



Highlights of [GAO-10-33](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Research suggests that more students with disabilities are pursuing higher education than in years past, and recent legislative changes, such as those in the Higher Education Opportunity Act and Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, have the potential to increase the number and diversity of this population.

GAO was asked to examine (1) what is known about the population of postsecondary students with disabilities; (2) how postsecondary schools are supporting students with disabilities; (3) what challenges, if any, schools face in supporting these students; and (4) how the Department of Education is assisting schools in supporting these students. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed federal survey and some state data; conducted site visits; interviewed agency officials, disability experts, school officials, and students; and reviewed laws, regulations, and literature.

## What GAO Recommends

To improve access to quality higher education for students with disabilities, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Education develop and implement a coordinated approach to optimize agency resources and knowledge in providing technical assistance to postsecondary schools in supporting students with disabilities. Education agreed with our recommendation and plans to create a work group to develop and implement a coordinated approach to providing technical assistance.

[View GAO-10-33 or key components.](#)  
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# HIGHER EDUCATION AND DISABILITY

## Education Needs a Coordinated Approach to Improve Its Assistance to Schools in Supporting Students

### What GAO Found

Students with disabilities represented nearly 11 percent of all postsecondary students in 2008, according to a federal survey. Moreover, this population appears to have grown, based on selected federal and state data. Also, in 2008, students with disabilities were similar to their peers without disabilities with regard to age, race, and the schools they attended. Students reported having a range of disabilities in 2008, and the distribution of disability types had changed since 2000. For example, the proportion of students that reported having attention deficit disorder had increased from 7 to 19 percent.

Postsecondary schools use different approaches and accommodations to support students with disabilities. Schools are required to provide reasonable accommodations, such as note takers and extended time on tests, tailored to individual students' needs. Further, some schools offer enhanced or more comprehensive services than are required by law. For example, some schools GAO visited provided support on time management and study skills. Other schools offer specialized programs, such as one designed to help students with learning disabilities transition to meet college-level reading and writing requirements. Assistive technology has expanded the educational opportunities for students with disabilities. For example, voice recognition software can help students prepare papers by "talking" to the computer.

Schools face a broad range of challenges in supporting students with disabilities as they transition to higher education. For example, schools face challenges in supporting students who are unaware of their rights and responsibilities regarding accommodations and in providing services that involve specialized knowledge. Another challenge schools reported was a lack of awareness among some faculty members regarding legal requirements for supporting students with disabilities. Schools also anticipate facing challenges in supporting two growing populations of postsecondary students: veterans with newly acquired disabilities and students with intellectual disabilities.

Education has provided some assistance to postsecondary schools to support students with disabilities through three offices. However, the agency has no mechanism to systematically share information across offices and coordinate their technical assistance efforts. These offices—Office for Civil Rights (OCR), Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE)—have different missions and priorities, focus on different clients, and provide different types of assistance to schools. Although OCR's primary role is enforcement, it has taken the lead in providing assistance to postsecondary schools regarding disability topics. OPE has focused its technical assistance primarily on those 47 schools that received grants in 2008 related to students with disabilities. According to OPE officials, the office does not provide broader technical assistance on disability issues because it lacks expertise in this area. School officials told GAO they need more guidance and information about serving students with disabilities.