of the focus groups, students were asked to share their thoughts about what an ideal college campus would be for students with disabilities. In closing, consider these attributes identified by students:

- “When I think about what a good campus would look like for college students with disabilities, it is a campus that embraces and works with a presumption of [student] competence.”
- “A good campus for disabled students would be one where there's not any extra work that comes with being disabled, that we are students just like any other student.”
- A good campus is “asking people to also consider [disability] in a different way, because it really does come down to access, like can I access the curriculum, can I access the building, can I access these events in meaningful ways, and then it's not just about who *I* am and what *my disability* is, but, [it's about] my *access* to things.”

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol for the NCCSD National Needs Assessment

1. Let's go around the room and get acquainted. Please tell us your first name and what you're studying.
2. We'd like to start by having you think about what a good campus would look like for college students with disabilities. What do you think the campus would be like?
3. In general, how do you think things are going for students with disabilities on campus?
4. What do you think are some of the biggest barriers or challenges for college students with disabilities?
5. We've talked about some of the problems. What do you think helps? Or what seems to be working well?
6. When we offer training for students, what do you think we should address first? Where should our priorities be?
7. What are your favorite ways to learn something when you need it? (e.g., websites, Twitter chats, videos, or other?)
8. Which technology do you tend to use the most? (e.g., your computer, a phone, a tablet, ipad, other?)
9. Do you have any advice for us about reaching a broad range of students? What about students with disabilities who choose not to disclose their disability?
10. Do you have any other comments, questions or advice for us?

## Appendix B: Descriptions of Tables

### [Table 1 \(Page 7\)](#)

The title of Table 1 is “Demographic characteristics reported by participants.” It has three columns: Characteristic, Percentage, and Frequency. Characteristics are divided into categories of “Role on Campus” (with a note that one participant indicated graduate student and GA), “Race/Ethnicity” (with a note that one participant selected multiple responses), “Gender,” “Age,” and “Total Number of Focus Group Participants Providing Demographic Information.”

For “Role on Campus,” 59% (26) were undergraduate students, 38% (17) were graduate students, and 4% (2) were a TA or instructor.

For “Race/Ethnicity,” 2% (1) was American Indian, 16% (7) were Asian or Asian-American, 9% (4) were Black or African American, 9% (4) were Hispanic or Latino, 0 were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 2% (1) was Middle Eastern, 66% (29) were White or Anglo, 2% (1) were bi-racial or multi-racial, and 0 selected “Prefer Not to Say.”

For Gender, 66% (29) were female, 27% (12) were male, 7% (3) were Trans, Non-Binary, or Intersex. 0 selected “Prefer Not to Say.”

For Age, 59% (26) were between 18-25, 16% (7) were between 26-30, 7% (3) were between 31-35, 4% (2) were between 36-40, and 7% (3) were over 40. 7% (3) selected “Prefer Not to Say.”

Total number of focus group participants providing demographic information were 96% (44).

### [Table 2 \(Page 8\)](#)

The title of Table 2 is “Frequency of Disability Types Disclosed by Participants.” This is a horizontal bar graph, where the horizontal axis is “Number of participants,” and the vertical axis is “Disability type.” The overall impression of the graph is that the most common disability type was ADHD or ADD (with 17 participants), and psychological, physical, and LD as the categories with the next highest number of participants (each category had 11).

The number of participants for each disability type were: Autism (1); Speech or dysfluency (1); Intellectual or development (1); TBI (2); Hard of hearing, deaf or Deaf (3); Chronic health, illness, or pain (5); Psychological, emotional, mental health (11); Physical, orthopedic, or mobility (11); LD, dyslexia, or CAPD (11); ADHD or ADD (17); Visual impairment or blind (6); Prefer not to say (1). There is a note below the graph saying “20 participants disclosed two or more disabilities.”

### [Table 3 \(Page 9\)](#)

The title of Table 3 is “Barriers to Campus Access and Participation.” The table has four columns: Work with the Disability Resource Office,” “Classroom and Instructional Environment,” “Campus Access and Support,” and “Campus Climate.”

Under “Work with the Disability Resource Office,” there is a bulleted list with the following items: Unaware of office and services; Difficulty navigating procedures; Inadequate accommodations; Lacking Support for self-advocacy and disclosure skills.

In the “Classroom and Instructional Environment” column, there is a bulleted list: Uninformed faculty; instructor pushback; Non-responsive instructors.

In the “Campus Access and Support” column, there is a bulleted list: Physical barriers; Gaps in programs and services.

In the “Campus Climate” column, there is a bulleted list: Negative interaction with peers; Stigma of disability; Added work of disability management.

### [Table 4 \(Page 15\)](#)

The title of Table 4 is “Supports for campus access and participation.” There are four columns: “Disability Resource Office,” “Inclusive Classrooms,” “Disability Community,” and “Self-Determination.”

Under the column "Disability Resource Office," there is a bulleted list: Supportive interactions with staff; Easy procedures; Accommodations that meet the need.

Under the column "Inclusive Classrooms," there is a bulleted list: Informed instructors; Supportive interactions with faculty.

Under "Disability Community," there is a bulleted list: Peer support; Campus structures.

Under "Self-Determination," there is a bulleted list: Confidence with self-advocacy, Claiming disability.