



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

Impact of Education Department Changes on Accessibility in Higher Education for People with Disabilities

Higher education institutions have long been essential in providing pathways to independence, employment and social mobility for people with disabilities. Legal protections like the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act have led colleges to invest in accommodations, accessible technologies and inclusive programming. However, growing hostility toward public universities, liberal arts education, and diversity, equity and inclusion programs threatens these gains.

Closing the Department of Education would profoundly affect disabled college students and employees, leading to significant disruptions in support services, legal protections and financial assistance. It would create a fragmented and inequitable educational landscape for people with disabilities. The loss of centralized support, oversight and funding mechanisms would exacerbate existing disparities and hinder progress toward inclusive education and employment. Below are some of the effects these attacks could have on disabled students and employees in higher education.

Impact on Disabled College Students

The Office for Civil Rights within the Education Department is responsible for enforcing laws that prohibit discrimination based on disability. If OCR is moved to another agency, such as the Department of Justice, its capacity to address complaints and ensure compliance may diminish, leading to reduced protections for disabled students.

Other potential effects include:

1. Reduced accessibility support

Budget cuts often target student services, including disability resource centers, assistive technology programs and sign language interpretation. This leads to longer wait times for accommodations and a decreased ability to support students with complex needs.

2. Undermining of DEI frameworks

Many attacks on higher education focus on dismantling DEI offices and policies, which are often the main drivers of disability inclusion on campus. Without these structures, students and employees with disabilities will lose key advocates and allies who work to ensure compliance and equity.

Impact on Disabled Employees

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Closing the Education Department would also affect disabled employees in higher education. Without the department's oversight, institutions may not be compelled to provide reasonable accommodations or enforce antidiscrimination policies effectively, potentially leading to increased workplace inequities.

Other potential effects include:

1. Chilling effect on academic freedom

Restrictions on what can be taught—especially around race, gender and disability—discourage research, advocacy and open discourse about systemic barriers faced by people with disabilities, further marginalizing their voices.

2. Staffing and job security

Employees with disabilities, who already face higher rates of underemployment and discrimination, are more vulnerable to layoffs and restructuring when institutions face political or financial pressure. The removal of remote and flexible work options exacerbates these barriers.

Recommendations

Attacks on higher education are not isolated political maneuvers; they have real, harmful consequences for people with disabilities. Protecting public institutions and their commitments to inclusion is essential. We recommend:

- Preserving and strengthening DEI initiatives, including disability-focused programming.
- Ensuring continued funding for accessibility services and assistive technologies.
- Supporting academic freedom to research and discuss disability-related issues.
- Expanding protections for disabled employees, including remote work flexibility.

Investing in accessible and inclusive education is not just a legal mandate, it's a moral imperative.