



College Enrollment and Completion among High School Graduates with a Disability in Texas

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Executive Summary

In response to concerns raised by Texas higher education stakeholders about the limited information available on students with a disability who are attending college in the state, this study examined college enrollment and completion among Texas public high school graduates by disability status, student demographic characteristics, and primary disability type. Across four statewide cohorts of high school graduates (2006/07 through 2009/10), 31 percent of graduates with a designated disability in grade 12 enrolled in a Texas college within two years of graduation. Of those, 90 percent initially enrolled in a public two-year college. Enrollment in four-year colleges was substantially lower for high school graduates with a disability than for graduates without a disability. Among high school graduates with a disability who initially enrolled in a two-year college, 17 percent attained a credential (certificate or associate degree) or transferred to a four-year college within four years of enrollment. Among high school graduates with a disability who initially enrolled a four-year college or a two-year college with the intention of attaining a four-year degree, 16 percent attained a baccalaureate degree within seven years of enrollment. Attainment of an associate degree or especially of a baccalaureate degree was substantially lower for high school graduates with a disability than for graduates without a disability. College enrollment and degree attainment among high school graduates with a disability were substantially lower for graduates who had been eligible for the national school lunch program in high school than for graduates who had not been eligible; lower for Hispanic graduates than for White graduates; and higher for graduates with auditory, speech, visual, orthopedic, and other health impairments than for graduates with other types of disability.

What We Studied

This study responds to concerns raised by Texas higher education administrators and policymakers about the limited information available on students with a disability who are attending college in the state and how to appropriately serve them. Most Texas colleges have an office to support students with a disability and provide services and accommodations. Students almost always must self-report their disability to their college to receive services or accommodations, but many do not. For example, 72 percent of postsecondary students in a nationally representative survey sample who had a designated disability during high school did not report a disability at their college (Newman et al., 2011). To protect student privacy, K–12 agencies rarely report information about disability status to colleges.

The limited available research suggests that students with a disability are less likely to enroll in and complete college than students without a disability (Newman et al., 2011). However, this research draws primarily on surveys with voluntary responses and often with a small sample size (Affleck et al., 1990; Karpinski et al., 1992; Leake, 2015; Murray et al., 2000; Newman et al., 2011; Rabren et al., 2002). This lack of comprehensive data creates uncertainties for college leaders about the pipeline of students with a disability from high school graduation to college completion and the extent to which their college serves students with different types of disability.

This study offers new evidence to inform policies and research about how to serve students with a disability in postsecondary education. The rich secondary and postsecondary student-level data stored at the Texas Education Research Center enabled the study team to examine the postsecondary transitions and outcomes of high school graduates with a disability and to expand the limited research on those topics using a statewide study population. The findings can help secondary and postsecondary educators and administrators identify where students with different types of disability and different demographic characteristics might need additional support in the pipeline between high school graduation and college completion.

The study was developed with input from higher education stakeholders who need foundational and systematic evidence about enrollment and progress in higher education for Texas students with a disability. Stakeholders included representatives from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Association of Community Colleges, and several public community colleges. These representatives are seeking to improve their knowledge about students with a disability in Texas colleges and to better track and serve these students by informing decisions on modifying data systems and institutional procedures.

How We Analyzed the Data

This study addressed three research questions:

1. What percentages of high school graduates with a disability enrolled in a Texas two-year or four-year college within two years of graduation?
2. What percentages of high school graduates with a disability who initially enrolled in a Texas two-year college attained a credential or transferred to a four-year college within four years of enrollment?
3. What percentages of high school graduates with a disability who initially enrolled in a Texas two-year or four-year college attained a baccalaureate degree within seven years of enrollment?

The study also examined the extent to which college enrollment and attainment of a credential or baccalaureate degree varied by disability status, demographic characteristics, primary disability type, and Texas geographic region. The report presents unadjusted group differences in the population of high school graduates in Texas in the years examined. The report presents these differences as standardized differences between paired groups of students for several comparisons of interest, primarily to compare college enrollment and attainment of a credential or degree between high school graduates with a disability and graduates without a disability and among graduates with a disability by demographic characteristics. Standardized differences of at least 0.25 standard deviation units were designated as substantial differences. Group differences of 2 percentage points or less are not reported in the findings.

What We Discovered

The findings indicate leaks in the higher education pipeline for students with a disability, both in the transition from high school to college and in the period after initial enrollment in college.

- College enrollment was substantially lower for high school graduates with a disability than for graduates without a disability, due primarily to differences in enrollment at four-year colleges. About 31 percent of high school graduates with a disability enrolled in a Texas college within two years of graduation. Of those, 90 percent initially enrolled in a public two-year college. Enrollment in two-year colleges was 7 percentage points lower for high school graduates with a disability than for graduates without a disability, and enrollment in four-year colleges was 26 percentage points lower, a substantial difference.
- Degree attainment was substantially lower for high school graduates with a disability than for graduates without a disability. About 16 percent of high school graduates with a disability attained a baccalaureate

degree within seven years of initial enrollment compared with 51 percent of graduates without a disability. Among high school graduates who initially enrolled in a two-year college, the percentage who attained a credential or degree or transferred to a four-year college within four years of enrollment was substantially lower for graduates with a disability (17 percent) than for graduates without a disability (34 percent).

- College enrollment and degree attainment among high school graduates with a disability varied by eligibility for the national school lunch program, race/ethnicity, and disability type. College enrollment and degree attainment were substantially lower for high school graduates with a disability who had been eligible for the national school lunch program in grade 12 than for graduates with a disability who had not been eligible. The percentages of Black and Hispanic high school graduates with a disability who attained a baccalaureate degree were substantially lower than the percentage of White graduates with a disability who did. College enrollment and degree attainment were generally higher for high school graduates with auditory, speech, visual, orthopedic, and other health impairments than for graduates with other types of disability.

Policy Recommendations

This study was designed to provide K–12 and higher education leaders and policymakers in Texas with foundational evidence on college enrollment and completion for students with a disability. The findings can inform efforts to explore different services that could increase college enrollment and completion.

Students with a disability who attain a college credential or degree have higher employment rates and incomes (Sannicandro et al., 2018). In addition, increasing the percentage of students with a disability who attain a credential or degree aligns with Texas goals for overall college outcomes in the state. The Texas strategic plan for higher education, 60x30TX, aims to increase the share of the state’s population ages 25–34 with a college credential, degree, or certificate to 60 percent by 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015). Texas education agencies and colleges need solutions targeted to the different points of leakage in the higher education pipeline for students with a disability, including the transitions from high school to college and the period after college enrollment, that take into account the particular circumstances for this diverse population of students.

Planning and services to help students with a disability in the transition between high school and postsecondary work or education rarely provide sufficient supports and resources (Rowe et al., 2014). To support the transition from high school to college for students with a disability for whom higher education might be an appropriate option, the Texas Education Agency and local school districts could explore additional ways to prepare students with a disability for college and help them identify, select, and apply for college programs. Considering the low percentage of students with a disability from low-income households who enroll in college, K–12 agencies could explore financial barriers and whether support in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid would be helpful. Students with a disability might benefit from interventions provided through high schools and transition services that help students become more proactive in articulating their needs for support and accommodation in higher education settings.

To address leaks between college enrollment and completion, the findings suggest that colleges could assess the needs for specific services designed to increase college persistence and completion—particularly at two-year colleges, where most high school graduates with a disability enrolled. Colleges could assess the value of outreach to increase awareness and identification of incoming students with a disability and encourage them to access services that might be helpful. Targeted recruitment efforts could also focus on students with a disability who have left college after completing some credit hours but before attaining a credential or degree and who might benefit from re-enrollment. Colleges could benefit from additional research and guidance on ways to encourage students with a disability to seek supports and accommodations, as well as on the kinds of supports and accommodations that can best help students with different types of disability succeed in college.

Limited information or awareness likely constrains the ability of college administrators to assess needs and provide appropriate supports for students with a disability. Most students must self-report and seek special services. The data sources and methods summarized in this report could be applied for individual colleges, providing anonymous data that

could help higher education leaders understand how well their college is serving students with a disability and whether students are making progress.

However, these data do not provide information on the factors that might affect student success in college. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board collects data from public two-year colleges on whether a student accessed any support or accommodation. The study team did not find this data element to be reliable, due to reporting inconsistencies across colleges and over time. The board could work with colleges to increase reporting accuracy for this indicator and explore ways to collect data on the types of services offered to students with a disability in college. This would provide more reliable and complete data for higher education leaders and for use in future research about the population of self-identified students with a disability in college.

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Link to full report: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/REL_2021043.pdf

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