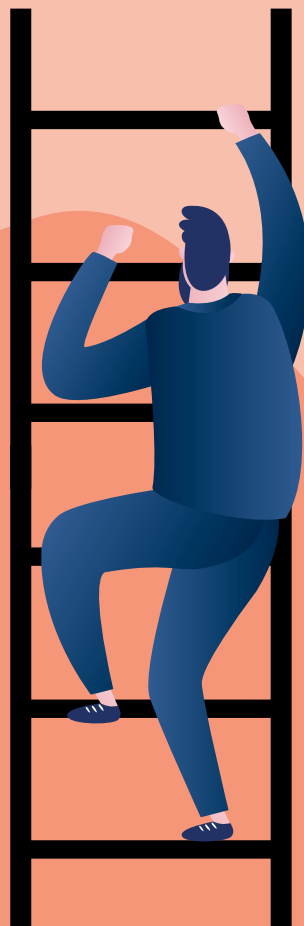
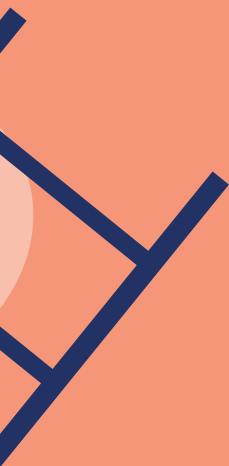


DISABLED AND DETERMINED

By Eric Endlich
and Rachel Williams Sincore





For years, the population of students with disabilities at U.S. colleges and universities has increased steadily, spurring institutions to grow their support systems to help these students to and through college. However, recent federal policy changes have experts worried that progress may be under threat.

As Annie Tulkin reads the news about continuous cuts to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility support in higher education, she worries about a particularly vulnerable population of students — those with disabilities.

Tulkin, the CEO and founder of Accessible College and a NACAC member, is connecting the dots: Attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility may mean fewer disability-related programs and cuts to disability support offices. Further, she worries that the gutting of the Office of Civil Rights by the Trump administration last year, which severely reduced the federal staff that investigates cases of discrimination against students with disabilities, means cases may be delayed, or worse, never investigated at all.

“Students with disabilities are feeling concerned about their ability to receive accommodations and be included on campus,” said Tulkin. “With funding and resources being cut, will students receive the same support?...Professionals are being asked to do more with less, and that means that students will fall through the cracks.”

The number of students affected is at an all-time high. Around 21 percent of U.S. undergraduate

As federal policy shifts and DEI-related supports decline, students with disabilities face growing uncertainty around access to accommodations, resources, and equitable college experiences.

students have disclosed a disability, according to 2023 data from the U.S. Department of Education, compared to 6 percent of all undergraduates in 1995-96. This growth is most notably due to higher rates of diagnosed mental health challenges and attention deficit disorders. Other common disabilities reported on college campuses include learning disabilities, autism, blindness or low-vision, and cognitive disabilities, according to the Department of Education.

“With recent shifts in federal education policy, we may see a decline in available support for students with disabilities in K-12 settings — potentially impacting

not only their academic preparation but also their confidence and motivation to pursue higher education,” said Julie Loppacher, founder and executive director of Rising Tide Educators. “This is definitely a time where we will continue to see shifts in the landscape that impact these students more so than their non-disabled or neurotypical classmates.”

WHAT’S AT STAKE

A Class of 2025 New England high school graduate recently had a triumphant college admission season, being admitted to every college she applied to as a theater major. The student, however, who had a



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Emily Raclaw

Director, On Your Marq Neurodiversity Support Program
Marquette University (WI)

3.0 GPA, had a learning difference: a neurobiological variation in how she processed information that impacted her focus. To her advantage, her learning difference didn't stand in her way; each of the institutions she applied to has a test-optional policy, meaning she did not have to take a standardized test as part of the application process.

"The move away from standardized testing has removed a significant barrier for many disabled students," said Emily Raclaw, director of the On Your Marq Neurodiversity Support Program at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Yet the test-optional admission policy — which gained a strong foothold due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is used by about 2,000 institutions — may be under threat as the Trump administration works to require merit-based admission across U.S. higher education. In October 2025, the Trump administration issued a [Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education](#) that outlines a list of requirements, including that "Institutions shall have all undergraduate applicants take a widely-used standardized test (i.e. SAT, ACT, or CLT) or program-specific measures of accomplishment in the case of music, art, and other specialized programs of study."

While the American Association

of Colleges and Universities, as well as many individual institutions, rejected the compact, the long-term impact and any additional efforts by the administration to require standardized testing remains to be seen.

Another hallmark of the Trump administration has been the rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, which may impact the college experience and sense of belonging for students with disabilities.

"For disabled students and staff who are also BIPOC, LGBTQ+, first-gen, or low-income, the barriers aren't just layered, they're compounded. At many institutions, navigating admissions can be especially difficult when you're also trying to figure out when and how to disclose, and if you'll be safe, understood, or even welcomed," said Raclaw. "Many students don't know what questions to ask during the admissions process because they've never had access to systems that affirmed or supported their full identities. That lack of exposure means they may not realize what information they need to make informed choices."

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR
ADMISSION PROFESSIONALS**

When students with disabilities graduate from K-12 education and transition to postsecondary education, they experience more than just

academic transitions. They also experience legal transitions.

In K-12, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education that's tailored to their unique needs. Once students transition to college, they are legally protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires a greater level of self-disclosure and self-advocacy to obtain reasonable accommodations for equal access. Disclosure of a disability is voluntary in the college admission process, according to the Learning Disabilities Association of America, as asking applicants to disclose a disability on an admission application generally is prohibited by law.

This presents an opportunity for admission professionals to proactively share what resources they have for these students, and how they can go about obtaining their accommodations.

"It can be very hard to find that information, as every college houses it in a different place so it kind of forces people to have to do a significant amount of investigation," said Alexander Morris-Wood, head of school at Franklin Academy in Connecticut and co-leader of the NACAC Disabilities and Neurodiversity Special Interest Group. "And then

once they're on the website, is the information digestible for the average person?"

Morris-Wood said institutions need to consider their audience when promoting their disability services information.

"Oftentimes, there's an assumption that families have an understanding of this new process, of transitioning from IDEA to ADA, where they have not had to positively prove over quite some time the need for accommodations," he said. "From the student perspective, if they have not led the discussion in high school around their accommodations, expecting them to understand how to submit psychoeducational evaluations, or understanding different words and terminologies, can be pretty big."

Admission officers and institutions also have an opportunity to consider a more holistic approach to admission — oftentimes a boon for students with disabilities.

At the University of Michigan, for example, the Stephen M. Ross School of Business asks prospective students to submit a two-part portfolio as part of the admission process. In it, students submit a business case discussion where they identify a current, real-world

With more students disclosing disabilities than ever, colleges are being challenged to rethink admissions, communication, and support systems to ensure these students succeed.

issue and propose a solution. They also submit an artifact — a project, website, video, or other multimedia asset they created, for example — and describe how it represents their learning in action.

"The work we do with holistic admissions, specifically the portfolio, allows students to submit an artifact that represents their learning from their own point of view. It is open-ended so that the applicant can choose what to submit and how to showcase their learning," said Blaire Moody Rideout, director of undergraduate admissions at the Ross School of Business. "Anecdotally, we see students sharing stories of how their learning was changed or challenged due to a learning difference. The artifact reflection then captures

how the student has grown and adapted to be successful."

"Ask whether every applicant has a meaningful opportunity to showcase their full range of strengths and potential contributions to your institution. Commit to holistic review practices that truly consider the diverse ways students demonstrate promise, even if those strengths fall outside traditional measures like test scores and GPAs," said Loppacher of Rising Tide Educators. "Stay open to the reality that brilliance and potential don't always show up in standardized ways. Many inspired and capable students — especially those with learning differences — bring unique assets that can enrich your campus community."



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