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How many students with disabilities are there? Measuring disability on college campuses

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Issue Brief: Disability in Higher Education

How Many Students with Disabilities are There?

Measuring Disability on College Campus

For many years, the Digest of Educational Statistics reported that about 11% of college students had disabilities in the United States. But since 2017, this publication has reported that nearly 20% of college students have disabilities. Additionally, if one looks to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) where colleges report institutional data, over 1000 of the approximately 1700 institutions participating report that 3% or less of their students are registered with disability services.

What's going on here? Why do estimates of college students with disabilities appear to be so inconsistent? What are the challenges in making such estimates? And what are the implications for institutions who are striving to serve students with disabilities?

This informational brief introduces ways that institutions attempt to gather data, to better understand, and to report about college students with disabilities. Ultimately, trying to come up with one definitive number of students with disabilities on a campus is impractical, and is not a recommended strategy. Instead, using multiple ways of understanding and representing disability is recommended, in order to provide more nuance and ultimately to better support students.

Disability Services Offices

When it comes to estimating the population of students with disabilities on a campus, many people presume they can just ask their local Office of Disability Services. That's a reasonable place to start, but as an understanding of the

population of students with disabilities on a campus, this measurement choice will simply miss many students. Among college students who had documented disabilities when they were in high school, only 35% disclosed their disability to their college campuses (Newman & Madaus, 2015). This is compounded by many students who did not understand themselves to have a disability prior to coming to college, who were diagnosed after high school, or who became disabled once in college.

Surveys

Given these limitations, many institutions attempt to gather their own data about disability, often in the form of a survey. While this approach seems simple, there are many ways to ask about disability, each of which has pros and cons. These measurements are grounded in different theories and assumptions about disability, which can lead to different conclusions to inform campus practices.

Medical approaches. Many campus personnel default to something simple like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which asks: "*Have you been diagnosed with any disability or impairment?*" If and only if students respond affirmatively, they are then asked to check the box of the type of disability. This approach to measuring disability won't catch anyone who hasn't been medically diagnosed or who doesn't consider their disability to be an impairment.

Functional Self-Assessment. An alternative to a medical model is a functional self-assessment, such as that used in the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates. This provides a set of scaled response options to the main question: "*What is the USUAL degree of difficulty you have with... Seeing, Hearing, Walking, Lifting, and 'Concentrating, Remembering or Making Decisions'?*" This technique is more nuanced and starts to get at the non-binary nature of disability. However, someone analyzing these data must then make a choice about where to draw the line for reporting. Should someone with a slight degree of difficulty be categorized as disabled? What about moderate? And who should be making these decisions in the first place?

Combined approach. The Center for Student Success Research created a survey instrument that measures disability in multiple ways, which is revealing about the pros and cons of different approaches. We asked college students three questions:

- "Do you think of yourself as a person with a disability?" Seven percent responded "yes," but

another 9% selected “unsure,” showing one reason why measuring disability is difficult.

- We then asked about impairments or medical conditions and provided a list of 11 categories, plus an “other” option. Forty-two percent (42%) of students checked at least one impairment or condition.
- We also provided a functional self-assessment similar to the NSF question. Over half (52%) of students checked “moderate” or “severe” difficulty in at least one category.

From these individual measures, we created the most inclusive definition possible, aggregating anyone who marked yes to the identity question, marked any impairment or condition, or who marked even slight difficulty on the functional assessment. The majority of students (80%) were in this broadest category, indicating students who might experience a disabling environment on campus at some point.

Summary

Measurement is tricky, and disability is complicated. So what should a campus do to estimate its population of

students with disabilities? *The best approach is to have multiple approaches.* Ask about disability in multiple ways and use those rich data to provide a nuanced portrait of students with disabilities. Why not report the proportion of students registered with disability services, as well as the percent who identify as having a disability, and also a range of students who may experience disability in key categories, such as student reporting mental health conditions? This complicates the simple answer people want when they ask how many students with disabilities are on campus. However, it is ultimately much more informative for designing services, policies, and programs at colleges that are serious about the success of all of their students, and particularly those with disabilities.

References

Newman, L. A., & Madaus, J. W. (2015). Reported accommodations and supports provided to secondary and postsecondary students with disabilities: National perspective. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 38(3), 173–181.

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