

COVID-19 Transitions: Higher Education Professionals' Perspectives on Access Barriers, Services, and Solutions for Students with Disabilities.

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This is a time of rapid change for college campuses. Moving to online instruction, adapting to remote student services, and implementing new procedures with no time to pause or reflect has been a common mode of operation over the last six months. Ensuring that this transition is done with accessibility in mind has been the consuming work of professionals who work and interact with college students with disabilities.

Rapid change became the norm in March 2020 when the wave of campus transitions began. While some institutions started the move to remote education as early as February, others held off on transitions until May. Campuses now face another type of transition as plans for re-opening in the fall are underway amid the fluctuating reports of progress and setbacks in containing COVID-19.

During this time of uncertainty, AHEAD is gathering data to help the higher education community be more aware of barriers to access for individuals with disabilities, as well as share promising practices within the postsecondary environment. AHEAD is also interested in the experiences of professionals who are supporting students with disabilities and engaging with leadership in campus transition efforts. In spring 2020, a survey was distributed to gather information from higher education professionals who work with college students with disabilities. These individuals offer a unique vantage point about the status of "campus" accessibility, in tune with student experiences and challenges, and possessing a unique institutional perspective on what is taking place.

The target population for this survey was defined broadly as higher educational professionals who work with college students with disabilities; 94% of respondents reported working in a disability resource office (DRO). The large majority were members of AHEAD, but the survey was also opened to other higher education professionals including a broader range of international respondents to gather a wide range of perspectives during this early transition period. Because transition will continue to be the norm for the foreseeable academic year, the survey findings reported here are the outcome of the first of three data collection efforts to be conducted by AHEAD.

Major Findings

- Students with disabilities have experienced difficulty across a wide range of areas in the transition to remote education. These barriers are, in almost all cases, reported to have created more frequent difficulties for students with disabilities than that experienced by the general student population.
- In the transition to remote disability services, providing documentation of a disability and discussing new access barriers and solutions were among the top issues.
- Students with disabilities at two-year public institutions have experienced the most widespread difficulties across remote education and services.

- Professionals working with students with disabilities have also faced challenges in transitioning to remote operations with greatest difficulty reported in receiving technology support and communicating with faculty about inclusive course design. Campus ADA coordinators report encountering difficulties more frequently than other professionals. Several promising practices are emerging including increasing collaboration, diversifying communication strategies with students, expanding outreach services, and modifying office procedures.

The Data: Students' Transition Difficulties

Students with and without disabilities have experienced difficulty in a wide range of areas during the transition to fully remote learning across campus. Over three fourths of respondents reported that students with and without disabilities experienced difficulty in having the needed equipment and devices to quickly make the transition to remote education.

Students with disabilities have encountered difficulty more frequently than the general student population across almost all aspects of remote education. Three areas presenting more frequent difficulty for students with disabilities included access to the network/Wi-Fi, access to course assessments or exams, and communication with instructors.

Students at some institutions are struggling more than others. Higher education professionals at two-year public institutions reported widespread difficulty for students with disabilities in such areas as having the needed equipment, accessing technical support, and using the learning management system. Professionals at private, for-profit institutions were more likely to report difficulty for students accessing counseling/mental health services.

Table 1. Areas of Difficulty for Students With and Without Disabilities in the Transition to Fully Remote Education

Percent of respondents indicating that students experienced difficulty in the transition to remote education in each of the following areas.	Students with Disabilities	General Student Population
Having needed equipment/ devices	78%	76%
Access to network/Wi-Fi access	85%	61%
Access to needed technology support and/or training	71%	65%
Using the learning management system (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, etc.	65%	57%

Access to learning materials, course texts	60%	51%
Access to course assessments or exams	60%	46%
Communication with instructors	74%	63%
Communication/collaboration with other students	60%	55%
Access to housing and food	55%	60%
Access to health services	50%	47%
Access to financial services	54%	52%
Access to counseling/mental health services	59%	54%
Access to academic advising	45%	44%
Access to academic support/tutoring	57%	49%
Access to library resources	50%	45%

Students with disabilities encountered fewer barriers in accessing remote services from the DRO.

While fewer respondents reported barriers for students in DRO service areas, four out of ten still indicated students on their campus encountered some level of difficulty requesting previously approved accommodations. Service areas that most often presented difficulties included providing documentation of a disability, receiving testing accommodations, discussing new access barriers, and using assistive technology.

The difficulties encountered by students accessing remote disability services are more widespread on some campuses. Professionals at public colleges (2-year and 4-year) reported widespread difficulty for students receiving test accommodations. Students at 2-year public schools were more frequently reported to be encountering difficulty with using assistive technology, receiving materials in alternate formats, and participating in the interactive process.

Table 2. Areas of Difficulty for Students with Disabilities in the Transition to Remote Operations of the Disability Resource Office

Did students experience difficulty in the transition to remote disability services in the following areas?	Percent responding Yes
Providing documentation of a disability (if needed)	63%
Receiving testing accommodations	61%
Discussing new access barriers and solutions	59%
Using assistive technology	58%
Participating in the interactive process	50%
Receiving notetaking accommodations	45%
Requesting previously approved accommodations	39%
Receiving materials in alternate format	39%
Receiving interpreter services	23%
Receiving CART/typewell services	19%

[The Data: Disability Resource Professionals’ Transition Difficulties](#)

Professionals working in DROs also experienced difficulties in making the transition to providing remote services. Over half of professionals reported difficulty in getting the technology support they needed to work remotely. Communication with faculty about inclusive online instruction and communication with new students needing to register with the DRO were also frequent challenges.

There have been challenges in receiving administrative support for accessibility considerations and planning. Just under half of respondents reported difficulty in the initial and ongoing stages of the campus transitions. Professionals who serve as campus ADA coordinators reported difficulty garnering administrative support significantly more often than DRO directors and staff.

Professionals on different types of campuses reported different challenges in the transition. Access to software and technical support were more frequently reported as areas of difficulty by professionals at private, for-profit institutions and public two-years campuses. Respondents from public institutions (two-year and four-year) more frequently reported difficulty with administrative support for requests related to the DRO.

Professionals in different roles have experienced different levels of difficulty. ADA coordinators have faced challenges with collaboration and communication across campus more frequently than other professionals. The most common area of difficulty was communication with faculty about accommodations and inclusive course design.

Table 3. Areas of Difficulty for Disability Resource Providers in the Transition to Remote Operating Procedures

<i>Did you experience difficulty in the transition to remote disability services in the following areas?</i>	Percent responding Yes
Needing technology support	58%
Communicating with faculty related to inclusive course design	52%
Communicating with students not registered with the DRO, but who may need services	51%
Communicating with faculty related to classroom accommodations	48%
Collaborating with other departments and offices to promote accessibility	47%
Receiving institutional support for accessibility planning and needs during the ONGOING stages (first 2-3 months) of campus COVID-19 response	47%

Access to software/ assistive tech	46%
Receiving institutional support for accessibility considerations and planning during the INITIAL stages (first 1-4 weeks) of campus COVID-19 response	46%
Communicating with students already registered with DR services	45%
Access to needed tech support/ training	42%
Receiving administrative support for requests related to DRO or administrative needs	36%
Access to network/ Wi-Fi	35%
Receiving administrative support for requests related to individual student needs	32%
Communicating with DRO colleagues to coordinate and document work with students	27%

Promising Practices

Professionals described several activities and workarounds in response to the question, “what are you doing that is working well?” These promising practices are organized into four broad categories: increasing collaboration; diversifying communication with students; expanding outreach services; and modifying office procedures.

Increasing Collaboration

DROs have expanded existing partnerships as well as established new ones. Examples included:

- Partnering with the Teaching and Learning Center to establish a COVID-19 inclusive teaching tips online platform, provide summer workshops on Universal Design, or formalize a campus plan for captioning all online content
- Participating on campus behavioral intervention teams, care teams, or response teams to identify and support at risk students, make referrals for new students, and streamline the steps required of students seeking support
- Reaching out to the surrounding community and local charities or businesses to support students needing computers, access to Wi-Fi, and other technology

- Collaborating with colleagues across the state through state higher education systems or state/regional AHEAD affiliate groups to problem solve and identify local resources

Diversifying communication strategies with students

While e-mail and phone calls remain important outreach tools with students, professionals reported it is more important than ever to diversify the ways they reach out to students. New and expanded approaches included:

- Teleconferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet/Hangouts, Web Ex, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Blue Jeans)
- Social media, with popular options including Twitter, You Tube, Instagram, and Facebook
- DRO data management systems (the student portal n AIM and Accommodate were highlighted)
- Institutional channels (e.g., college website, institutional apps, Starfish, student life or residence life newsletter)
- The DRO website, including timely COVID-19 updates, an FAQs page, a newsletter, instructional videos for new office procedures, and live chat options
- Learning management system (e.g., offering an optional “class” through the campus learning management system and using the discussion board to connect with registered students)

Expanding outreach services

As new barriers were identified in the rapid transition to remote education, professionals reported success with a variety of expanded services within the DRO. Examples included:

- Supporting students in areas of executive functioning and time management (e.g., offering weekly check-ins with an access coordinator for students who are particularly impacted by the dramatic change in daily schedules and time management in a remote environment)
- Offering extended office hours as a way to accommodate and provide flexibility for students as well as staff who may be juggling additional home and family demands
- Providing online “accessibility checks” for instructors on a voluntary basis
- Reaching out to students who may be at risk “early and often”
- Virtual coaching on a one-to-one basis to bolster student planning and goal setting in online classes

Modifying office procedures

Among the many rapid changes DROs have had to make to office procedures in a few short months, respondents shared a few of the strategies that were working well.

- Using a disability resource data management system (such as AIM or Accommodate) was invaluable in allowing the DRO staff to move quickly to remote services. Documentation and case notes were readily available with little interruption to student services and teamwork.
- Transitioning to remote interpreting was successful and easily accomplished.

- Providing a virtual lobby (via Zoom or Cranium Café) was a strategy mentioned by several respondents as being useful in filling the void for students who preferred “walk-in” appointments.
- Establishing a text line for appointment setting only gave students more options.
- Setting up regular communication structures for disability resource office staff (e.g. all-staff Zoom meeting twice each week, virtual interpreter check ins every other week) to stay informed of changes, concerns, and plans.

Resource Needs

The barriers and experiences of respondents suggested several important areas for support and resource development during these turbulent times. Recommendations include providing centralized resources, professional conferences, virtual communities for support and sharing, and information and data about continued COVID-19 management.

Centralized Resources

DRO professionals need support in gathering the wide variety of materials and information that are needed to plan and lead ongoing campus change with accessibility and equity in mind. Openly available webpages, links, and webinars should address high need topics such as:

- Universally designed online class development and instruction
- Provision of remote accommodations
- Diverse strategies for connecting with students
- Accessible technology considerations

Low- or no-cost options for professional resources are essential as campuses struggle with plummeting budgets and funds.

Professional Conferences

There is high need for continued professional development and sharing of best practices. Broad topics provided through a virtual format should include:

- Remote Disability Resource Office management and service provision
- Research to inform COVID-19 responses and planning
- Legal insights in the changing context
- Leadership during and beyond COVID-19

Virtual Communities

DRO work continues to require rapid decision-making in a changing campus context. It is more important than ever for professionals to have online communities of colleagues to problem solve, brainstorm, and share experiences including among other approaches including:

- A dedicated COVID Response community list for DRO professionals
- Scheduled discussions to allow professionals to meet virtually around specific topics of high need.

Information and Data

The demand for rapid change in instruction and services requires DRO professionals to focus intensely on local resources and needs. It is an important time to also have a bigger picture of what is occurring in

DROs across the country and at peer institutions. National data collection on the experiences of DROs and their work to assure equity for people with disabilities is needed to capture the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on services and to identify continued needs and areas for support.

Methodological Notes

Solicitation and data collection for the online survey occurred May 13-27, 2020. In addition to inviting all AHEAD members associated through the AHEAD member distribution list, the survey invitation was also shared with several higher education online communities focused on supporting students with disabilities within the postsecondary environment. Individuals were eligible to participate if they currently worked for a college or university. Following the two-week data collection period, 605 participant responses were recorded. The sample was comprised of 95 percent campus administrators or staff members, 4 percent faculty, and 1 percent graduate student workers. Additionally, of the individuals identifying as members of their institution's disability resource office, 45 percent identified as a DRO director. Respondents were predominantly from North America, but also included participants from Ukraine, Israel, Botswana, Sierra Leone, Japan, Australia, and Portugal.

Question generation for the survey instrument was informed by the EDUCAUSE COVID-19 QuickPoll. Permission to create an adapted survey instrument that used EDUCAUSE questions in part or in whole for non-commercial purposes was granted in April 2020. All questions included in the online survey were designated as optional, creating data missingness if a participant chose not to respond to one or more included questions in the logic-based survey. As with any survey, data was self-reported and participant responses, including their perceptions of students with disabilities as well as their professional experiences during the remote transition, were taken at face value. Descriptive statistics were utilized to organize the closed-ended survey question responses and open-ended survey response questions were organized by themes.

Suggested citation: Scott, S., & Aquino, K. (2020). *COVID-19 Transitions: Higher Education Professionals' Perspectives on Access Barriers, Services, and Solutions for Students with Disabilities*. Association on Higher Education and Disability.