

Aim Higher

Access | Affordability | Completion

Improving Access to Higher Education Act

The Improving Access to Higher Education Act would amend the Higher Education Act (HEA) to improve college access and completion for students with disabilities. Since the early 1990s and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), federal law has been clear – individuals with disabilities must have equitable opportunities to fully participate in society, live independently, and gain economic self-sufficiency. Despite some progress in recent reauthorizations, HEA needs improvements to truly align with the goals of the ADA. If enacted, the Improving Access to Higher Education Act will ensure that more students should have access to a meaningful degree that costs less money and leads to a good-paying job.

Forty years of advancement in K-12 policy and practice – spurred by implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – has improved access to the general curriculum, classroom inclusion, and academic achievement of students with disabilities. Yet, higher education policy has not kept pace with K-12 system improvements, resulting in a lack of higher education options for students with disabilities upon high school graduation. Thanks to higher expectations for educational achievement, decades of improvements in service delivery, and a national focus on inclusion, more students with diverse abilities are graduating from high school than ever before. In 2005, just [46 percent](#) of students with disabilities who graduated from high school enrolled in postsecondary education, with only [40 percent](#) of those students going on to finish a degree or receive a work certificate within eight years. For students with disabilities who enroll in a four year institution, the odds of completing a degree fall to just [34 percent](#).

The Improving Access to Higher Education Act is the first-ever comprehensive legislation that specifically addresses the needs of students with disabilities in higher education. The bill seeks to:

- **Train Faculty to Deliver Accessible Instruction:** offers competitive grants to institutions of higher education (IHE) to train faculty, staff, and administrators in teaching methods and strategies, implementing accommodations, effective transition practices, distance learning, and career pathway guidance
- **Establish an Office of Accessibility in Every IHE:** sets forth a requirement that IHEs must have an office of accessibility and outlines responsibilities of that office that include transparency and dissemination of information related to accommodations and adopting policies that support students with disabilities in obtaining accommodations
- **Develop University-Wide Universal Design for Learning:** includes a new grant program to implement [universal design for learning](#) (UDL) across the entire institution or within a distance learning program, making all aspects of college more accessible for students with disabilities.
- **Increase Accessible Instructional Materials and Technologies:** establishes a commission to develop guidelines for IHEs to use to provide high-quality instructional materials and technologies to students with disabilities, especially students who are blind or have vision loss
- **Expand Higher Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities:** updates a program that provides funding to IHEs to [educate students with intellectual disabilities](#) on campus and integrate them into the higher education community
- **Improve Data Collection and Closed Captioning Training:** adds more information about students with disabilities in IHE data collection efforts and reauthorizes the [Realtime Writers](#) grant that provides training for closed captioning services