

Supporting Deaf College Students: Perspectives From Disability Services Professionals

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National Deaf Center
on Postsecondary Outcomes

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The National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC) is a technical assistance and dissemination center supported by a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. Our mission is to share information, networks, and strategies to improve continuing education and training for deaf people.

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Introduction

This report summarizes findings from a national survey of disability services professionals about services that were provided to deaf college students on their campus. Data was collected between 2018 and 2020. Findings provide an overview of different approaches to campus policies and practices. These findings also reveal that disability services professionals and deaf students often have different perspectives about the experience of being a deaf student on a college campus.

Currently, more than 200,000 deaf students are enrolled in college (Garberoglio et al., 2019), and **over the past 10 years more deaf people have obtained a bachelor's degree than ever before** (Garberoglio et al., 2021). Deaf students are racially and ethnically diverse, often have additional disabilities, and can be veterans or first-generation college students (Garberoglio et al., 2019). Additionally, they identify and communicate in myriad ways. Though some students attend postsecondary programs that are designed for deaf students, **the vast majority are enrolled at colleges alongside their hearing peers.**

Federal laws protect disabled students from discrimination and guide institutions in promoting accessible environments on campus. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) require both

public and private institutions to make all programs accessible to deaf students. Disability services professionals ensure institutions meet this obligation by providing accommodations and appropriate modifications on a case-by-case basis (Duncan & Ali, 2011).

A previous report provided a comprehensive overview of deaf student experiences and perceptions (Palmer et al., 2020). Overall, students indicated that constantly

advocating for accommodations and feeling socially isolated was exhausting (even before the coronavirus pandemic). One student shared, "There has been no institutional interest in learning how to become more deaf friendly. The attitude is one of begrudging tolerance at best." The goal of this report is to share perspectives from disability services professionals at postsecondary institutions across the nation about services for deaf students, and to suggest areas of improvement.

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In this report, the term "deaf" is used in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many people, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, "deaf," with the goal of recognizing the shared experiences of people from diverse deaf communities while also honoring their differences.

Who Completed This Survey?

A total of 87 disability services professionals completed this survey from various colleges, universities, and training programs across the nation.

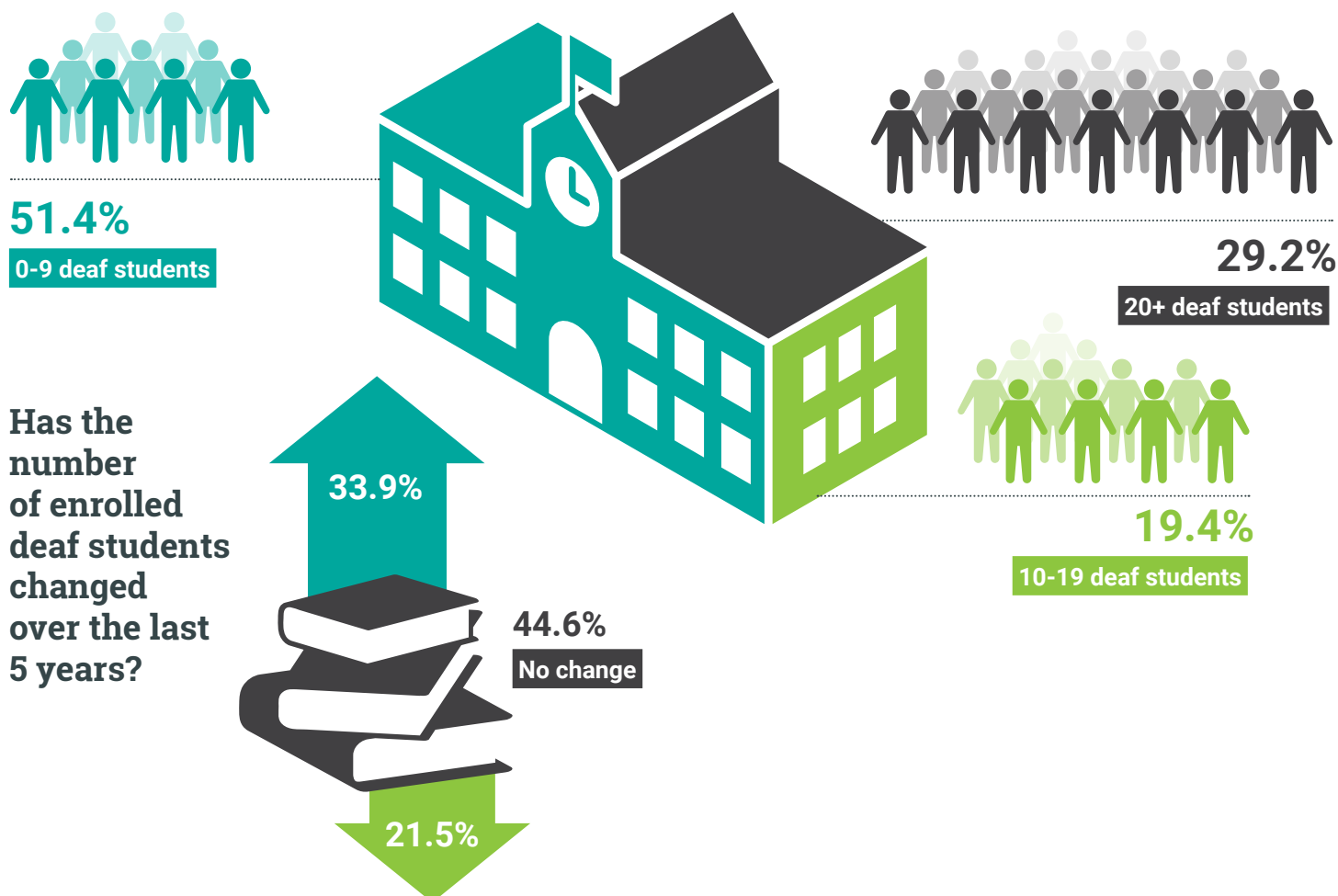
Most institutions stated they had fewer than nine deaf students. This aligns with national trends—colleges are most likely to have only one deaf student, or a few at most, enrolled at one time (Lang, 2002).

Most disability services professionals reported that enrollment had not changed on their campus over the last 5 years, and only 34% believed that their campus had increased enrollment of deaf students. Some respondents believed that low enrollment rates were related to the lack of

administrative support, with one saying, “The new director is not supportive of deaf students.” Respondents noted that the input of deaf faculty and staff—in particular, deaf staff who work for the disability services office—was routinely ignored or dismissed. One respondent shared how administrators are “surprised that there is a deaf faculty member,” **revealing underlying low expectations of deaf people.**

In some cases, respondents felt that the type of deaf college students had changed over time—sharing that there had been an increase in deaf students who do not sign and those who had “limited or ineffective accommodations in high school.”

How many deaf people does your institution serve?

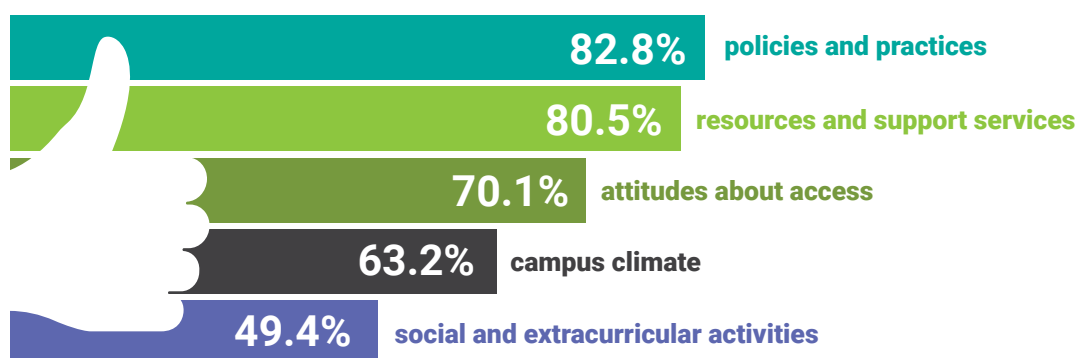


General Assessment of Campus Access for Deaf Students

Disability services professionals answered questions related to campus policies, practices, resources, support services, attitudes, campus climate, social engagement, and extracurricular activities. They were more confident about activities directly related to their day-to-day work (e.g., policies, practices, resources, support) than activities dependent on the wider campus

community (e.g., campus climate, attitudes, social engagement, extracurricular activities). This aligns with other studies demonstrating that professionals who work in disability services often express frustration with limited campuswide efforts related to inclusion of deaf students (Kinast, 2021).

Experiences for deaf students rated as good or very good



Professionals' self-assessment of services and supports for deaf students did not always align with students' perspectives and experiences. For example, while 91% of disability services professionals stated that it is likely they will respond to deaf students in a timely manner, fewer deaf students (72%) agreed with that statement. In general, disability services professionals were likely to select more optimistic responses than deaf students when asked similar questions.

Disability services professionals respond to deaf students in a timely manner

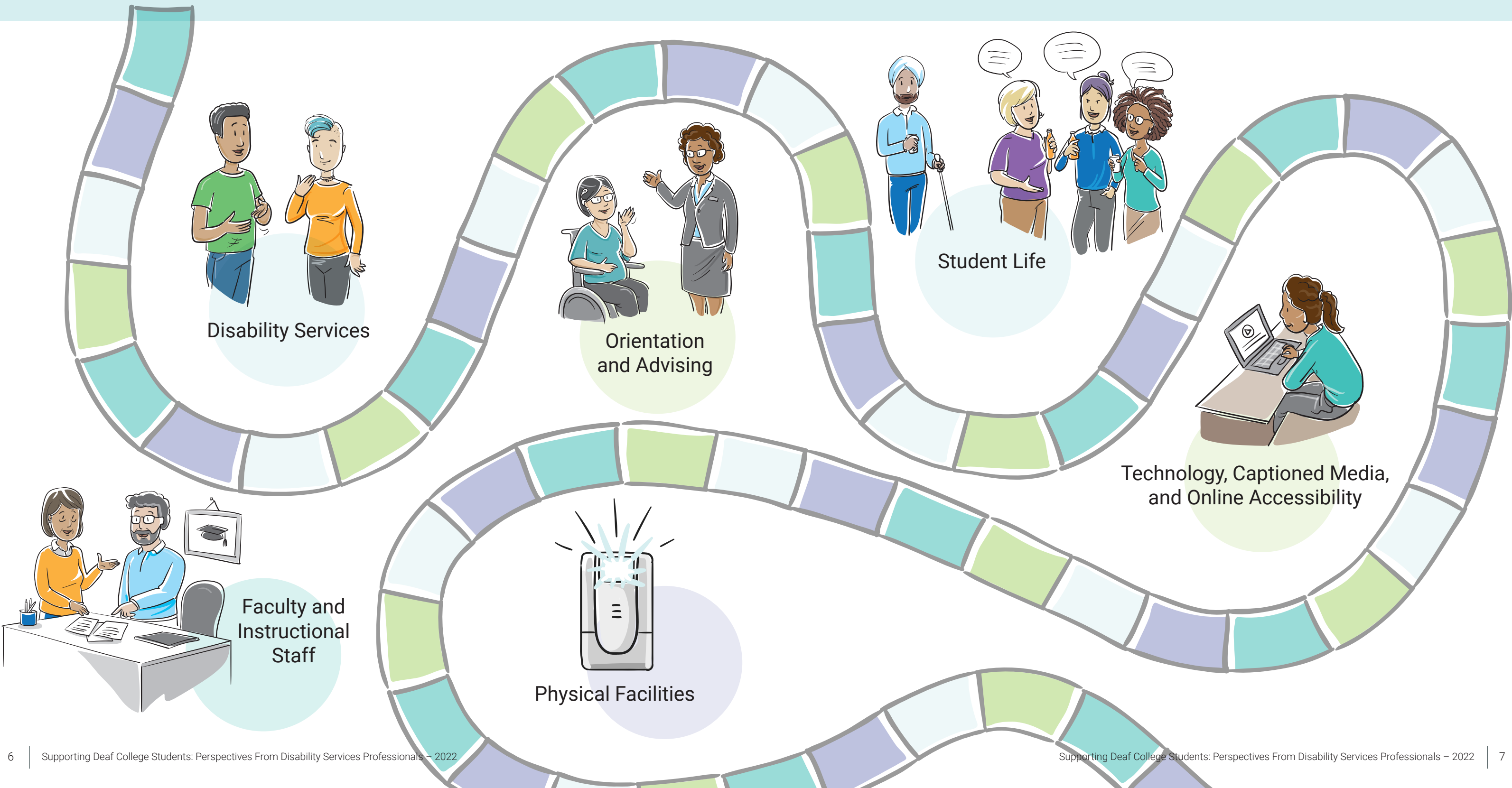


Access Is Broader Than Accommodations

One of the primary responsibilities of disability services offices is ensuring accommodations are consistently available to disabled students. However, providing accommodations to deaf students so that they can access auditory information in the classroom—though necessary—does not ensure that deaf students have access to the full college experience. Access involves multiple dimensions—attitudes, campus technology, communications, environmental factors, services, and social engagement (Cawthon et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2020). Thus, this report will share findings related not only

to the provision of accommodations but also attitudes, policies, and practices that are applicable to the campus experience as a whole.

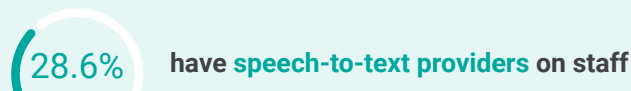
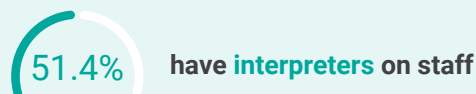
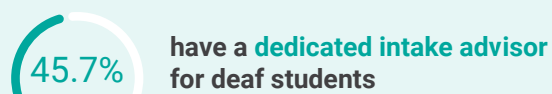
Though disability services professionals are not solely responsible for creating a welcoming campus climate or implementing campuswide policies and practices, they often play **an important role in facilitating access for deaf and disabled students**. Their perspectives can enrich understanding of barriers on campus that deaf students may experience and help identify areas of needed improvement.



Disability Services

Deaf students benefit from working with staff and access providers who are qualified, familiar with deafness, and consistently available (Cawthon et al., 2013). Disability services offices vary widely in their staffing structure—though all offices coordinate access service providers like interpreters and speech-to-text captionists, fewer have dedicated coordinators or advisors who work with deaf students.

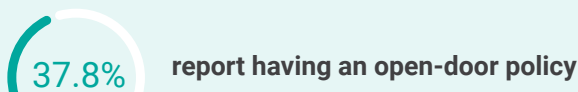
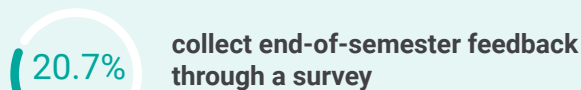
A student shared that the most difficult thing about being a deaf student was getting access to “interpreters who are qualified and available when I need services.” Most institutions relied on contractors for service provision—fewer had dedicated staff who worked with deaf students.



Deaf students must be involved in the process of determining whether accommodations and supports are a good fit for them (Department of Justice, 1993; Santa Ana Resolution



Agreement, 2012). This discussion typically happens before each semester to create an accommodations plan for the student’s scheduled classes. Some institutions reported having an open-door policy to receive ongoing feedback from students, and fewer reported collecting feedback from deaf students about their accommodations and service providers via a survey at the end of each semester.



Orientation and Advising

Acclimating deaf students to campus culture and practices can help with the transition to a new campus environment. Robust onboarding approaches, including orientation events, can be used to share information about campus services, policies, and practices. Though disability services offices may be most likely to host orientation events for disabled students, this can also be a campuswide effort.

Some disability services offices participated in campuswide orientations by having a dedicated table or session time. Very few institutions hosted an orientation event that was specifically designed for deaf students.

13.9% **host a face-to-face orientation specifically for deaf students**

2.8% **have an online orientation specifically for deaf students**

16.7% **host a meet-and-greet for deaf students and service providers**



Academic advising is also an integral part of orienting deaf students to the expectations of their program. Deaf students benefit from working with academic advisors who are familiar with the support that deaf students need and the challenges that they may face (Powell et al., 2014). A small number of institutions (20.3%) reported having a dedicated academic advisor for deaf students available on campus.

Only **20.3%** of institutions have a dedicated academic advisor for deaf students available on campus.

Faculty and Instructional Staff

In addition to classroom accommodations, many other instructional modifications can meet a range of student needs. For instance, faculty and instructional staff can implement flexible attendance policies and inclusive classroom management strategies like turn-taking protocols.

Most disability services professionals (77%) believed that faculty are likely to work with the disability services office to solve access challenges, while slightly fewer deaf students (69%) reported that faculty were willing to help with solving accessibility issues inside and outside of the classroom.

Faculty may need additional guidance in understanding how they can implement specific practices like sharing classroom materials ahead of time and giving students additional time to process information in class. Only 34% of disability services professionals believed that faculty give deaf students enough time to process information in class. While 74% of disability services professionals felt it was likely that faculty supplemented lectures with slides, only 48% believed faculty shared slides with deaf students ahead of time. This mirrors what deaf students reported; 48% of students

stated it was likely that professors share class materials ahead of time. One deaf student reported frustration with the timing of materials sharing: "Slides are never given out in class but are online for access outside of class."

Only 66% of deaf students felt welcome engaging in conversations with faculty. One student mentioned: "It's a constant battle to explain myself... [faculty] need to slow down; they have to write certain things down that I'm having trouble lip reading."



Only 66% of deaf students felt welcome engaging in conversations with faculty.

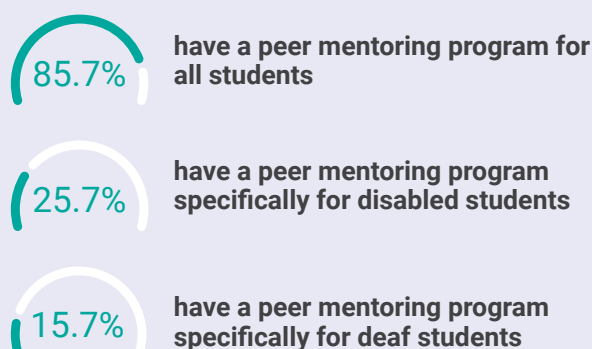
Student Life

Feeling connected to the campus community is an important predictor of success in college but may not always happen for deaf students. A deaf college student shared that “Loneliness is probably the most challenging thing.” Only 29% of disability services professionals believed that deaf students had access to supportive deaf peers.

Only 40% of disability services professionals believed that deaf students are likely to participate in campus activities outside the classroom. Though campus activities are a pivotal part of the college experience, a deaf student explained, “I do not get to participate in as many campus activities, especially groups, because services are not easy to come by.” Disability services professionals stated that they would provide accommodations for these activities to varying extents:



Peer mentoring has been shown to improve retention and promote college success (Bowden, 2014; Collier, 2017). A majority of the institutions surveyed had formal peer mentoring programs for all students, but fewer had programs specifically for disabled students or deaf students.



A deaf college student shared that **loneliness is probably the most challenging thing.**



Technology, Captioned Media, and Online Accessibility

Communication and information technology is steadily becoming a key part of the campus experience, particularly for deaf college students who also rely on technology for accessibility purposes. Survey results indicate that few institutions are investing in technologies that support deaf students, despite millions of dollars spent in infrastructure upgrades and improvements nationwide.

46.7% have portable assistive listening devices available for classroom use

25.2% provide laptops or tablets for students who request speech-to-text services

Though many students took classes online before the pandemic, not all deaf students (65%) felt that their classes were accessible. A deaf student who takes online courses lamented frequent technical difficulties: “Either the class starts off without access, or my services cut out in the middle of a webinar and I feel awkward that everyone has to wait on me or that I slow everyone down.” As a reminder, these data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, deaf students have continued to share challenges with access to online courses ([National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, 2020](#)).

As classroom instruction increasingly integrates video content, it is important to ensure that all videos are accessible. Disability services professionals explained that faculty are actively encouraged to use existing captioned media or caption any content they create. Many institutions offer additional support in different ways, such as:

30.0% offer services for captioning media

31.4% use a designated department outside of disability services for captioning media

41.4% hire an external third-party vendor for captioning media

21.4% have a caption policy for videos in public spaces

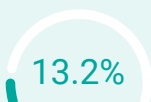


Physical Facilities

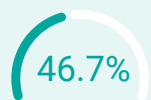
Physical spaces need to be designed with accessibility in mind to ensure that deaf students have full access to the campus experience. Examples include emergency alerts, acoustics, doorbells, and public phones. Only 56% of deaf students reported that safety and emergency announcements were accessible to them.



have public videophones available for student use

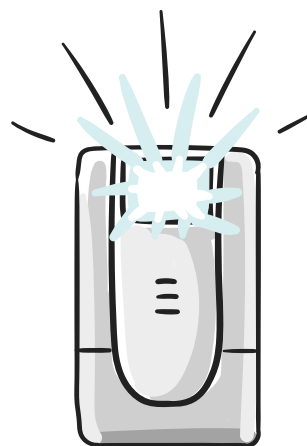


have portable visual and other non-auditory based alarms or doorbells for use in residence halls



have installed assistive listening systems in larger gathering spaces such as auditoriums

Forty-seven percent of disability services professionals felt that classrooms were not free of excess distracting noises such as loud fans or poor acoustics, which is important for students who use assistive listening devices



or rely on their hearing to access classroom lectures. A deaf student who uses hearing aids reported: “There are only so many times I have the confidence to keep asking the professor to repeat certain things before it gets annoying to them.”

Only 56% of deaf students reported that safety and emergency announcements were accessible to them.

Recommendations for Improvement

Survey results suggest areas of needed improvement that align with best practices in the field. These recommendations require a commitment from the whole campus, not only the disability services office. Efforts must be coordinated across departments. For example, increased coordination between academic advising and disability services offices may be necessary in situations where there is not a dedicated academic advisor for deaf students (Johnson & Fann, 2016).

ONE STUDENT REFLECTED:

“It was a challenge to educate faculty members, classmates, and staff about my needs. It was a long process to get where I needed to be; it took about 3 semesters to figure out how to stand up for my needs.”

Recruit and retain qualified professionals and provide professional development.

Students report that having to continuously educate faculty and staff is exhausting and distracts from academic endeavors. Qualified professionals who have experience working with deaf students, particularly those who are also deaf themselves, are few and far between. Institutions should be prepared to recruit widely and implement strategic retention efforts to reduce turnover. However, in many situations it may not be feasible to hire personnel with specific expertise in working with deaf students. This is why providing consistent professional development to staff and faculty across campus is crucial. Institutions need to seek opportunities to embed information about supporting deaf students in their campuswide professional development offerings or consider using online resources like free **online courses from NDC**. The goal is to distribute knowledge across campus, so the responsibility for supporting deaf students does not fall on only the disability services office.



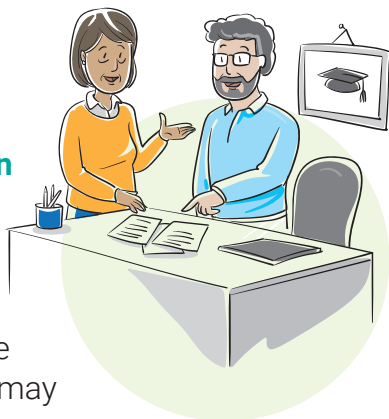
Consider creative solutions to provide dedicated support for deaf students.

It is clear that many institutions are unable to provide robust and dedicated services (e.g., academic advisors, access service providers, peer mentoring programs, orientations) that are designed specifically for deaf students—particularly colleges with few deaf students enrolled at the same time. In those situations, institutions need to seek out creative approaches to ensuring that programs and services will benefit deaf students. For example, institutions may want to seek services and resources for deaf people in the broader community that can be tapped into, develop cross-campus collaborations with other postsecondary institutions in their area, or identify online resources that can be used to provide specialized support or services for deaf students.



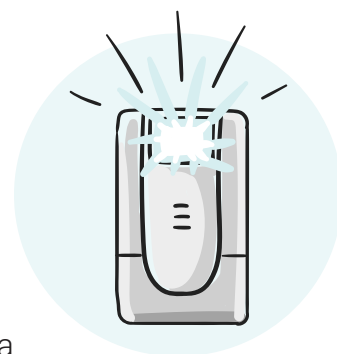
Improve communication pathways with deaf students.

Many deaf students use accommodations for the first time in college and may need opportunities to learn more about the full range of accommodations available. Sharing this information is an integral part of providing access on campus (**Association of Higher Education and Disability, 2021**; Cawthon et al., 2013). This can be achieved through hosting orientation events, or using online resources like NDC's **Accommodations 101**. It is also important to build systems for getting ongoing feedback from deaf students about their accommodations and services—their needs can change over time and across contexts. Disability services offices should not be the only ones checking in with deaf students about their accommodations; faculty, advisors, and campus staff should also foster a practice of asking questions and listening to deaf students.



Ensure that deaf students have full access to campus life.

A sense of belonging is a key element of the campus experience—deaf students need opportunities for developing relationships and connections across campus. Campus life and student activities must be consistently accessible to deaf students—accommodations should always be provided, at a minimum. Ensuring accessibility for all aspects of campus life requires a campuswide commitment that should include discussions about centralized funding and shared policies surrounding access. It is also beneficial to identify opportunities for deaf students to connect with each other—where they can share tips, resources, and strategies that are unique to their experiences as a deaf student on campus. This can be achieved during meet-and-greet sessions hosted by the disability services office or by peer mentoring.



Make a campuswide commitment to accessible technologies.

Coordinated campus efforts are necessary to ensure accessibility for deaf students when using virtual platforms and communication technologies. Be on the lookout for emerging technologies and trends in the field and engage early and often with the campus information technology office to make sure their staff are considering deaf students when purchasing new software and equipment. Clarity on policies, procedures, and practices for using technology and adding captions to media will help students, staff, and faculty make their content accessible. These efforts contribute to a culture of access and inclusion on campus.



Conclusion

Deaf students pursue postsecondary education and training at a comparable rate to their hearing peers. Yet they are unable to maximize their experience because institutions are not prepared to provide equitable access to the full range of programs and services available. The extent to which students are able to get started, stay on track, and successfully complete college can be attributed to a combination of institutional and individual readiness (Cawthon et al., 2013). Many institutions are narrowly focused on meeting their legal responsibilities for providing accommodations but miss many opportunities to maximize student experiences.

Disability services offices are often the gatekeepers of engagement for deaf students. Decisions made in this office, and by campus administrators, can create barriers or open doors on campus. Though there is an ever-growing network of disability services staff who are working hard to improve accessibility on campus for deaf students, inexperienced staff may make decisions about accommodations without a consideration of the individual needs of deaf students across contexts. This is problematic because what works for one deaf student does not necessarily work for all deaf students. Flexibility in both policy and practice is essential. The diverse experiences of deaf students require disability services professionals to have sufficient knowledge and training to efficiently implement access services that are adaptive and flexible.

Take action

Get customized support from NDC:
nationaldeafcenter.org/ask

Take NDC's online courses:
nationaldeafcenter.org/learn

Join our listserv to connect
with colleagues:
nationaldeafcenter.org/signup



Institutions can use the information in this report to design accessible and equitable opportunities for deaf students and to foster an inclusive setting for all students to thrive. Access is more than an accommodation or an afterthought; it's a multidimensional framework that is woven throughout an institution. Access manifests in the actions, attitudes, and behaviors of leadership, faculty members, staff members, and students on campus. Planning for access throughout all dimensions of the campus experience is instrumental in ensuring that deaf students feel like they are part of a campus community.

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