



**Statement of Melissa Emrey-Arras
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Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

**Roundtable Discussion: “*Promoting College Access and Success for Students with Disabilities*”
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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Alexander, and Members of the Committee, for inviting me to participate in this roundtable discussion on promoting college access and success for students with disabilities. My remarks today will summarize GAO’s prior work on these students as they navigate the transition to postsecondary education. The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed federal survey data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, and conducted interviews with agency officials, school officials, students, and parents. Further details about the scope and methodology can be found in each of these related products.

- Our prior work has noted that the overall population of postsecondary students with disabilities appears to have increased, rising to 11 percent of students. About a quarter of students with disabilities have reported having a mental, emotional or psychiatric condition. Other common types of disabilities reported by postsecondary students include attention deficit disorder, mobility impairments, and learning disabilities. Demographically, we found that students with disabilities closely mirror students without disabilities, but are slightly more likely to attend college part time.
- Two federal laws protect the rights of students with disabilities in postsecondary education—Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination by institutions of higher education that receive federal financial assistance, such as federal financial aid. The ADA covers a broader range of schools, including state and locally funded and private-sector schools.
- Regarding enforcement of these laws, the Department of Justice can pursue any complaints it receives alleging discrimination under the ADA, regardless of the funding status of the respondent. The Department of Education can pursue complaints filed against schools receiving financial assistance from the agency at the time of the alleged discrimination. The Department of Education also provides grants and technical assistance to support students with disabilities in the transition to college.

Our prior work has identified several key challenges faced by students with disabilities, as well as postsecondary schools:

- ***The Transition to College Poses Challenges for Students and Schools.*** The transition from high school to postsecondary school presents challenges for students with disabilities because they must assume more responsibility for their education. In contrast to elementary and secondary school, they must identify themselves as having a disability, provide documentation of their disability, and request accommodations and services from their postsecondary institution. According to our work, this transition can be overwhelming and difficult for students to understand. Schools also face challenges related to this. Many schools proactively conduct outreach to students with disabilities and their parents to inform them of their rights and responsibilities, but reaching all students is difficult. This can become problematic if students request accommodations after classes have begun, as they may have fallen behind academically, and accommodations can take time to put in place.
- ***Students Also Reported Challenges Documenting their Disability to Obtain Accommodations.*** Many students with disabilities are accustomed to certain accommodations or adaptive technologies and begin college to find they are not automatically provided for them in college. In many cases, colleges require updated disability evaluations conducted by qualified professionals. These evaluations can be costly and there may be long wait lists for appointments, which can cause delays for students who must wait for accommodations. Some schools reported providing assistance to students in obtaining evaluations at lower cost.
- ***Three Student Populations May Create Additional Challenges for Schools.***
 - (1) Veterans with Newly Acquired Disabilities: Many veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from conditions such as traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder, which are difficult to diagnose. Symptoms may not surface immediately after such injuries, but may instead manifest themselves once these students have already begun classes.
 - (2) Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Students with intellectual disabilities—such as developmental disabilities or autism—are a population that schools believe will increase in the coming years. These students often require more specialized services that schools typically lack experience in providing, and may also need additional classes to address life skills, financial skills, or employment training.
 - (3) Students with Mental Illness: Students with mental illness usually require multiple supports, and colleges may have difficulty coordinating accommodations and other benefits to support them. These students, whose disabilities are less visible, may also, be among a group that chooses not to disclose their disability or seek accommodations until classes have already begun, resulting in service gaps.
- In recent years, GAO has made recommendations to several federal agencies, including the Department of Education, and the Department of Justice, to address some of these challenges, for example, by improving coordination among federal agencies providing services and strengthening enforcement efforts related to testing accommodations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this concludes my remarks. I am happy to take any questions.