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## Mapping the ecology of college-going and within-college support for students with intellectual and other disabilities: An introduction to the project.

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# Issue Brief: Disability in Higher Education

## Mapping the Ecology of College-Going and Within-College Support for Students with Intellectual and other Disabilities:

### An Introduction to the Project

Although they improved in the past three decades, the rates of college admission, enrollment, and completion for students with disabilities are lower than for peers without disabilities (Kimball et al., 2016). Moreover, students with some disability types—notably intellectual disability—encounter challenges in college-going even greater than those experienced by peers with other disabilities (Grigal et al., 2011). Several explanations for these trends—ranging from differences in access to good admissions information to inadequate preparation to inaccessible learning environments—have been provided by past work, but research uniformly shows that more action is needed to address pressing equity gaps related to postsecondary success for students with disabilities.

To support these efforts, the Center for Student Success Research (CSSR) spent the past year investigating the college-going and within-college experiences of students with disabilities supported by a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative. The purpose of this work was to: *Support the transformation of public colleges and universities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to allow the full inclusion of people with disabilities (particularly intellectual disability) through the creation and dissemination of new knowledge about their postsecondary experiences.*

Our work in support this purpose consisted of five closely-related activities. First, we completed an in-depth review of available data and studies about college-going for students with disabilities in Massachusetts. We used this work to develop a context for our other activities as well as to create new estimates for the incidence of disability on college campuses. Second, we developed case studies and conducted interviews with students, faculty, and staff at public colleges and universities in Massachusetts. This work helped to produce insights about how students with disabilities navigated college admissions and enrollment processes as well as how their experiences varied across campuses. Third, we created a survey instrument that measured the way that students with and without disabilities thought about the accessibility of

their campuses. This survey development also helped us to refine the way that we created inclusive instruments for people with varied types of disabilities. Fourth, we analyzed Google search results related to disability and college-going in Massachusetts. These results helped to show that good information about college admission for students with many disability types is not widely available online. Finally, we found ways to share our findings via public presentations, webinars, and briefing papers like this one. These dissemination efforts are key to providing high-quality information about how students with disabilities experience the college-going process.

### Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative

The Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI) helps students with intellectual disability achieve their academic, career, and personal goals as a part of a college or university community. It does so through the creation of partnerships between colleges, universities, and local school districts that facilitate concurrent enrollment in secondary and postsecondary programs. At present, there are thirteen operational MAICEI programs, and efforts are underway to expand the program to additional public colleges and universities in Massachusetts.

**Key findings from a review of available data and studies.** Our review indicated that information sources calculated counts of students with disabilities in very different ways. Summarized in CSSR Briefing Paper 2019-102, our analysis shows that roughly twenty percent of college students have a disability that has been documented in a way that would entitle them to services at a college or university. However, far fewer students actually access those services and far more students report experiencing the college environment as disabling at some point during their studies.

**Key findings from case studies and interviews.** The college choice model most often used to describe the experiences of all students has three stages: predisposition, search, and choice. Our study found two additional stages, transition and enrollment, shaped the

experiences of students with disabilities. It also showed that information and support were key predictors of college-going for students with disabilities. Findings from this work are summarized in CSSR Briefing Paper 2019-103.

**Key findings from survey development.** Although our team included researchers with expertise in special education, school counseling, and higher education, we found the task of developing inclusive survey instruments quite difficult. In order to enable the full participation of students with intellectual disability, we developed a hybrid survey-interview instrument that could be taken: with or without support; with or without visual input; and with or without basic literacy. Although our actual survey data collection is still ongoing, the insights we gained from our instrument creation are summarized in CSSR Briefing Paper 2019-104. We also offer additional insights about designing disability-inclusive studies in CSSR Briefing Paper 2019-105.

**Key findings from analysis of Google search results.** Our analysis of search results for information that would support college-going for students with disabilities showed that information is often unavailable or misleading. Additionally, we found that information for some disability types was nearly entirely absent while other disability types had more robust information. Our findings from this activity are summarized in CSSR Briefing Paper 2019-106.

### Finding More Information from Mapping the Ecology of College-Going

Consistent with the goal of supporting the ongoing “transformation of public colleges and universities” in Massachusetts by sharing new information the experiences of students with disabilities—particularly intellectual disability—we have archived our public presentations, webinars, and briefing papers at [studentsuccessresearch.org](http://studentsuccessresearch.org). For additional information, please follow us on Twitter (@UMassCSSR).

### References

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