A Review of the Biennial AHEAD Surveys:
Trends and Changes in the Demographics and Work of Disability Resource Professionals

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Abstract

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) has conducted biennial surveys of postsecondary disability resource professionals since 2008. The day-to-day work of disability resource offices on college campuses has undergone significant changes in this time period, potentially requiring new technical skills, expanded content knowledge, and increasingly complex professional judgement. Has this evolving work been accompanied by a change in the demographic characteristics and backgrounds of professional staff who lead higher education disability resource offices? This study examined the outcomes of the biennial AHEAD surveys to address this question and identify trends and changes in the responses over time. Using AHEAD surveys and reports, items pertaining to (a) demographic characteristics, (b) education and professional background, (c) job structure, and (d) earning and compensation were compared across each year of survey administration. Findings reflect a field that appears to be growing and maturing, as seen through the changing lens of the survey's sampling methodology. There are increasing numbers of full-time staff supported by permanent institutional funds. Changes in functional job roles reflect a shift to increased focus on campus access. The lack of diversity in racial, ethnic, and gender identity; changes in the discourse on disability identity; the importance of updated professional standards; and the promotion of opportunities for scholarly practice are discussed.

Keywords: postsecondary disability, disability resource professionals, demographics, trends

The field of postsecondary disability is characterized by change and growth. In an early historical overview of postsecondary disability resources, Madaus (2000) chronicled the emergence of professional training and college study opportunities for veterans with physical disabilities returning from World War II and the Korean War. The decades of the 1960's and 1970's were characterized by the civil rights movement and educational legislation that expanded the demand and need for postsecondary disability services. In 1978, national data from the American Council on Education began to include questions about disability, documenting the increasing presence of students with a variety of types of disability including visual, orthopedic, hearing, and learning. The work of postsecondary disability services professionals was no longer predominantly requiring architectural accommodation to assure access for students with disabilities (Madaus, 2000).

In a more recent retrospective, Evans et al. (2017) identified four seminal historical events that have shaped development of the field.

1. In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act established the legal mandate for a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities, creating a pipeline for students who were better prepared to attend college.
2. In 1977 the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) was formed, establishing the first organization of professionals to champion the field.
3. In 1985 the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education to support data-based policy and practice decisions regarding students leaving K-12 educational settings.

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4. In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed extending the non-discrimination mandates of Section 504 to a wide range of public and private entities.

Evans et al. (2017) described the following decades of the 1990s and 2000s as marked by steady growth in professional staff and disability resource offices. True to the emerging nature of the field, these offices vary as widely as the institutions they serve. Administrative reporting lines of disability resource offices range from student life divisions, to academic affairs, to counseling departments, to student health services among others. Office structures include multi-staff full-time disability professionals, one-person offices, and individuals who have disability resource work as an add-on to their primary position (Scott, 2019a).

The development of AHEAD's Program Standards established an important foundation for understanding and examining the commonalities across diverse office structures. First established in 1999 to provide direction and support to early disability resource offices, the Program Standards were updated in 2006 to reflect changes in the field including growing availability and use of assistive technology, collaboration with faculty, and a changing student population (Shaw & Dukes, 2006). Similarly, the AHEAD Professional Standards, established in 1996, defined the skills and knowledge needed by disability resource office personnel. They were developed initially to address the lack of specific training and graduate school preparation available in the field. The Professional Standards were described as creating a new level of professionalism for the leaders of these offices (Shaw et al., 1997). While these Standards provide important grounding for the field, the administrative duties and role of the disability resource professional have been described as "constantly evolving" (Evans et al., 2017, p. 357).

The work of promoting access for individuals with disabilities on college campuses has undergone seismic shifts in recent years. Consider these changes in the field that impact the day-to-day work of disability resource professionals: The ADA Amendments Act (ADA AA, 2008) clarified and expanded the definition of disability; the resulting updates to regulations and guidance for Title II and Title III of the ADA AA have directly influenced how professionals in the field work with students to document the presence of a disability and needed accommodations (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012).

Conversations about models of disability have evolved from theoretical suppositions to frameworks that guide the daily practice of disability resource offices (Kroeger & Kraus, 2017). Recent conference programs provided by leading professional organizations such as AHEAD, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) tout a social model of disability for structuring disability resource office connections to social justice and diversity initiatives on campus. Leaders and visionaries in the field have guided professionals to re-examine fundamental disability resource structures such as office mission statements, job titles and roles, faculty syllabus statements, and campus outreach events to influence the narrative around disability (Refocus, n.d.).

Within the broad changing demographics of college students over the past decade (including such aspects of student identity as race, gender, ethnicity, and age), the demographics of students disclosing a disability is also changing. A growing number of students with mental health and chronic health concerns are among today's college population with disabilities (Campbell & Westcott, 2019). A budding awareness of the importance of recognizing intersectionality of these elements of diversity is emerging with important implications for disability resource professionals supporting student disclosure, self-advocacy, and use of accommodations (Karpicz, 2019; Kim & Aquino, 2017).

With growing student diversity comes awareness of new potential barriers in the college environment. Recent years have seen an explosion of conversations, Office of Civil Rights (OCR) letters of finding, court cases and campus policies related to access needs for emotional support animals (ESAs) and electronic information technology, such as campus websites and learning management systems (Evans et al., 2017). Advances in assistive technology have resulted in greatly expanded options for notetaking, lecture capture, and American Sign Language (ASL) services, for example, requiring disability resource professionals to keep abreast of new and exciting ways of offering access to learning.

These areas of substantial growth and change in the day-to-day work of disability resource professionals—including the definition of disability, guiding theoretical models, changing student populations, new access barriers, and emerging technology resources—do indeed reflect a field that is constantly evolving. With this evolution comes a significantly changing landscape for disability resource professionals, potentially requiring new skills, expanded knowledge, and increasingly complex professional judgement in daily practice.

Has this evolving work been accompanied by a change in the professional staff who lead disability

resource offices? Are the demographic characteristics of disability resource professionals reflecting changing areas of diversity, expertise, or professional backgrounds? Are professionals from different academic fields or specialty areas being drawn to the maturing work of disability resource offices? The purpose of this study was to examine the outcomes of the biennial AHEAD surveys of disability resource professionals conducted since 2008 (Association on Higher Education and Disability, n.d.a) to identify trends and changes reported by the respondents over time. The guiding research questions were as follows: What patterns or trends are evident in the demographic identity and characteristics of disability resource professionals over time? What changes have occurred regarding the education and professional background of disability resource professionals? Have there been changes in how disability resource professionals' jobs are defined and structured? What changes have occurred in earning and compensation for disability resource professionals?

Methods

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) conducted an early survey of disability resource professionals in 2004. In 2007-2008, the AHEAD Board of Directors approved and launched a biennial data collection process with a redesigned survey instrument (Harbour, 2008). Since that time, AHEAD has administered a total of five surveys of disability resource professionals (Harbour, 2008; Kasnitz, 2011, 2013; Scott, 2017, 2019b).

Overview of the AHEAD Surveys

The following goals of the survey program have remained consistent over time:

- Collect demographic information about disability resource office staff, including personal statistics such as age, ethnicity, professional backgrounds, and salary ranges;
- Learn about the administration of disability resource offices, including the number of students and staff served, decentralization or centralization of services, and the institutional units (e.g. academic affairs, student affairs) overseeing disability resource operations; and
- Find practical information to guide administrators in disability resource offices and at AHEAD, including compensation, resources, and professional development opportunities that would be most beneficial for disability resource office staff.

Survey Implementation

Each administration of the survey has been conducted online and there have been refinements and modifications to survey implementation over time. Early survey administrations (2008, 2010, and 2012) used an opportunity sampling procedure with an open invitation for participation by professionals in the field. In response to limitations identified by Kasnitz (2011, 2013), the target population was refined in 2016 to focus on the AHEAD membership in particular (Scott, 2017).

Thus, in 2016, AHEAD refined the data collection process. Limitations identified in previous survey administrations (Kasnitz, 2011; 2013) made clear that existing sampling procedures were not effective for gathering administrative and programmatic data about office practices. A new plan was implemented to alternate the focus of the biennial work. In 2016, the survey was distributed to all AHEAD members to gather information about professionals including their work, background, and salaries. In 2018, the survey was distributed to a lead contact person on each campus reflected within the AHEAD membership and specifically focused on disability resource offices and programs. The AHEAD surveys will continue with this alternating cycle. (See Table 1 for an overview of AHEAD survey components, respondents, and changes.)

Survey Content

The core sections of the survey initially developed in 2008 have remained unchanged though the wording of individual survey items has been modified in some instances to increase clarity. In 2016, a new section of the survey was added to gather information on timely topics of interest to the membership. Survey sections have included:

1. Personal and professional information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and education;
2. Details about respondents' current positions, including job titles and degree requirements for the position;
3. Salary and compensation information, including non-monetary forms of compensation such as flexible work hours;
4. Information about the respondents' campus & disability resource office, including setting, type of campus, statistics about consumers, and administrative features of the office;
5. Perspectives on disability resources, including professional development needs, identification of critical knowledge for staff, and underlying philosophy of disability resource

service provision; and

6. Topical supplement unique to each survey. In 2016, this supplement focused on professional experiences providing one-to-one work with students. In 2018, supplemental questions focused on office structures and roles of the campus ADA Coordinator.

dents to provide a numerical salary value. Summaries in the survey reports included salary ranges provided across all participants, and averages by functional job title. The findings in this manuscript were taken from those reports.

We noted that in the earlier surveys of disability resource professionals, a majority (from 70% to

Table 1

Overview of AHEAD Survey Program Components, 2008-2018

Year of implementation	2008	2010	2012	2016	2018
Number of survey respondents	662	916	461	581	457
Target population	Disability resource professionals in higher education			AHEAD members	
Focus of survey questions	Individuals & programs			Individuals	Programs
Survey sections	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	1, 2, 3, 4 [a]	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 2, 3, 6 [b]	4, 6

Note. [a] Section 5 dropped to streamline survey. [b] First separation of individuals and programs. Introduction of Topical Supplement (section 6).

Procedures

The AHEAD surveys of disability professionals from 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2016 comprised the data for this study. In 2014, AHEAD did not conduct a survey. The 2018 AHEAD survey was the first administration of the data collection program that focused on campus and programmatic data. It therefore did not include data about individual disability professionals in line with the purpose of this study.

We began the review process by examining the survey instruments used each year to identify sections and individual questions that had remained largely unchanged across survey administration. Items pertaining to demographic characteristics, education and professional background, job structure, and earning and compensation were identified and used as comparison points. We then gathered all available findings. In addition to the four published AHEAD reports, we contacted the lead researcher of each survey to identify any unpublished summaries or preliminary reports of survey findings that might provide data not included in the final reports. Data summaries were extracted from each source, arranged in tables, and verified. For questions that were not exactly the same from year to year, the level of comparability was evaluated before inclusion in the final data.

Collection of salary data asked survey respon-

87%) of respondents identified as AHEAD members, while the 2016 survey sampled only from the AHEAD membership. While not a perfect alignment, there is justification for comparison of survey respondents while also remaining cognizant of potential differences and limitations.

Examination of data also led to consideration of respondents from locations outside the U.S. Across administrations of the surveys, the percentage of international respondents varied slightly. In 2008, 3.1% of respondents were from outside the U.S followed by 1.7% in both 2010 and 2012, and 1.3% in 2016. The small numbers of international participants each year were unable to yield meaningful data about international trends, and at the same time increased the potential for confounding patterns in the predominantly U.S. based data. We therefore decided to focus this review on data collected from respondents in the U.S. Given AHEAD's role as an international professional association however, we have included a discussion of international data in the implications of this research.

The research questions provided an approach to cluster and compile the data across each year of survey findings. Where possible, we report findings for all survey years. When an individual survey item was changed over time (e.g., response options were modi-

fied) this change was documented and carefully noted in the summary tables. Descriptive statistics were first examined individually by each of the co-authors, and then discussed to reach consensus on patterns and trends significant to the field.

Results and Discussion

The AHEAD survey questions covered a diverse set of topics, including personal demographics, education and professional background, disability resource jobs and structures, and earning and compensation. Findings are presented by topic area with a discussion of each guiding research question.

Personal Demographics of Disability Resource Professionals

Each year the survey has gathered basic information about the demographic characteristics of disability resource professionals. Data from each administration of the survey was reviewed to identify patterns or trends in the demographic identity and characteristics of these professionals related to gender, ethnicity, age, and disability.

Gender

The proportions of male and female respondents (see Table 2) have remained constant over the years. Females have consistently comprised about 80% of the respondents for each year of the survey, males about 19% and otherwise identified approximately 0.2%.

Ethnicity

The prominent ethnicity among respondents (see Table 3) was White for each year of the survey administration. The representation of White respondents was approximately 86% for all the years except 2012,

when it dropped down to 79%. African American or Black respondents consistently comprised 5-6% of the respondents, while the percentage of Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or Mexican respondents increased slightly. Other ethnicities remained at relatively small percentages.

Age

The survey question related to age has been modified slightly over the years. In 2008, the age ranges available for selection by respondents were different than the age ranges provided in 2012 and 2016 (see Table 4). The most frequently reported age range for 2008 was 45-54 years (31%), while for 2012 and 2016, the most frequently reported age range was 51-60 years (32% and 29%, respectively). Data reported from the 2010 survey does not provide a break down of different age groups but does state that the average age of respondents was in the 40s.

Disability Status

In 2008 and 2010, 33% and 31% of respondents, respectively, identified as having a specific disability. In 2012, the question format was modified, and response options were expanded to allow respondents to identify as having a disability "at times," and to designate whether a family member has a disability. In 2012, 24% of respondents identified as having a disability and an additional 14% responded they experienced a disability at times; in 2016 these figures were similar with 31% identifying as experiencing a disability, and 9% experiencing a disability at times (see Table 5).

Table 2

Respondents' Gender

Gender	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Female	79.0	81.1	80.5	81.6
Male	20.7	18.2	17.1	17.7
Otherwise identified	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2
Prefer not to say/unknown	0.2	0.3	2.4	0.5

Table 3

Respondents' Ethnicity

Ethnicity	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016[a] (%)
White or Caucasian	86.3	85.6	79.4	85.2
African American or Black	5.0	6.9	5.9	5.6
Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or Mexican	3.8	2.3	4.1	4.9
Multi-Ethnic or Biracial	1.2	0.8	1.3	1.4
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.2	0.4	1.1	1.6
Asian-American, Asian, or Indian	1.0	0.7	1.5	1.4
Other	0.9	0	0.9	1.4
Middle Eastern	0.5	0	0.7	0.5
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2	0.1	0	0.2
Prefer not to say	0	3.3	4.3	2.3
No data	0	0	0.9	0

Note. [a]Respondents could select more than one ethnicity.

Table 4

Respondents' Age

Reported Age	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	Reported Age	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
24 yrs or less	1	NA			
25-34 yrs or less	13	NA	30 yrs or less	6	8
35-44	23	NA	31-40	16	23
45-54	31	NA	41-50	19	25
55-64	28	NA	51-60	32	29
65 or higher	2	NA	61 or higher	17	15
Prefer not to say	1	NA	Prefer not to say	1	1

Table 5

Respondents' Disability Status

Disability Status	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	Do you consider yourself a person with a disability?	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Disability specified	33.1	34.4	Yes	24.3	30.1
Non-disabled	62.3	58.3	At times	13.9	8.7
Unstated/Prefer not to say	4.6	7.2	No, but a close family member does	23.2	18.0
			No	36.9	40.2
			Other/No data	1.7	3.0

Table 6

Respondents' Disability Experiences

Disability experience	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Chronic/Other Health	34.5	37.6
Psychological/Psychiatric	22.8	31.0
Mobility	28.7	25.2
Attention/Hyperactivity	18.1	18.6
Hearing	14.0	13.7
Learning	12.9	11.9
Vision	11.1	8.0
Motor Activity	3.5	5.3
Speaking	0.6	1.3

Disability Experiences

Beginning in 2012, a new survey item was added asking about specific types of disabilities experienced by respondents (see Table 6). Participants were able to identify more than one type of disability. In both 2012 and 2016, the three most frequent types of disability experiences were chronic/other health (35% and 38%, respectively), psychological/psychiatric (23% and 31%), and mobility (29% and 25%).

Discussion of Patterns or Trends in Demographic Identity and Characteristics

In many respects, the demographic characteristics of disability resource professionals have remained consistent over the past decade. Reporting on gender and ethnicity suggest that the profession is largely female and White.

Patterns in the age of respondents has shifted somewhat between the 2012 and 2016 data collection periods. In 2016, there was a broader representation of professionals in each age group under 50 than seen in 2012. This may reflect a shift in the profession, or alternatively, it may reflect the modified population of the survey that was revised in 2016 to focus solely on AHEAD members. Age groups were reported differently in the 2008 and 2010 limiting the ability to make additional comparisons.

Assessing the presence of individuals with disabilities among the professional population is tied to the discourse on disability in general, and to the wording of survey questions in particular. While initial administrations of the survey reflected approximately one-third of respondents indicating they experienced a disability, that percentage increased in 2012 and 2016

to nearly 40% when the question was broadened to also inquire about the experience of disability at times.

In the two most recent administrations of the survey, respondents were asked to report specific experiences of disability. The three most commonly reported disabilities have remained consistent since 2012. Over one-third of disability resource professionals reported experiencing a chronic/other health disability. Also, of note is an uptick in the percentage of people reporting psychological/psychiatric disability. This could be, in part, attributed to an increasingly open societal attitude regarding mental health.

Educational and Professional Background

Each year the survey has asked participants for information about their educational training and background as well as work experience. Responses were compared to identify patterns and possible changes over time regarding the education and professional background of disability resource professionals.

Education

Most respondents hold a master's degree (see Table 7). In 2008, this was reported by 72% of participants and the rate of occurrence has remained consistent across the years ranging between 65% and 72%. Over the same time period, the number of respondents reporting a doctoral degree has varied between 10% and 20%. A declining number of respondents report a bachelor's degree as the highest degree earned, with only 8% of respondents indicating this as their highest educational degree in 2016.

Ongoing Education

A question regarding continuing education was added to the survey in 2012. In both the 2012 and 2016 data collection, approximately 13% of respondents were in school working toward a degree—roughly 7% were working on a doctorate, 4% were pursuing a master's, and 1.0% reported working toward a bachelor's degree (see Table 8).

Years of Experience in Current Job

Respondents were asked how many years they had worked in their current position. Since 2010, approximately half of disability resource professionals indicated they had been in their current job for five years or less (see Table 9). Participants in more recent administrations of the survey reported more frequently that they had been in their current position 11-15 years or over 20 years.

Work Experience in Higher Education

Survey response options have varied slightly for the question asking respondents about their years of work experience in higher education. The original ranges ("0-5 years," "6-15 years," and "over 15 years") were used in 2008, 2012 and 2016. In 2010, the response options for this question were "0-5 years," "6-20 years," and "over 20 years." With that in mind, it appears that over time there has been a decline in the percentage of respondents who reported five years or less experience in higher education, and a corresponding increase in professionals who indicated they had worked in higher education for more than 15 years (see Table 10).

Work Experience in Higher Education Disability Resources

As described above, survey response options for this question were modified in 2010 making direct comparisons of these data more difficult. Although there is variation across the years, it appears that approximately 4 out of 10 respondents reported working in disability resources for five years or less; almost 40% of participants reported working in disability resources for 6-15 years, and one quarter of respondents had over 15 years of experience in disability resources (see Table 11).

Table 7

Respondents' Highest Degree Earned

Education Level	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Doctoral degree	18	10	20	15
Master's degree	72	72	65	71
Bachelor's degree	9	13	10	8
Other/No data	2	5	5	6

Table 8

Respondents' Ongoing Education

Currently working towards a degree	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
A trade or skill certificate	0.2	0.2
A.A., A.A.S. or other Associate's	0.0	0.0
B.S., B.A., B.I. or other Bachelor's	1.3	0.5
M.A., M.S., M.S.W., M.Ed. or other Master's	4.6	4.0
Ph.D., Ed.D., J.D., M.D. or other Doctorate	7.2	6.8
Other	NA	1.2
Total in school	13.2	12.8
No data	1.1	NA
Not in school	85.7	87.2

Table 9

Employment in Current Position

Years of experience	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
0 - 5	59	51	48	51
6 -10	21	20	20	19
11 - 15	9	14	16	15
16 - 20	7	8	6	7
Over 20	4	7	9	7

Table 10

Employment in Higher Education

Years of Experience	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
≤ 5	30	28	20	23
6-20 (2010) 6-15 (2008, 2012, 2016)	39	53	39	38
>20 (2010) >15 (2008, 2012, 2016)	31	20	41	38

Table 11

Employment in Higher Education Disability Resources

Years of experience	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
≤ 5	44	43	32	39
6-20 (2010) 6-15 (2008, 2012, 2016)	35	47	39	38
>20 (2010) >15 (2008, 2012, 2016)	21	10	28	23

Table 12

Work Experience in Other Fields

Field	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Law or legal services	2	5	4	6
Allied health services and medical professions	4	8	7	7.5
Vocational or rehabilitation services	13	23	15	14
Business	6	24	14	15
Student affairs or academic affairs in higher education	12	32	25	26.5
Counseling, psychological services, social work or other mental health services	17	33	31	27
Elementary/primary or secondary education (K-12)	14	35	12	10
Elementary/primary or secondary education (K-12) with children who are disabled	16	36	29	30
Teaching in higher education	16	38	35	37

Work Experience in Other Fields

Respondents were asked whether they had work experience in a variety of fields related to disability resources. Different years of the survey administration reflected very different responses (see Table 12). The 2008 survey participants reported much lower rates of experience in student affairs, K-12 special education, and teaching in higher education than reported by respondents in subsequent years. Respondents in 2010 indicated more frequent experience in business and K-12 general education. Survey responses from 2012 and 2016, however, are quite consistent in work experience reported by respondents. In both recent administrations of the survey, 35%-38% of respondents reported experience teaching in higher education. Across 2012 and 2016 almost a third of respondents reported experience working in special education in a K-12 setting, serving as a counselor/mental health professional, or working in academic or student affairs.

Discussion of Education and Professional Background Changes Over Time

The large majority of disability resource professionals surveyed have a master's degree, and this has been reported consistently since 2008. In that same time period, there has been a steady decline in the number of respondents who reported a bachelor's degree as their highest educational attainment, while the percentage of professionals with doctoral degrees has varied somewhat over the years. It will be important to continue to monitor what percentage of disability resource professionals report earning a doctoral degree and to gather information on the degree granting program of study in future administrations of the survey.

Many of the disability resource professionals in the survey data enter their work already experienced in the arena of higher education. Almost 40% reported they have more than 20 years (2010) or more than 15 years (2012, 2016) in college and university settings overall, while 23% reported this time frame specifically in disability resources. It appears that many of these professionals have experience teaching in higher education as well as working in other areas of student affairs or academic affairs.

While the field of disability resources appears to have many newcomers with roughly 40% reporting five years of experience or less, there is a stable number of seasoned disability resource professionals who have been in the field for 6-15 years or more. This is an encouraging trend for college campuses as well as the field of disability resources.

When asked about the length of time in the current professional position, however, we see a trend that is known anecdotally in the field. Roughly half of the disability resource professionals surveyed have been in their current position five years or less. On campuses with multiple staff in the disability resource office, this relatively brief time in a professional position may reflect an internal move within the office such as an assistant director being promoted to a director level position. On a campus with a small disability resource office with one or two full-time staff however, a reported change in a professional position is more likely indicative of the professional moving to another college or university. This raises potential training and support needs for smaller campuses that may experience more discontinuity in leadership of disability resource offices and broader campus-wide accessibility work.

As a field that has no standard graduate training track to prepare or become certified for work in disability resources, the professional backgrounds of respondents provide interesting insight into the training and skills of those conducting the work of disability resources. The extensive variation in related professional experience reported in the 2008 and 2010 data in particular are somewhat erratic and are likely a reflection of the opportunity sampling procedure that was used to identify and invite survey respondents. This snowball recruitment technique was also used in 2012, but the professional experiences reported in this administration of the survey were very similar to the 2016 data when the survey was modified to focus entirely on professionals in the AHEAD membership.

The most prominent work experiences reported in recent years include teaching in higher education, experience with K-12 special education, and prior involvement in student or academic affairs, as well as counseling services. The AHEAD Program Standards and the AHEAD Professional Standards take on particular importance for a profession with such diverse professional preparation and work experience. It will be important to continue to monitor prior work experience and trends in campus hiring practices.

Disability Resource Jobs and Structures

Since 2008, the survey has included questions related to the structure of disability resource positions, including such areas as job title, time allocation, and funding sources for positions. Responses were examined to identify changes that may have occurred over time in how the jobs of disability resource professionals in the survey data are defined and structured.

Job Title

To learn more about job roles of professionals in disability resource offices, respondents were asked to select all standard titles that apply or closely apply to their work. In 2008, 54% of participants identified the role of director as an aspect of their work in the disability resource office. The percentage of respondents identifying this role has decreased each year of the survey, culminating with 41% in 2016. Notable shifts in descriptive work roles since 2008 include growing numbers of respondents who indicated serving as a specialist, ADA/504 coordinator, advisor/academic counselor or assistive technology coordinator in their disability resource work. The percentage of respondents who reported working as a college counselor/psychologist has decreased during the same time period. In 2016 a new job title was added to the survey and access coordinator was a functional role identified by over one-third of participants (see Table 13).

Minimum Education Requirements

Respondents were asked what minimal education level would be required for new hires in their current position. There was slight variation in responses each year of the survey. In general, participants reported that a new hire in their current position would be required to have a master's degree. This expectation has grown slightly since 2008 (see Table 14). A small percentage of these positions require a doctoral degree, while approximately 1 in 4 positions define the minimum required education as a bachelor's degree. In each year of the survey, a small number of respondents noted that another degree, such as an associate degree is required or there is no specific educational level required.

Table 13

Functional Job Title

Functional title	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Director/manager	54	53	47	41
Associate or assistant director	12	11	22	12
ADA/504 coordinator	11	8	24	28
Assistive/ adaptive technology Coordinator/ specialist	7	7	14	17
Advisor or academic counselor	13	12	22	20
Specialist	21	21	30	36
College counselor, psychologist	10	12	7	6
Diagnostician	1	12	1	NA
Access coordinator	NA	NA	NA	35

Note. Respondents could select more than one functional title.

Table 14

Disability Resource Job Education Requirements

Minimum education required	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Doctorate	3	3	7	5
Master's	67	64	69	71
Bachelor's	21	24	19	23

Full-time Employment and Proportion of Time in Disability Resources

Each year of survey administration, a large proportion of respondents reported that they are employed full-time (see Table 15). This has grown from 85% of participants in 2008 to 94% in 2016. In 2010, a question was added asking respondents to identify the proportion of one's time in disability resources. Between 2010 and 2016, the percentage of respondents reporting 100% time allocation to disability resources has varied from 50% to 68%. Three quarters of respondents reported 75%-100% time allocation in 2012 and 2016. There was a slight increase in 2016 among professionals who allocate 50-74% of their time to DS, and a corresponding decrease in respondents indicating a 25-49% time allocation.

Supervisory Positions

Many respondents reported that they supervise professional staff as part of their current job responsibilities. This has ranged from 47% in 2008 to a high of 66% in 2012 (see Table 16). Across all four administrations of the survey, 76% or more of respondents either currently supervised staff or have in the past.

Funding Source

A growing number of respondents reported that their positions in disability resources were funded through permanent institutional budgets (see Table 17). In 2008, 80% of respondents reported support through institutional budgets; in 2016, this percentage had risen to 88%. The percentage of positions funded through grant monies alone was approximately 5% from 2008 through 2012 but declined to 1% in 2016.

Discussion of Changes Over Time in How Jobs are Defined and Structured

Overall, employment characteristics in disability resource job structures for survey respondents have been stable. Minimum education requirements have remained much the same, with a small but notable increase in required doctoral and master's degrees. A high percentage of respondents are employed full-time, and trends in the data show an increase in time allocation to disability resources among those respondents who divide their time among multiple roles. Data on funding practices suggest an increasing percentage of disability resource positions are supported by permanent institutional funds. This trend alongside growing institutional time allocation for disability resources speaks to a growing maturity and recognition of the field in higher education. Well over half of these respondents have supervisory responsibilities with other professional staff.

There have been some interesting shifts over time in how respondents identified their functional job roles in the disability resource office. Growing numbers of professionals reported their work as including the functional areas of a specialist (e.g., resource specialist or accessibility specialist). Along with the emergence of the new role as access coordinator, these trends may reflect an increase in disability resource work structured to focus on the campus environment and reflect a social model of disability.

Between 2010 and 2016, there was a notable increase in the number of respondents identifying part of their work role to be that of an ADA/504 coordinator. The shift seen cannot necessarily be attributed to changes in the profession, as it is confounded with the change in the sampling methodology. A recent

Table 15

Disability Resource Job Structure

Current Employment		2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Full-time or part-time	Full Time	85	91	90	94
	Part Time	9	6	5	6
Proportion of time in disability resources	100%	N/A	50	68	52
	75%-100%		64	76	76
	50% to 74%		8	9	13
	25% to 49%		8	9	3
	<24%		10	6	8

Table 16

Supervisory Responsibilities of Disability Resource Jobs

Supervise professional staff	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Currently	47	51	66	61
In the past	45	49	10	24
Never	N/A	N/A	24	15

Table 17

Funding Source for Disability Resource Jobs

Funding Source	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Permanent institution funding	81	79	85	88
Grants and/or other limited funding	4	6	6	1
Both	9	10	5	6

Table 18

Remuneration Basis

Remuneration basis	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Salary	89	88	93	90
Hourly wage	4	7	5	7
Contract/temporary basis	1	1	1	1
Other	NA	NA	NA	2
Unpaid/not applicable/no data	7	4	1	1

study conducted by AHEAD found that only 17% of campuses reported a full-time staff member within the disability resource office who fulfilled this role (Scott, 2019a) suggesting that this may be an additional responsibility assigned to disability resource office professionals.

A final and perhaps predictable shift in reported job functions is the growing number of respondents who indicated serving as an assistive/adaptive technology (AT) coordinator as an integral part of their job. With the extensive growth in technology in all aspects of higher education, and the growing options in AT as a means of providing student choice and access, this is important to recognize as a frequent job role for disability professionals.

Earning and Compensation of Disability Resource Professionals

One of the ongoing goals of the biennial survey has been to learn more about salaries and other forms of compensation for disability resource professionals. We examined the data across the surveys to look for patterns, trends, and changes in how respondents are paid and compensated for their work.

Remuneration Basis

Over time there appears to be little change in how respondents have been remunerated for their services. Most respondents reported being paid an annual salary as noted by 88%-93% of participants. While few participants reported an hourly wage, this has increased slightly between 2008 (4%) and 2016 (7%). Since 2010, a very small number of respondents reported being on a contract or working on a temporary basis (see Table 18).

Non-salary compensation. In addition to salary, most respondents receive additional forms of compensation in a remuneration package. Medical and dental insurance coverage continue to be common benefits (see Table 19). Retirement packages are consistently reported by more than half of respondents across each year of the survey, though mandatory retirement packages or pensions appear to be in slight decline. A frequent benefit in higher education is tuition assistance. Over 70% of respondents reported that this was available to the employee and roughly 58% indicated this benefit was extended to family members as well. In 2012, new response options were added to this question including additional medical, insurance, and leave time benefits. All new options were reported by at least half of respondents, with the most widely reported benefits being vacation and sick leave. There were slight increases across all of the additional response options in 2016.

The non-salary compensation item with the greatest decline over time was access to professional development funding. At its highest, this benefit was reported by 64% of respondents in 2008. With some variation across the years, this benefit was more recently reported by 56% of participants.

Average annual earnings. In each administration of the survey respondents were asked to provide a numerical salary value. Summaries in the survey reports included salary ranges provided across all participants. In 2008, the most common annual salary range for almost half of respondents was $30,000 to under $50,000 (see Table 20). In 2012 and 2016, the most common range was $50,000 to under $70,000 (36% and 40%, respectively). While this question was included in the 2010 survey, the summary report of data did not include the percentage for each response option. It did report an overall full-time salary range of $20,000-$141,000. While other changes in reported salary across the years are small, there appears to be slightly fewer respondents who report earning less than $30,000 and a small but growing number who reported earning $90,000 or more.

Average annual earnings by functional job title. In an effort to provide slightly more nuanced salary information, each year the reported survey data has sorted salaries by the reported functional job titles of respondents. While we reviewed these data for changes and trends, it is important to be aware that these are not the respondents' formal job titles. Rather, they are functional titles; respondents were instructed to select ALL of the standard titles that apply or closely apply to their current work.

Salary is often dependent on duties, level of responsibility, years of experience, highest degree earned, and cost-of-living for the geographic area. The AHEAD survey reports examined for this study report average salary by functional job title, which may or may not reflect duties, level of responsibility, requirements in education or years of experience in the field. Often positions such as psychologist require a doctorate, while managerial positions command years of experience, both factors that tend to drive salaries higher.

As might be expected, reported salaries in 2016 are greater than salaries in corresponding functional areas in 2008. For three of the four administrations of the survey, the highest salaries are indicated for professionals fulfilling the roles of director/manager, ADA coordinator, and college counselor/psychologist (see Table 21). Salaries reported in 2010 are unexpectedly low for director and ADA coordinator work, and notably high for participants who reported a work role as psychologist, counselor, or diagnostician. This

Table 19

Non-Salary Compensation

Non-salary compensation	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Medical/dental insurance for self	87	82	86	85
Medical/dental care for family members	77	74	72	74
Mandatory retirement plan/pension	68	65	63	62
Optional retirement plan	60	50	55	57
Tuition waivers/reduced tuition fees for self	75	66	75	71
Tuition waivers/reduced tuition fees for family	58	48	58	58
Professional development funding	64	55	59	56
Vision plan	NA	NA	68	76
Life insurance	NA	NA	76	80
Short term disability insurance	NA	NA	56	64
Vacation benefit	NA	NA	88	91
Sick leave allowance	NA	NA	90	91
Family leave benefit	NA	NA	64	64

Table 20

Average Annual Earnings from Institution/Employer for Full-Time Employees

Annual Salary	2008 (%)	2010 (%)	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
Less than $30K	7	NA	3	2
$30K to under $50K	47	NA	35	34
$50K to under $70K	34	NA	36	40
$70K to under $90K	10	NA	18	15
$90K to under $110K	3	NA	5	7
$110K to under $130K	1	NA	2	2
$130K to under $150K	0	NA	1	1
$150K to under $170K	0	NA	1	0
$170K and higher	0	NA	0	0

Table 21

Average Earnings for Full-Time Employees by Functional Title

Functional Title	Annual Salary			
	2008	2010	2012	2016
Director/manager	$55,333	$53,196	$66,704	$69,154
Associate or assistant director	$50,032	$53,843	$55,805	$56,420
ADA/504 coordinator	$55,748	$45,076	$61,915	$62,699
Assistive/adaptive technology coordinator/specialist	$46,759	$44,430	$57,894	$55,075
Advisor or academic counselor	$48,587	$53,866	$60,596	$58,873
Specialist	$46,326	$40,858	$57,406	$54,166
College counselor, psychologist, or diagnostician (2008, 2010) College counselor, psychologist (2012, 2016)	$52,985	$89,408	$70,110	$61,594

may be an artifact of the particular snowball sampling used to recruit participants in 2010. Alternatively, there may be some explanation found in the fact that 2010 data included the role of diagnostician along with college counselor and psychologist. In 2012 and 2016, diagnostician salary is reported separately. In 2012, the average salary reported for the functional area of diagnostician was $81,666.

Discussion of changes over time in earning and compensation

Remuneration basis for disability resource professionals responding to the survey has remained fairly consistent over time, with approximately 90% of respondents reporting they are in a salaried position.

Non-salary compensation can take many different forms and over the years, respondents reported having access to many of the perks that are typical of positions in higher education including a variety of medical, retirement, tuition, insurance, and leave benefits. Respondents reporting mandatory retirement plans or pensions have decreased somewhat since 2008, the year of the global financial crisis, while optional retirement plans have remained consistent. A decrease in the percentage of respondents reporting the availability of professional development funds is of concern given the evolving and changing nature of the field of postsecondary disability. It will be important for campuses, AHEAD, and other organizations to continue to consider low-cost options for training and professional development with a wide reach.

Limitations

A natural part of an evolving survey program is to revise and improve the methods and instrument over time as needed. Since 2008, refinements in the target population (to focus entirely on AHEAD members), and changes in the administration of the survey (to capture professional and programmatic data in alternating cycles) have been implemented in response to identified weaknesses. While these changes improve the effectiveness of the survey in meeting AHEAD's goals of the research program, they do create limitations in interpreting the trends and patterns in the findings over time. Similarly, when individual survey questions have been modified, whether to clarify wording or revise response options, the reader needs to exercise caution in making comparisons of responses across survey administrations. The ability to generalize findings of the individual AHEAD surveys also merits consideration when making observations in this study about trends in the profession. Surveys prior to 2016 were distributed using opportunity sampling, with the response sets consisting largely of AHEAD members. Beginning in 2016 the survey sample targeted only AHEAD members. Without the ability to sample directly from the population of postsecondary disability professionals, generalization of the findings is limited.

Implications

The findings of this study provide a unique perspective on the growth and development of the field of postsecondary disability professionals. Data over time suggest a profession that is growing in maturity and recognition. Disability resource professionals appear to be increasingly full-time staff supported by permanent institutional funds. While there is turnover in staff positions on individual campuses, the field as a whole seems to have a significant number of seasoned professionals who are staying in the field for 6-15 years or more and have experience supervising professional staff. In recent years, these professionals increasingly report that they bring background knowledge and experience from the areas of student affairs, academic affairs, and teaching in higher education. Reported experience in K-12 special education and psychology/counseling fields has also become prominent.

Longitudinal data also suggest shifting job roles for disability resource professionals over time. Survey respondents increasingly identified functional responsibilities that focus on the college environment such as access consultant and ADA/504 coordinator. With the rapid growth of technology, it is no surprise that assistive technology is now identified as an integral part of daily work roles. Reflecting on these trends and changes in the demographics and work of these professionals suggests both opportunities and needs.

The reported personal demographics of disability resource professionals in the areas of ethnic, racial, and gender identity have been stagnant across the years of AHEAD's data collection. In the context of national conversations around the importance of campus diversity and national data predicting increasingly diverse student populations (Kim & Aquino, 2017), this trend is out of sync with the work to enhance diversity on many college campuses. Initiatives within professional organizations including AHEAD, ACPA, and NASPA are timely and necessary. Professional competencies related to equity and diversity (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015), opportunities for community engagement (American College Personnel Association, n.d.), and training and conferences (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, n.d.) around topics of multicultural awareness are examples of initiatives in this area. AHEAD's recent work promoting student diversity through special interest groups (SIGs)[1] such as the Racial and Ethnic Diversity SIG, and the LGBTQA SIG are steps in the right direction (Association on Higher Education and Disability, n.d.b). Additional approaches for campuses and professional associations alike are needed to recruit and mentor diverse young professionals and graduate students. Strategies may include collaborations with campus diversity offices, internship and co-operative education opportunities in disability resource offices, and outreach to diverse communities.

Notably, there is a consistent and perhaps growing presence of professionals in the field who identify in the surveys as experiencing disability. This is a logical strength to bring to the work of disability resource offices. The increase in professionals identifying as having a mental health disability or experiencing disability "at times" is very much in line with national conversations and growth in this area (National Council on Disability, 2017). With growing awareness of the campus-wide responsibilities for access and inclusive environments (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017) can the field of postsecondary disability offer more to promote inclusive campuses for employees with disabilities? How can institutions look to disability resource professionals as they work to further diversify the staff and faculty bodies? Opportunities to partner with faculty colleagues in disability studies as well as other disability researchers or professionals across campus may be timely to further the awareness and work of including disability as an aspect of employee diversity across campus.

Trends in the AHEAD data also suggest some unique needs of a field that is maturing in the absence of certification requirements or widespread graduate training programs designed to assure a pipeline of similarly prepared and trained professionals. AHEAD's current initiatives to update both the guiding AHEAD Program Standards and the AHEAD Professional Standards (S. Smith, personal communication, November 12, 2019)[2] are important and timely for professional growth and support. Will there be more professional programs and advanced degrees focused on disability resources in the years ahead? How will the prominent fields of student affairs, academic affairs, special education, and counseling psychology influence graduate training in the field? These will be trends to watch.

In this same context, it is important for the field to recognize that almost one quarter of disability resource professionals reflected in this data have over 15 years of experience in disability resource work. These ex-

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1   Now called Knowledge and Practice Communities
2   These have been officially updated and approved by the Board of Directors

perienced professionals offer important expertise in the daily practice of disability resource work and are perhaps an under-tapped resource. Hatfield and Wise (2015) discussed the value of scholar practitioners who engage in research, writing, and presenting as an integral part of student services work. They noted, "Unless student affairs practitioners, those who work most closely with students, take the time to present or publish, changes to the field will not be informed by those most knowledgeable to improve practices, programs, and services" (p. 8). Increased opportunities and incentives for research and publication would benefit not only the field's most seasoned professionals but young and emerging scholars as well. This may also lead to a tighter connection between disability resource offices and higher education faculty, with opportunities for collaboration.

The decreasing support seen in the data for professional development for disability resource professionals is perhaps not surprising in the broader context of higher education. However, it is certainly not a positive trend for a field experiencing rapid changes. Colleges and universities are encouraged to remember the essential roles that disability resource professionals play on campus in assuring legal compliance and promoting important campus diversity, and are encouraged to consider a variety of ways to support essential professional development and growth.

Review of the reports over time also suggest ways that AHEAD can continue to enhance research and improve the use of findings. How well does the set of survey respondents compare to the national population of higher education disability resource providers? There is no nationally representative data available. Yet AHEAD is in the position of being able to gather demographic information on a large subset of this population through its membership. AHEAD has recognized this need and has begun a process of gathering additional demographic information from new members with the goal of having more comprehensive data for comparison in the future.

The decision to exclude respondents from outside the U.S. in the current review of AHEAD surveys was controversial for the authors. While international members currently reflect approximately 2% of AHEAD's membership (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 25, 2020), AHEAD is an international professional organization. In 2020, the 75 members from locations outside the U.S., reflected 20 different countries (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 25, 2020). In addition to a minority presence, low response rates to the surveys from international members have been reported in the past (Scott, 2016). This suggests the current survey and

data collection process has not been successful with this audience and needs further exploration.

AHEAD's survey program provides a useful perspective on the professionals working in the growing field of disability resources. When survey results are viewed from a longitudinal vantage point, trends and patterns point to a profession that is in some respects evolving with the daily demands of campus access and in other areas in need of growth. Continued inspection and reflection about the profession serve a valuable function for the field. Going forward, it is clear that increased consistency in survey questions and sampling procedures will allow for more comparisons. While this review of data focused on longitudinal trends among disability resource professionals, the revised survey administration process that now gathers data on disability resource programs in alternating cycles of the biennial survey offers a beginning point for similar longitudinal perspectives at the program and campus level in the future.

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