

# Students with Disabilities on the College Campus

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## Overview

Student affairs professionals will work with many disabled students throughout their careers, and it is imperative to become more aware of the student population as a whole. The general term disability means, “with respect to an individual, a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual, record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 16). However, this term can be broken up into two subgroups including learning disabilities (LD) and physical disabilities (PD). LD “refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the lifespan” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 65). PD refers to “orthopedic impairments include severe disabilities that adversely affect educational performance” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 16). Additionally, it is important to note how disabilities affect educational performance in higher education (see Figure 1). In 2000, 73% of high school graduates with disabilities enrolled in college, compared with 84% of their non-disabled peers (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 10). In the same year, only 12% of students with disabilities graduated with a four year degree (Randolph, 2012, p. 4). Undergraduate students reporting disabilities continue to rise in number, and with the return of deployed disabled veterans, the makeup of this student population will change dramatically (Randolph, 2010, p. 10).

## Laws

In order to fully understand the challenges and experiences that students with disabilities face in settings of higher education, one must have a basic understanding of the following laws regarding disabilities.

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** provides protection from discrimination for people with disabilities. Specifically, the federal government, recipients of federal financial assistance, and federal contractors cannot discriminate based on a qualified person’s disabilities (Rothstein, 1998, p. 297).

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990** extends law based on disability from federally funded programs as well as institutions to those funded by state and local governments (Hall & Belch, 2000, p. 6).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA)** began in 1975 and was created in order to provide eligible students with special education (Rothstein, 1998, p. 298).

As administrators, we must note that the laws governing secondary and postsecondary institutions differ, so when students transition to college, they may be unaware of those changes (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

## Diversity

Our American socialization affects the way we understand the racialized, ethnic, sexual, or gendered mind. The intersection of identity further complicates our understanding of disabled students in college. For example, society desexualizes disabled students and simultaneously hypersexualizes LGBT students, likely forcing an LGBT, disabled student to choose between communities. The combination of these identities can further isolate a student (Harley et al., 2002), despite them possibly needing friends to help bolster this emotional weight.

Schools may limit the success of misdiagnosed students, while failing to meet the needs of undiagnosed students. Doctors are more likely to diagnose students with English as a second language, racial minorities, and students from a low socioeconomic background with an LD (Shifrer et al., 2011, p. 246). The meaning and utility of the term “disability” varies in every country and culture, possibly creating confusion for international students who may not self-identify for campus disability services (Korbel, Lucia, Wenzel, & Anderson, 2011, p. 20).

Similarly, the incidence rate of disability varied based on race and ethnicity. “Asians reported the lowest incidence of disability at 4%, while American Indian and Alaska Natives reported the highest rates at 20%” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 30). These statistics can reveal what American diagnosticians value most in brain and bodily function. Wolanin and

Steele (2004) provide another example, finding that “female students reported some type of mental illness at significantly higher rates than males (21% versus 11%)” (p. 30). The addition of some historically marginalized identity increases the likelihood of being diagnosed with a learning disability, mental illness, and/or abnormality.

Students with multiple or severely debilitating disabilities often find more challenge in college and may need more resources or support. Students with comorbid LD/ADHD are more likely than students with or without an LD alone to have lower grades, more negative temperament characteristics, a weaker parental bond, and to have been directly and/or indirectly victimized by fellow students (McNamara et al., 2005, pp. 234-241). Students with severe disabilities need, but have difficulty finding reliable and trained full-time personal assistance. Without 24/7/365 assistance, these students cannot reasonably complete postsecondary school in four years, disadvantaging students who could otherwise complete the academic programs (Stumbo et al., 2009, pp. 11-12). Students with severe disabilities may need family or professional assistance to complete daily tasks, whose presence will increase the likelihood of social isolation (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005, p. 431). Without assistance, disabled students may leave college due to isolation and/or a lack of resources. Holding another marginalized identity only makes this journey more challenging.

Figure 2.  
Among 1999-2000 undergraduates who reported a disability or difficulty (9 percent of all), the percentage distribution by the main limiting condition  
Source: Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 11.

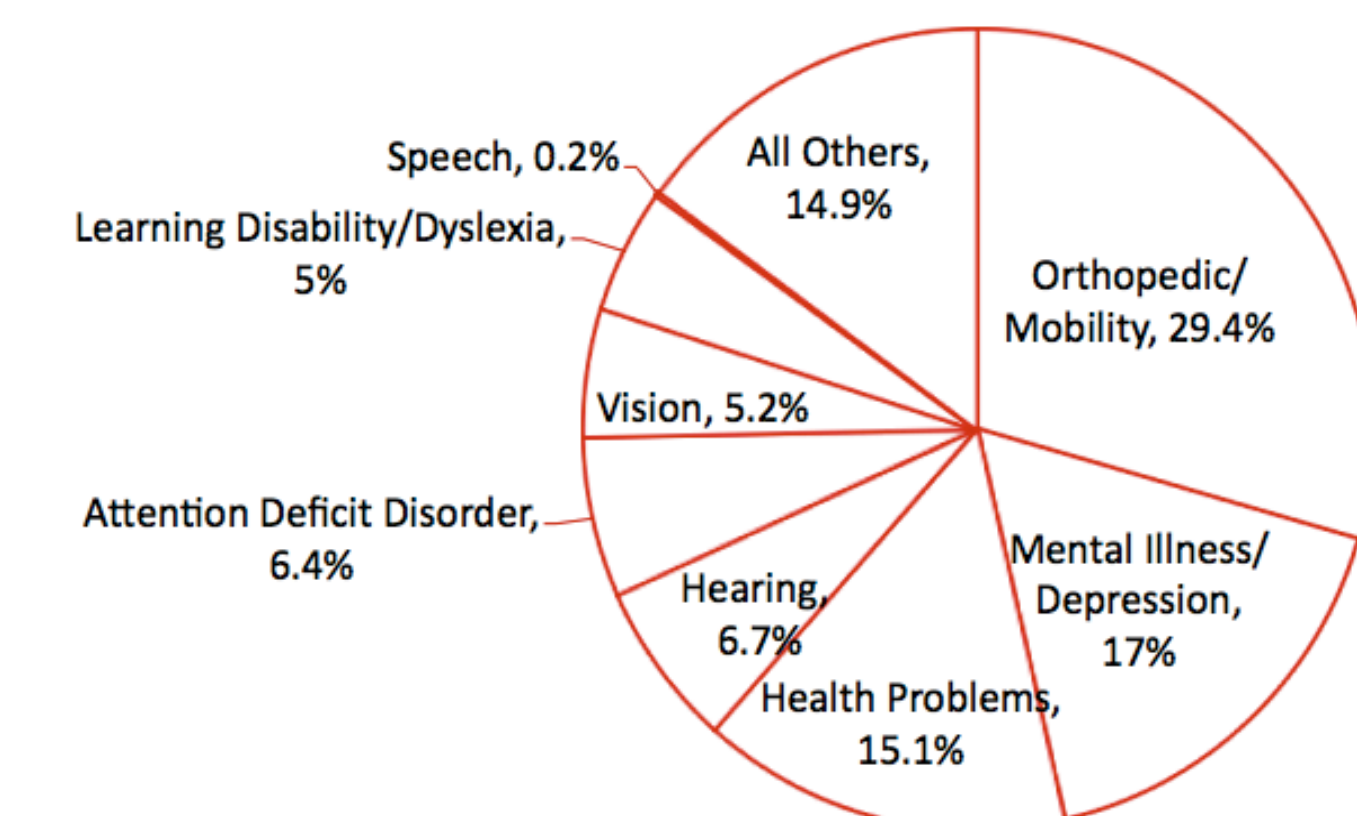
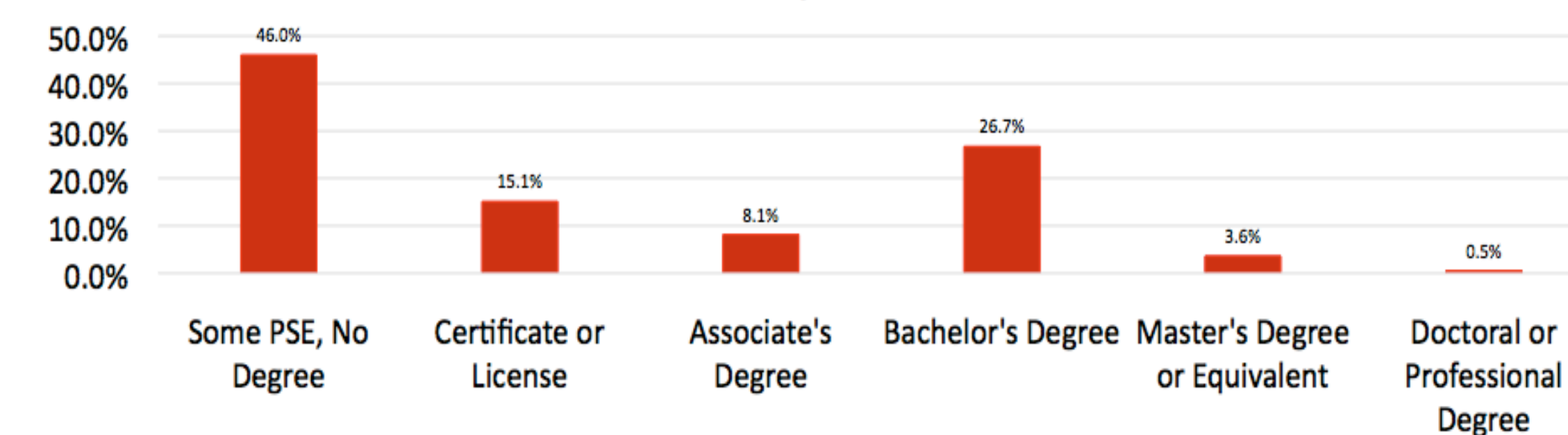


Figure 1.  
Percentage distribution of 1988 disabled eighth graders who completed high school according to highest postsecondary education degree attained as of 2000.  
Source: Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 9.



Above: Figure 1 shows surprising results regarding students with disabilities and the percentage of students who obtain degrees at postsecondary institutions (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 9).

Above left: Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of disability or difficult of undergraduate students between 1999 and 2000 (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 11).

## Experiences and Challenges

Students with disabilities often struggle to find their place on the traditional college campus. For example, "during examinations, the students with LD had difficulty concentrating and were concerned about lack of time. They experienced stress, were nervous, and felt more frustrated, helpless, or uncertain during examinations than students without LD" (Heiman & Preceel, 2003, p. 248). These students have poor retention and degree completion rates not only because they comprehend material differently, but also because of faculty fear and disengagement. Many college faculty doubt their skills to teach students with hidden and mysterious disabilities and may avoid working with them, preventing these students from getting assistance in class. LD students are more likely to have lasting emotional scarring related to learning differently (Orr & Goodman, 2010, p. 213) and may not seek help in time to benefit from it.

Having an LD on campus can marginalize a student, leaving them alone or without the proper guidance to achieve success. When students begin their freshman year in college, they have to contact the Office for Students with Disabilities to notify them of their disability. This also would entail that the student present documentation as well as suggested accommodations that would make their transition to college easier. This self-identification may be difficult for students who are newly coming to terms with their disability (Hadley, 2011, p. 77). Students with an LD must often fend for themselves to find useful resources while also finding friends. Despite participating in more activities than people with PD, people with LD had fewer social support structures and few non-disabled friends (Lippold & Burns, 2009). This loose social support system can lead to depression, loneliness, and frustration, which only adds to the stress of the college experience. Compared to non-LD peers, adolescents with LDs engaged more frequently in some risk-taking behaviors including smoking, marijuana use, acts of delinquency, acts of aggression, and gambling" (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010, p. 11).

Along with the difficulty of social marginalization, students who have mobility challenges may have difficulty getting around some campuses. They could come across unsupportive attitudes toward changing the landscape of the campus (Hall & Belch, 2000, p. 12), adding to the stress students with disabilities may already face. These people may not support the social, educational, or emotional health of students with disabilities and may fail to accommodate their needs through housing or the education process.

Finally, physically disabled and/or ill students are more likely to have sexual problems than their healthy counterparts. These problems may be directly associated with their "disease or its treatment, or indirectly by adjustment problems, resulting in lower levels of sexual esteem, sexual satisfaction, mutual sexual activity, and higher levels of sexual depression" (Kedde et al., 2012, p. 64). Nonetheless, there are many challenges that a disabled student can face on campus and a weak social network can make these challenges even greater.

## Implications

After being informed about the challenges and experiences disabled students face in higher education, it is critical to take the research and apply it. If you are interested in knowing more, “Educators can learn more about specific disabilities of students and disability-related accommodations through online information, health services, and disability services” (Hadley, 2011, p. 80). As an administrator, encourage the concept of centers or student organizations for students with disabilities to provide a wider range of support (Hadley, 2011, p. 80). Additionally, students with LD are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as marijuana use, smoking, and acts of delinquency, so support those students and look for signs of misconduct (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010, p. 11). As administrators, note that before applying for colleges, prospective students with disabilities should know the services available to them at the colleges they are looking at (Hadley, 2011, p. 79). Overall, administrators and faculty should come together in order to use developmental theory as a beginning step to improving services and understanding for incoming students with disabilities (Hadley, 2011, p. 80).

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