

HOW TO BUILD MORE ACCESSIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS



COALITION ON ACCESSIBILITY
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

AUGUST 12, 2025



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State Higher Education
Executive Officers Association

**To follow along with our
presentation:**



TODAY'S SESSION

1. Introductions
2. Opening questions
3. Issues our coalition is seeking to address
4. Student Perspectives
5. What is needed to create change
6. Activity: Experiences from the Field
7. Putting ideas to practice and wrap up
8. Q&A



ABOUT US

We are leading a cross-sector coalition of organizations called the Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education.

FOLLOW THE COALITION ON ACCESSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Nicole Fuller

Associate Director of Policy and Advocacy
National Center for Learning Disabilities



Brittany Matthews

Director of Policy and Advocacy
Center on Higher Education Policy and Practice, Southern New Hampshire University

WELCOME NOTE



“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.”

-Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section
1400(c)(1)



ABOUT THE COALITION



Launch of a Coalition

In March 2025, CHEPP & NCLD launched a cross sector coalition to address the persistent and pervasive inaccessibility in higher education



Mission

Accessibility in higher education will be achieved by bringing together organizations across multiple sectors and driving change in institutional and practitioner policies and developing and supporting strong public policies.



Members

Members include: a) disability policy experts and advocates, b) higher education practitioners, c) workforce experts and advocates, d) policy leaders, e) legal experts, f) K-12 experts, and g) technology experts .



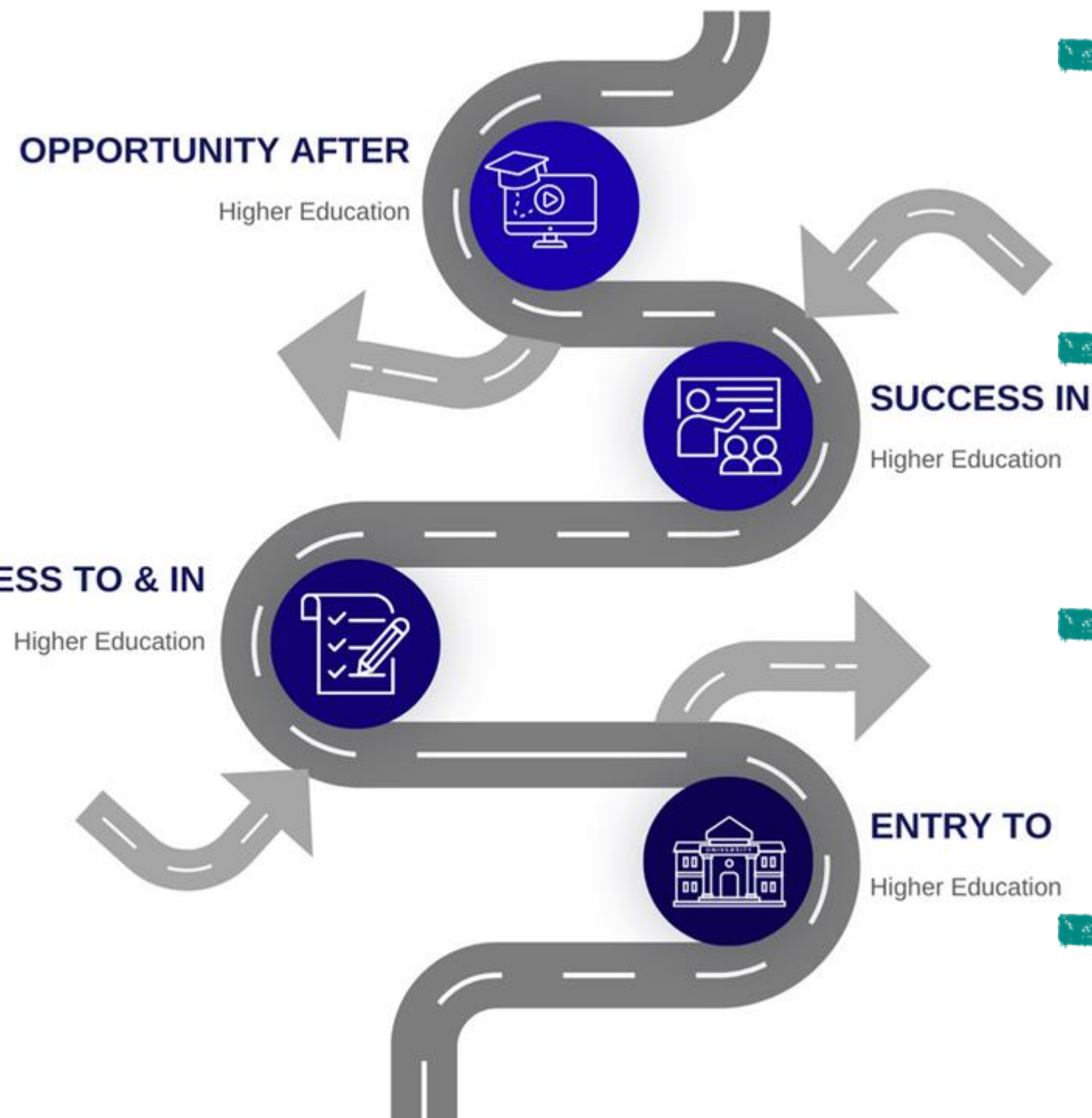
Policy Pillars

To support the work of the Coalition, policy pillars were developed. Focused on **Entry To, Access To and In, Success In, and Opportunity After Higher Education**, the policy pillars support organizational, local, state, and federal policy work.



Proactive Change

The Coalition seeks to make proactive change, building on a vision of a more accessible higher education system by connecting research, policy, and practice.



OPENING QUESTIONS



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RAISE YOUR HAND IF...

Identify as disabled or know someone who has a disability.



RAISE YOUR HAND IF...

Your institution (current or previous) offers any training for faculty or staff on accessibility or disability inclusive practices.



RAISE YOUR HAND IF...

- You have ever used a curb cut in the side walk.
- You have ever used ever used an accessible button on a door.
- You have used captions.



RAISE YOUR HAND IF...

You've heard of Universal Design for Learning—or UDL—before today.



RAISE YOUR HAND IF...

You think accessibility should be baked into every part of higher education—not just added on when needed



RAISE YOUR HAND IF...

You're hoping to leave this session with one concrete idea or next step you can take back to your work



ISSUES OUR COALITION IS SEEKING TO ADDRESS



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DEFINITIONS



Throughout this presentation, we will refer to these terms:

Disability: As defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (all institutions of higher education must abide by this law if receiving any federal funds) and the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual with a disability is defined as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. This definition also includes individuals with a record of such impairment or those who are regarded as having such an impairment.

Accommodation: An accommodation refers to a “reasonable accommodation” as defined by law and means any modification or adjustment to educational material or environment that will enable an individual with a disability to more fully participate. An accommodation is different from a modification which changes what is actually being taught.

Policy: Policy may include law, regulation, guidance, organizational guiding documents, or a set of rules or guidelines for an entity or organization. When referring to laws and regulations, the term “Big P” policy may be used as compared to rules and guidelines of an institution of higher education (“little p” policy).

DEFINITIONS CONT.



Throughout this presentation, we will refer to these terms:

Practitioner: The term may mean educator, faculty, leader, institution of higher education employee, disability access coordinator, and any individual that may be implementing or carrying out such policies and practices that are referenced.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): The term is defined in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) to mean a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that (A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient." CAST created the UDL framework..

THE PROBLEM

More than 21 percent of undergraduate college and **11 percent** of graduate students identify as having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023)

Only 18 percent of disabled adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree – half the rate of adults without a disability (Field, 2023)

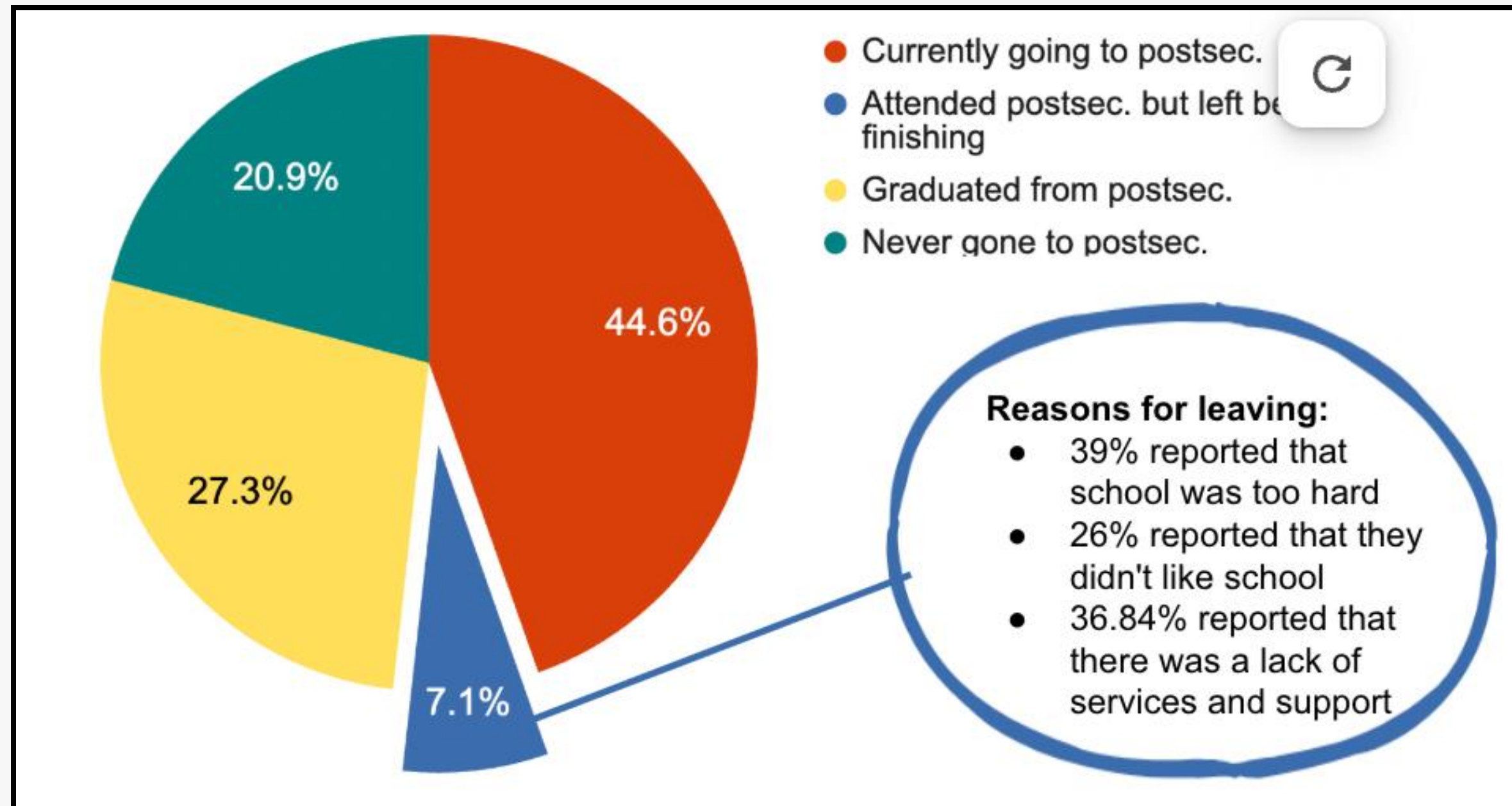
The labor force participation rate of people with disabilities is **41.6 percent compared to 78.5 percent** of people without disabilities (Kessler Foundation, August 2025)

The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is **11.1 percent as compared to 4.4 percent** for people without disabilities (Department of Labor, July 2025)

What does this mean? Disabled learners are struggling to get in and graduate from college which makes it even harder to be set up for success in the workforce.

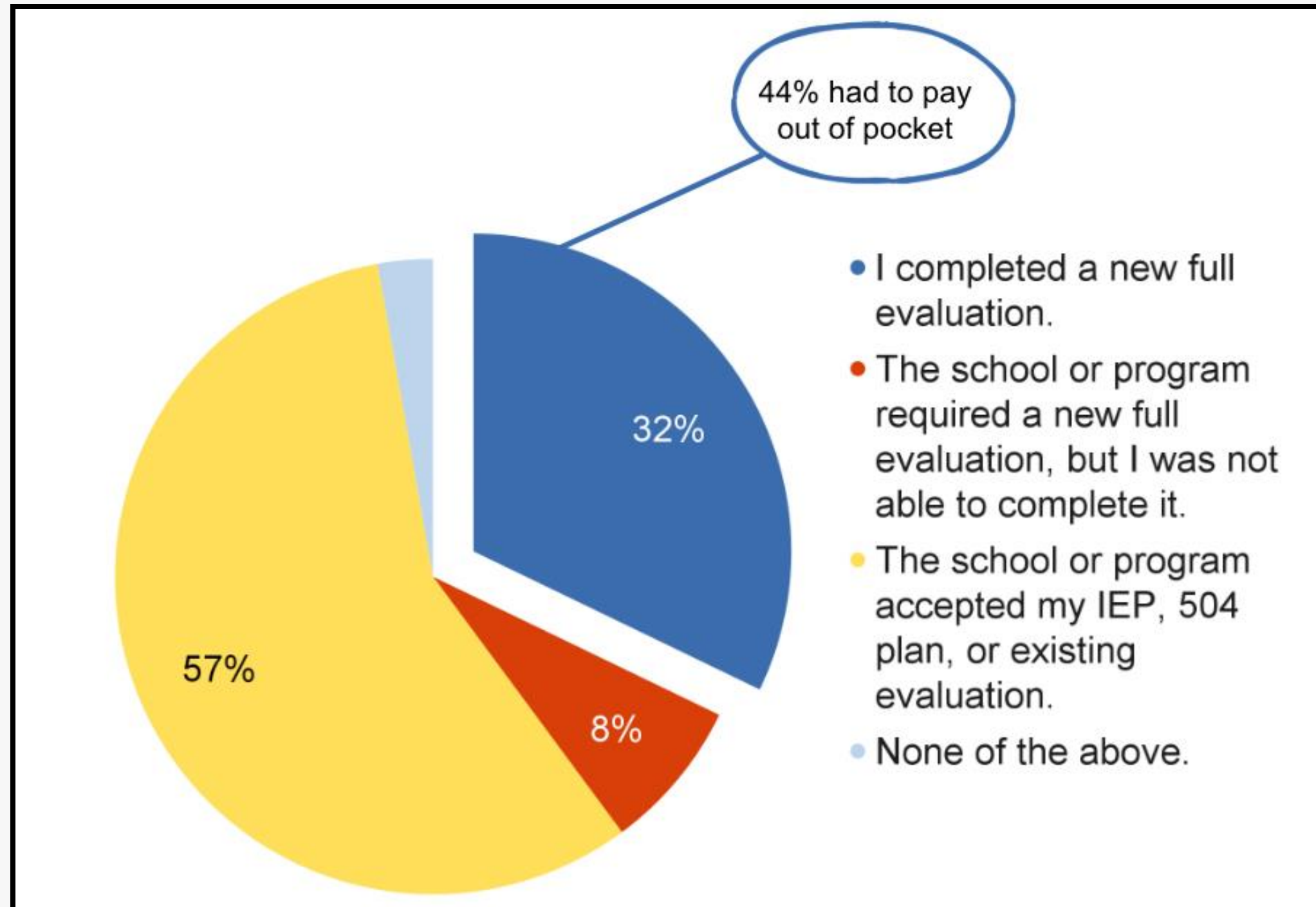
Let's dig deeper.

A LOOK AT ACCESS



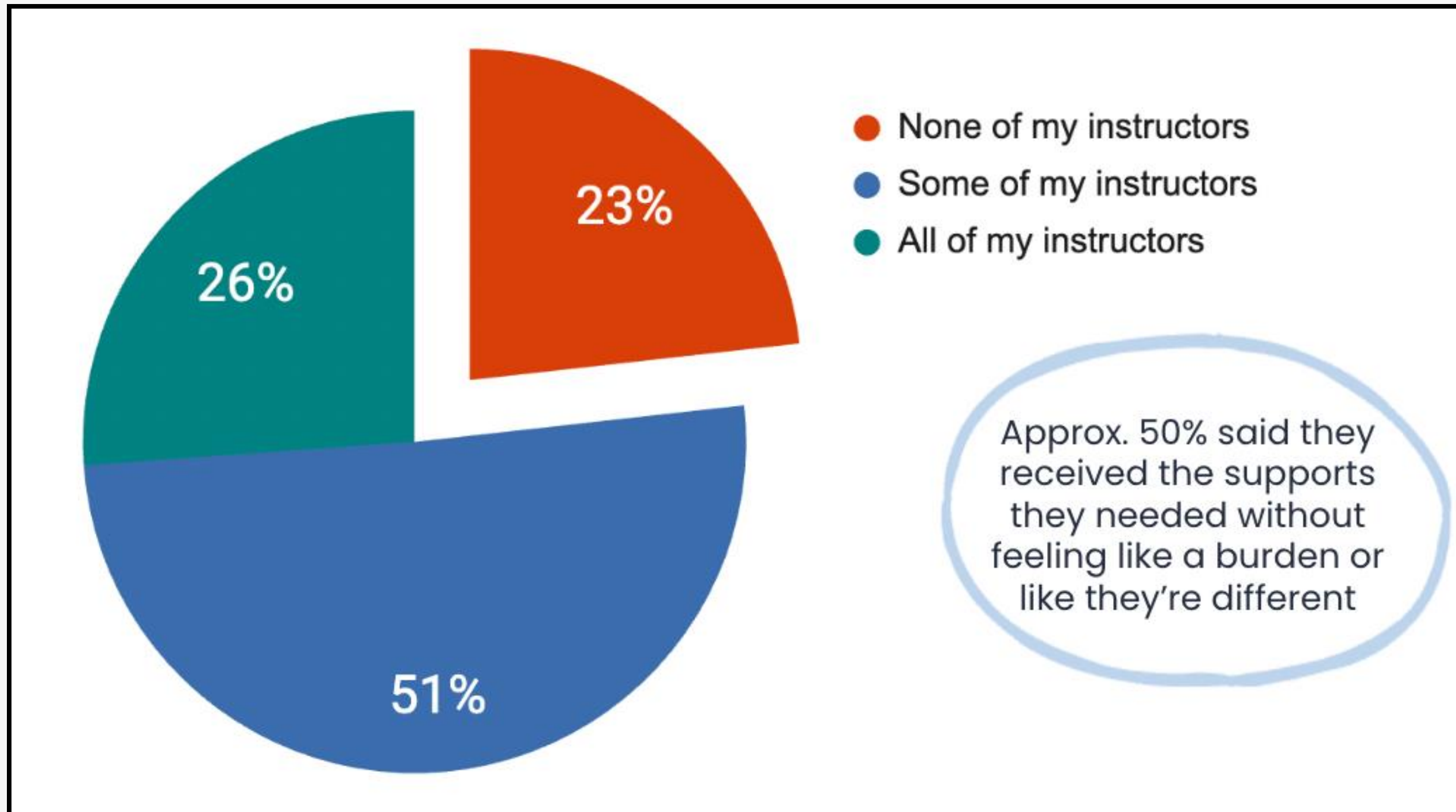
Source: NCLD (2024). State of Learning Disabilities

A LOOK AT ACCOMMODATIONS ACCESS



Source: NCLD (2024). State of Learning Disabilities

A LOOK AT SUPPORTS



Source: NCLD (2024). State of Learning Disabilities

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES



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STUDENT QUOTES



Find out what strategies and approaches have been adopted to deal with learning disabilities to overcome difficulties and achieve success.

STUDENT QUOTES



It changed my ability to learn from readings completely when I learned about text-to-speech software.

STUDENT QUOTES



Disability is a stigma.

STUDENT QUOTES



Non-accommodation students are very jealous of accommodation students and think it's unfair.

STUDENT QUOTES



Sharing my experiences with others can help them understand learning obstacles and foster greater understanding and support among individuals.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO CREATE CHANGE



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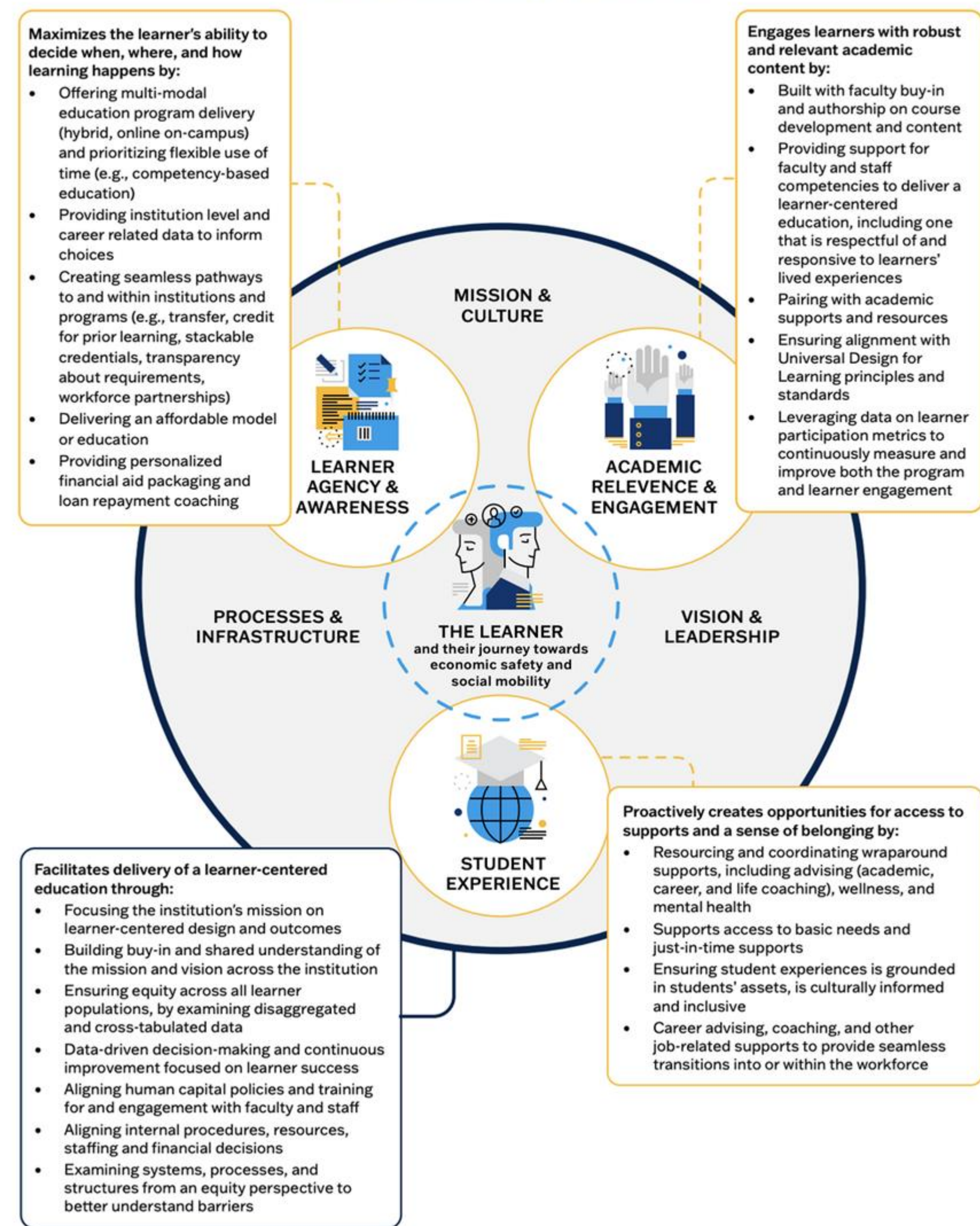
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TO CREATE MORE ACCESSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION ...

- A Learner Centered Framework is needed.
- Institutions of Higher Education should consider putting in place key elements of accessibility.
- Institutions of Higher Education can make strategic changes within mission and culture, academic relevance & engagement, learner agency & awareness, and student experience.
- State and Federal policy changes are needed.

A Learner Centered Framework

- Learner-centered design means delivering education in a manner that reflects a learner's lived experience, meets a diverse range of needs that support persistence, and provides for economic safety and social mobility.
- Introduced by CHEPP in a paper released in January 2024, the learner-centered design framework provides a guide for how to center the needs of students first and foremost in all aspects of the higher education environment.
- The framework also demonstrates the importance of accessibility and universal design for learning (UDL) for all students and in all educational environments.
- In the paper released by CHEPP with significant input by NCLD in July 2024, the recommendations focused through this framework with institutional & practitioner policy recommendations and federal policy recommendations, creating a runway for the Coalition's work.



KEY ELEMENTS OF ACCESSIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

- Transparent availability of resources and access to a disability office
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles applied throughout course and program design and delivery
- Centralized systems and consistent use of technology across courses and departments
- Feedback channels and continuous improvement processes
- Accessibility committee and governance policies
- Regular engagement of faculty and student services professionals

CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Mission and Culture

- Adopt a vision or mission statement with aligned goals to build an inclusive system
- Centralize budgeting & provide adequate staffing
- Establish a governing body to ensure ADA & Section 504 compliance

Academic Relevance and Engagement

- Embed UDL training for faculty and staff
- Develop internal accessibility assessment processes to test, review, evaluate, and improve accessibility across all settings.

Learner Agency and Awareness

- Offer flexible, multimodal programming
- Adopt a system-wide policy to consistently accept certain documentation as evidence of a disability, including IEPs, 504 plans (aligned with the RISE Act)

Student Experience

- Develop & invest in a robust accessibility office & widely distribute inclusive materials
- Use data to continuously improve available accommodations based on student success

CHANGING POLICY

ISSUE	FEDERAL LEVER	STATE LEVER
Data	Dept of ED should collect and track comprehensive, longitudinal data on students with disabilities in higher education to inform policy decisions related to their access and success in college	States have undergone their own efforts to improve data systems (i.e. UC System, with report mentioned in video)
Accommodations	RISE Act Updated regulations on Section 504	State-level RISE Act (passed in 4 states)
Transition	Office of postsecondary access within the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Funding for Technical Assistance	Coordination between state special ed systems and colleges

CHANGING POLICY CONT.

ISSUE	FEDERAL LEVER	STATE LEVER
Affordability	Access to Title IV federal student aid and not penalizing students needing modified course of study (i.e. Pell Grant Flexibility Act)	N/A - federal role critical
Digital accessibility	Updated ADA Title II Regulations on web accessibility (slated to go into effect 2026 for large IHEs)	State laws can be passed to support accessibility and further implement regulations
Accessibility, generally	OCR equipped for investigating and resolving complaints. Accreditors requiring accessibility standards. Clearinghouse and sharing of best practices.	Some states have passed laws that go above and beyond the ADA (i.e. CA). States can continue to support accessibility in this way. Elevating what works and system-level changes.

ACTIVITY: EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD



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ACTIVITY!

- Pull out your phone or a computer.
- Log on to <https://padlet.com/knackstedt/SHEEOactivity>
- Or scan the QR code.
- Read each of the four questions.
- Select at least one to respond to. “Comment” in response to answer the question.
- “Like” or comment to respond to other’s posts.



Questions You'll Find in the Padlet:

1. How can the RISE Act/accepting IEP and 504 documentation from students help to better implement accommodations in higher education? Share examples.
2. How does affordability intersect with accessibility? Share thoughts on how the Higher Education Grant Flexibility Act can reduce financial barriers for students with disabilities.
3. Why is collecting better data about students with disabilities in higher education so important? Are there ethical, privacy, or other concerns?
4. How does the ADA Title II regulation improve digital accessibility? Post solutions related to navigating inaccessible websites, learning platforms, or tools.

PUTTING IDEAS TO PRACTICE & WRAP UP



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COALITION ACTIVITIES IN

1. Bringing together cross-sector leaders
2. Support, adapt, and advance federal policy recommendations and practical guidance
3. Assess, adapt, and advance state activities and policy recommendations.
4. Develop a research agenda and needed data collection to advance work.
5. Create a playbook for institutions of higher education to inform institutional policy change and implement practical guidance, including:
 - accommodations,
 - procurement of technology,
 - culture,
 - staff training,
 - updating and improving websites
6. Uplift student stories and experience to inform practice and policy change



Alt text: Three young adults in professional attire walking towards the U.S. Capitol

The Reconciliation Bill's Limiting of Pell Grants Would Unfairly Disadvantage College Students with Disabilities



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323 followers

June 4, 2025

By: Nicole Fuller, National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) and Denise Rozell, Association of University Centers of Disabilities



Image of the U.S. Department of Education building with text on the front that reads "U.S. Department of Education."

Dismantling of the Office for Civil Rights: What it Means for College Learners with Disabilities



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323 followers

June 25, 2025

By: AHEAD and The Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education



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1mo •

Today, 24 organizations, including many from this coalition, sent the attached letter to Congressional Appropriations Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee Leadership advocating for funding for important Technical Assistance (TA centers), especially about recent proposals to defund and eliminate Technical Assistance (TA) centers, that support learners with disabilities from early childhood through higher education. Robust national support, including funding for technical assistance, enables K-12 schools, institutions of higher education, Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to support disabled learners to the best of their ability – from providing accommodations, accessible technologies, and other support.

May 20, 2025

Chair Shelley Moore Capito
Appropriations LHHS-ED Subcommittee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Tammy Baldwin
Appropriations LHHS-ED Subcommittee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Chair Robert Aderholt
Appropriations LHHS-ED Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro
Appropriations LHHS-ED Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, Chair Capito, and Ranking Member Baldwin,



Hua Hui Samuel Vogel • 1st
Honors Student at Florida International U...
1w •

Several weeks ago, I had the opportunity to connect with [Kim Knackstedt](#), who introduced me to the [Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education](#). ...more



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Disabled students face many barriers and roadblocks when navigating accessibility in higher education. These real-life challenges ...more



Paving the Way: One Student's Story of...
Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education

COALITION ACTIVITIES IN ACTION, CONT ...

Disability Pride Month: Announcing the Coalition & Showing Partnership

New Coalition Launches to Improve Higher Education Accessibility for Learners with Disabilities


Representatives from across sectors come together to drive higher education policy changes at the state and federal levels and improve institutional accessibility practices.

Today, in honor of Disability Pride Month, the Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice (CHEPP) at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and the National Center For Learning Disabilities (NCLD) announced the newly created Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education. This coalition brings together organizations across K12, higher education, workforce, technology, and disability rights organizations to advocate for change in higher education institutional and practitioner policies, and develop and support strong state and federal public policies.

Members of The Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education include:

Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD)
Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)
Center for American Progress
EdTrust
Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)
National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)
National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC)
Nelnet Diversified Services
National Skills Coalition

Making Policy Recommendations & Information Easy to Read



The Center for Higher Education
Policy and Practice

**POLICY SOLUTIONS: INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY IN
HIGHER EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES**

JULY 2025

In the United States, more than 21% of undergraduate college students identify as having a disability (NCES, 2023). Unfortunately, because of inaccessible higher education systems, disabled learners often choose to not enroll, stop out, or struggle to connect their degree to career opportunities after graduation. As a result, only 18% of disabled adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree—half the rate of adults without a disability (Field, 2023). As college degree attainment continues to be a leading indicator of economic stability and overall well-being, this disparity is even more alarming. Federal policymakers must support changes to make higher education systems more accessible, providing a door to such opportunity instead of an obstacle. In doing so, they will increase college access, degree attainment, and career outcomes for learners with and without disabilities.

Fast Facts

- 1 in 4 adults has a disability (CDC, 2023).
- Over 21% of undergraduate students and 11% of graduate students report having a disability (NCES, 2023).
- 18% of disabled adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree—half the rate of adults without a disability (Field, 2023).
- The labor force participation rate of people with disabilities is 41.4% compared to 77.8% of people without disabilities (Kessler Foundation, May 2025).
- The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 8.2% as compared to 3.9% for people without disabilities (Department of Labor, May 2025).

Key Barriers in Postsecondary Accessibility



KEY FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Accommodations: RISE Act

Federal bill that would allow IEP & 504 documentation to be accepted for accommodations.

H.R. 3939

Accommodations & Affordability: Higher Education Grant Flexibility Act

Federal bill that would improve access to higher education by addressing challenges in grant requirements.

S. 4379 (from 118th)

Data Collection: College Transparency Act with improvements around disability data

Federal bill to improve higher education data systems. Needs changes to add disability disaggregation.

H.R. 4806

Digital Access: ADA Title II Regulations

Regulations set standards for digital accessibility across settings covered by ADA Title II.

Regulations
Fact Sheet

MENTIONED/RELEVANT RESOURCE LIST

1. NCLD, State of Learning Disabilities (2024). Navigating the transition to adulthood.
2. Ithaka S&R (2025). Collecting Additional Data on Students with Disabilities in IPEDS
3. Transforming Culture and Practice: serving students with disabilities at the University of California: A final report by The University of California Systemwide Advisory Workgroup on Students with Disabilities
4. CHEPP, Report (2024). Online by Design: How Accessibility is Fundamental to Learner-Centered Design.
5. CHEPP, Policy Recommendations (2024). Online by Design: How Accessibility is Fundamental to Learner-Centered Design.
6. CHEPP, Fact Sheet (2025). Policy Solutions: Increasing Accessibility in Higher Education for Learners with Disabilities. (Hand out)



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THANK YOU

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CONNECT



SLIDE DECK



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