



Serving survivors of sexual assault with disabilities in college

“What do we need to know?”

By Vera Institute for Justice for the Working with Student Populations within Campuses Program with Esperanza United



This short guide provides an overview of information to enhance services when working with student survivors of sexual assault with disabilities in colleges. The statistics and studies referenced are a jumping off point for further exploration. In this guide, you will learn about critical issues facing this population, dos and don'ts when working with survivors of sexual assault with disabilities, and other information needed to create safe and accessible services and engagement.

Understanding the issues

Almost 20% of college students identify as having a disability.¹

The category of definition is quite broad but generally refers to:

- **Sensory disability:** refers to disability that impacts any of the five senses but generally refers to hearing and seeing. Sensory disabilities can be co-occurring such as DeafBlind. On a college campus, you are likely to have Deaf students, students who are blind, and/or DeafBlind students.
- **Physical disability:** refers to disability that impacts a person's mobility, dexterity, or agility. Students with this type of disability may have experienced spinal cord injury (paraplegia or quadriplegia) or amputation or may have been born with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, or cardiac conditions.
- **Mental health disability:** refers to psychological and/or psychiatric conditions that result in emotional or mental health challenges. Examples that you may see on a campus include major depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders (which include panic disorders), schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- **Cognitive or Intellectual disability:** refers to disabilities that can result in compromised cognitive or intellectual capacity. Students who have experienced a traumatic brain injury would fall into this category. Learning disabilities are generally less severe than intellectual disabilities but can cause difficulty in traditional learning environments. Examples of learning disabilities may include Dyslexia, Non-Verbal Learning

¹ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>

Disabilities, Oral/Written Language Disorder and Specific Reading Comprehension Deficit.



Students with disabilities and Deaf students may encounter physical barriers to services or may require accommodations.

Physical barriers include stairs to entrances, lack of adequate “rolling space” at events, narrow doorways, and inaccessible restroom facilities, among others. Understanding what physical barriers exist is a critical first step to removing them.

Examples of accommodations (also known as auxiliary aids and services) include:

- qualified interpreters for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing;
- brailled materials, large print materials, or other effective methods of making visually delivered materials available to students who are blind or low-vision;
- acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, magnification devices, and electronic devices to assist with communication;
- readers or note takers for students with cognitive or intellectual disabilities;
- quiet, distraction-free learning areas for students with psychiatric disabilities.

Students with disabilities and Deaf students navigate a complex system of attitudinal barriers such as stigma, devaluation, and paternalism.

- Adults with disabilities, including college students with disabilities, are often treated as “vulnerable” simply for having a disability. This can be linked to the belief of superiority and ableism, where students with disabilities often experience discrimination and prejudice.
- Our society has a long history of devaluing people with disabilities which can result in students not wanting to disclose their disabilities for fear of discrimination. This fear can impact how students with disabilities disclose incidents of sexual assault. This creates an opportunity for campuses to engage students with disabilities to create safe spaces and reduce fears.
- Public policy and state statutes may create barriers for students with disabilities who are seeking confidential avenues of support following a sexual assault. It is important to work with students and/or campus office of student accessibility services to ensure proper accommodations are made to reduce barriers,



build trust, and increase individualized support for student survivors with disabilities.

- Paternalistic attitudes on college campuses toward students, generally, are often amplified when working with students with disabilities. State statutes on sexual assault can compound this issue by including broad terms such as “physically helpless” or “mental disease or defect” as grounds for incapacity to consent. Although, these statutes highlight the issue of lack of consent because of a disability, therefore, a crime was committed, it is important to always support the empowerment, voice, and autonomy of the student. or something to that effect.

31.6% females with disabilities compared to 18.4% without disabilities report experiencing sexual victimization on campus².

- Students with disabilities who experience sexual assault on campus may encounter access barriers within campus victim services.
- Campus education and awareness programs may not account for access needs at campus events or for the unique dynamics in the lives of students with disabilities in their programming.
- When survivors with disabilities don’t see themselves represented in campus conversations around sexual assault, they may be embarrassed to report, seek help, or pursue services due to their disability.

Considerations for campus services

- Understand the population of students with survivors of sexual assault with disabilities on your campus and ensure that you are able to meet their access needs. Conduct access reviews to remove barriers in your physical and communication environments. Provide staff with training and education to remove attitudinal barriers.
- Include students with disabilities on your advisory boards, campus task forces, policy review committees, etc. The best way to avoid unintentionally feeding into negative stereotypes is to ensure students with disabilities are “at the table.”
- Collaborate across systems to fill the gaps for students with disabilities. The Title IX office should have strong working relationships with the Disability Services office and all offices should be familiar with the guiding laws.

² https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_Not_on_the_Radar_Accessible.pdf



<i>Campus services and guiding laws</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability Services Office • Campus/Classroom Accommodations • Student Orgs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sect. 503 of the Rehabilitation Act • ADA • FHA (Fair Housing Act)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title IX Office • Student Orgs. • Counseling Center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title IX • Clery Act • VAWA

- Cultivate spaces for student survivors of sexual assault with disabilities to share their stories or seek help without compromising confidentiality. This may mean that you have to get guidance on navigating mandatory reporting requirements to allow for confidential avenues of support.
- Avoid assumptions about a person’s capacity to consent based on their disability. This is particularly important when adopting an affirmative consent policy for your campus. Avoid overly broad language that could define people with disabilities as being incapable of consenting.
- Use faculty and/or administration ongoing meetings as a time to train on guiding laws, resources, and efforts supporting survivors of sexual with disabilities.

The dos and dont's when working with survivors of sexual assault with disabilities (SWD) on campus

<i>Don't:</i>	<i>Do:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume a SWD is registered with Disability Services or that a SWD wants Disability Services to be involved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include the option to identify as a SWD on intake forms or disclosure interviews. Allow SWD to self-select whether or not they want the Title IX office to communicate with Disability Services.



<i>Don't:</i>	<i>Do:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume a SWD will know what accommodations are available to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly communicate the accommodations available to SWD, including options for interpreting, note taking, and assistance throughout the Title IX process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume a SWD will be able to articulate or anticipate all their needs at the beginning of the process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to offer accommodations throughout the Title IX investigation/reporting process. Allow SWD to request accommodations during each stage.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build programs or offices without accessibility in mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an “accessibility checklist” to measure how accessible your offices and services are. Remove barriers to seeking services. (see page 20 of the document hyperlinked above)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host trainings or serve SWD without the input of disability professionals or disabled students, staff, and faculty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with Disability Services, students with disabilities, staff, and faculty to include them in development of training and service delivery.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume all SWD will know the best resources on campus available to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with the Title IX office and Counseling Services to understand best practices for serving survivors of sexual assault.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on accessibility but not safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review policies and procedures and assess for safety and confidentiality around working with SWD.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume that if a student gets accommodations for their disability, they won't need further accommodations after their assault. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that the trauma of a sexual assault could bring about the need for more or different accommodations.

<i>Don't:</i>	<i>Do:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan “Take Back the Night” or other events raising awareness about sexual assault or violence without keeping accessibility in mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with Disability Services and disabled student organizations to create accessible programming.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk about sexual assault or interpersonal violence on campus without including disability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize and support disabled students through inclusive campaigns, storytelling, and programming that prioritizes their needs.

There are several different entry points in serving survivors with disabilities on campus and communicating and collaborating well at each one is vital. This is an underserved population with little representation in most academic communities. Use this guide just as a jumping off point for conversations among colleagues and service providers/trainers, and check out the resources and articles provided below for a deeper understanding.

Further reading and resources

“Not on the Radar: Sexual Assault of College Students with Disabilities”

https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_Not_on_the_Radar_Accessible.pdf

Clery Center

<https://clerycenter.org>

Association on Higher Education and Disabilities

<https://www.ahead.org/home>

Safety 1st Initiative: Accessibility & Responsiveness for Survivors with Disabilities

http://www.ncdsv.org/images/Saftey1stInit_AccessibilityResponsivenessSurvDisabil.pdf

“Unwanted Sexual Contact: Students with Autism and Other Disabilities at Greater Risk”

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665682/summary>

“Exploring the Experiences of Abuse of College Students with Disabilities”

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0886260515581906>

“College Campus Sexual Assault and Female Students with Disabilities

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0886260519840405>

End Abuse of People with Disabilities

www.endabusepwd.org



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