

Review

Mentoring Graduate Students with Disabilities: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis and Review

Maura Borrego ^{1,*}, Stephanie Cawthon ², Ariel Chasen ², Lily G. Alvarez ², Emily Landgren ³, Madeline O'Grady ², Desiree Lama ² and Soren Aldaco ²

¹ Walker Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 70701, USA

² College of Education, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 70701, USA

³ Center for Engineering Education, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 70701, USA

* Correspondence: maura.borrego@austin.utexas.edu

Abstract

Graduate education is important for career and social mobility, but it is inaccessible to many students with disabilities. Prior research describes structural and societal barriers—including but not limited to ableism and discrimination—and their impact on graduate students with disabilities. This review discusses challenges unique to graduate education such as faculty-student power differentials, unwillingness to disclose disability for fear of appearing incapable, classification of graduate students as both students and employees, and limited applicability of formal accommodations beyond organized coursework. Informed by our lived experience as disabled graduate students and faculty, we conduct a qualitative evidence synthesis of 28 articles, theses, book chapters and reports into actionable steps graduate faculty can take to mentor and support graduate students with disabilities. Using a mentoring-across-difference framework, we endorse reciprocal mentoring relationships that support trust, mutual learning, and sustained connection between mentors and mentees. Recommendations range from developing trust, questioning ableist disciplinary and graduate program norms, advocating for students and helping students develop advocacy skills, and providing scaffolding for disabled graduate students' learning and professional development.

Keywords: disability; doctoral; graduate training; accessibility; mentorship



Academic Editors: Antonio-Manuel Rodríguez-García and Juan Carlos de la Cruz-Campos

Received: 5 December 2025

Revised: 17 January 2026

Accepted: 28 January 2026

Published: 31 January 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Graduate training is a bedrock of preparation for many professionals, including scientists, doctors, nurses, lawyers, school administrators, and numerous others. Whether for a master's, professional, or doctoral degree, post baccalaureate education represents an opportunity to both increase the quality of our workforce and provide opportunities for individuals to reach their full potential. For example, attainment of graduate degrees is one factor in increasing income and employability for disabled people¹ ([Gulish et al., 2024](#); [US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022](#)) which may help to close gaps in employment and salaries between disabled and non-disabled people ([National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, 2023](#)).

Despite the benefits, people with disabilities are underrepresented in graduate education. Official US figures estimate the proportion of graduate students with disabilities at 11% ([National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023](#)), about half of what is reported

for undergraduates (20%) and far below estimates for the adult population. An estimated 25% of adults in the US have a disability at any given time ([US Centers for Disease Control, 2024](#)), a figure that includes congenital disabilities, temporary conditions, mental health, and other health-related diagnoses. What these numbers indicate is that graduate students with disabilities are either far underrepresented compared with the undergraduate and general population, or that students with disabilities in post baccalaureate programs are less likely to disclose than those in undergraduate programs ([Zimdars, 2022](#)). We assume that both of the above reasons account for the underrepresentation of disabled students in graduate training.

After graduate students with disabilities complete their degrees, there is strong evidence of discrimination toward disabled people in the workforce, even when controlling for age and educational attainment ([Sharma et al., 2025](#)). For the highest paying occupations requiring the most advanced education, applicants with disabilities must have more prior work experience and stronger information and communication skills than their non-disabled counterparts ([Kaye, 2009](#)). Once hired, employees with disabilities face wage gaps that persist even when controlling for productivity and job characteristics ([Hum & Simpson, 1996](#); [O'Hara, 2004](#)) and increased likelihood of involuntary job changes ([Schumacher & Baldwin, 2000](#)), as compared with non-disabled workers.

It is important that graduate students with disabilities are mentored and supported through completing their degrees and developing skills needed to navigate the workforce. Graduate faculty have a duty to prepare graduate students to be successful in their chosen careers. In addition to the disciplinary proficiency all graduate students need, including information and analytical skills ([Kaye, 2009](#)), graduate students with disabilities also need specific advocacy skills to be successful. At the graduate level, such advocacy skills include articulating diverse perspectives and skills they bring to their work, understanding how their disabilities impact their productivity and work styles, learning which accommodations or adjustments support their best work, and knowing how to ask for these accommodations ([Test et al., 2005](#)). It is an unfortunate reality that ableism and discrimination persist in higher education and the workforce, and that the burden of advocacy falls to disabled persons and their allies ([Dolmage, 2017](#)). Faculty can support disabled graduate students by holding them to high standards, advocating for them and helping them learn to advocate for themselves ([Farran, 2018](#)). Such advocacy pays dividends into the future when graduate students with disabilities are successful in their careers and mentor others in developing the same—or more advanced—advocacy skills.

Mentorship is a signature aspect of graduate training ([Sverdlik et al., 2018](#)), particularly in programs with a significant research component including doctorate and thesis master's programs. The focus of this paper is on mentorship and training practices that benefit students with disabilities specifically within the research enterprise, including research and advocacy skills. Many of these important mentoring and training practices go unexamined in their degree of accessibility and efficacy for students with disabilities. For example, in one survey, disabled graduate students reported low self-esteem and lack of confidence more frequently than all other marginalized groups studied ([Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016](#)). This finding warrants an examination of why disabled students have such low self-assurance and how mentorship is failing these students.

This paper focuses specifically on the role of mentorship in positioning disabled graduate students as valued contributors to their fields and in environments what were not built for them. Using the foundation of a relational mentoring framework ([Li et al., 2018](#)), we posit mentoring works as a two-way street between parties' personal and professional development while considering multiple aspects of a successful professional career

(Ragins & Verbos, 2017). It goes beyond the transaction of tasks and conceptual knowledge to encompass mutual learning and support.

1.2. Rationale for the Study

Through a qualitative evidence synthesis and personal insights as faculty and graduate students at a research-intensive institution in the US, we tie together essential information and recommendations for ways to increase the accessibility of our post baccalaureate training and build better systems for future cohorts. We argue that the literature is sufficiently developed and dispersed among disciplines to warrant the type of summarization and weighing of evidence a qualitative evidence synthesis provides. Qualitative evidence syntheses develop more cumulative knowledge than single studies and “rich interpretations relating to the impact of a condition and can enable a greater understanding of individuals’ and groups’ experiences, views, beliefs and priorities” (Flemming & Noyes, 2021, p. 1). Applied to mentoring graduate students with disabilities, this synthesis develops a richer and broader understanding of the experiences of disabled graduate students and how to best support them than concluded by any single study (Grant & Booth, 2009). We are able to identify where multiple studies in different settings have identified similar issues, strengthening the evidence base while staying consistent with a qualitative research worldview (Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

The research questions are:

1. What are the main themes in the extant literature around mentoring master’s and doctoral students with disabilities?
2. What recommendations for mentoring master’s and doctoral students with disabilities can be synthesized from this literature?

This paper presents additional background on graduate education for disabled students, describes a model of mentoring across difference, describes our review methods, presents major findings from the literature and synthesizes these into recommendations for mentoring graduate students with disabilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Barriers to Graduate Study for Students with Disabilities

This section focuses on the unique barriers to graduate study for students with disabilities. A full review of the barriers to entry and retention for disabled undergraduate students is available from other sources (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2018; Friedensen et al., 2021b; Toutain, 2019). First, it provides context on master’s and doctoral programs in the US, which is the reference point of the authors.

In the US, coursework is a major component of both master’s and doctoral programs (Fleming et al., 2023). It is most common in the US for master’s and doctoral students to take a full load of organized courses for their first two years, e.g., before starting research in earnest (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005). Although the doctoral degree is focused on research in later years, during which the advisor has substantial power over the student, doctoral students interact with multiple faculty members, particularly in their initial years of study. Some master’s programs rely entirely on coursework, while others may include research in the form of a project or thesis (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). In the graduate education literature, doctoral students receive the most attention, and the term “graduate” may be used ambiguously to refer to doctoral students. In this review, the authors attempt to include findings for master’s and doctoral students, since coursework, funding concerns, faculty interactions and even advising relationships impact students at both levels.

2.1.1. Preparation, Recruitment, and Admission Barriers

Graduate school applications may have inherent barriers to entry, such as standardized test requirements that are inflexible with regard to accommodations or high bars for documentation of accessibility needs (Rose, 2010). Further, undergraduate preparation may not have been fully accessible, leaving disabled students underprepared for graduate study. Incidental learning, group study, and other informal learning settings are typically not covered by undergraduate academic accommodations, and students with disabilities miss out, often doing their best to learn on their own (Leppo, 2015).

Lack of information about accessibility of graduate programs means disabled students may not know which program can best support them. Graduate program outreach typically does not include information about accessibility in recruitment materials (Rose, 2010), which means students are unaware of which program would best support them. Yet in open-ended survey responses, psychologists and psychology trainees with disabilities advised students to carefully consider graduate school and work environments to ensure they are supportive of disability (Lund et al., 2016). In the same survey, half of the respondents indicated disability was a factor in where to attend graduate school (Lund et al., 2014). Accessibility considerations included weather, the size of the campus, and parking and transportation (Lund et al., 2014). Similarly, graduate students may not be aware whether a campus has a disability services office or whether it serves graduate students (Zimdars, 2022). Finally, realization and diagnosis that one has a disability can happen during graduate study and would not be disclosed in the application or fully considered when selecting a graduate program (Lund & Hanebutt, 2022). Graduate program faculty can mentor students through these processes, connect them to resources, and advocate for accessible program policies and procedures.

2.1.2. Power and Ableism in Faculty-Student Relationships

Graduate advisors create and reproduce culture around disability and access (R. J. Perez et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2024). Their actions shape perceived safety and inclusivity for mentees navigating both visible and invisible disabilities. A large percentage of disabilities cannot be identified from casual conversation or interaction (Goodwin, 2020). Estimates of nonapparent or “invisible” disabilities are as high as 75–80% of all disabling conditions (Curda, 2024; DirectEmployers Association, 2023; US Bureau of the Census, 1997). While one may be able to infer a disability or disabling condition when someone uses a mobility aid or has a guide dog, disabilities such as mental health, learning disabilities, autism, cancer, and hearing loss are much subtler. When thinking about graduate students or applicants, it is possible that if a student does have a disability, that this is not known to the faculty or student colleagues. In other words, many graduate faculty may be working with more disabled students than they realize.

As graduate students focus on a particular discipline, they may be more concerned than ever about how graduate program faculty perceive them as competent, independent researchers (Rose, 2010). Doctoral students may be less likely to disclose a nonapparent disability and ask for help (Zimdars, 2022), since relationships with faculty are longer term and more consequential to career trajectories. Graduate students work closely with their research advisor, and administrators may be unwilling to intervene in exploitative relationships (Bodensteiner, 2017). Doctoral training has been described as an apprenticeship, since many research skills (e.g., application of abstract ideas into concrete problem solving) cannot be learned in the classroom (Walker et al., 2008). Thus, at the graduate level, faculty have tremendous power over students (Friedensen et al., 2024), but a good mentor avoids wielding this power against students.

Certain aspects of doctoral training lead to a huge disparity in power, including the view of graduate students as cheap labor and the fact that US students' salary, tuition, and often healthcare are dependent upon employment on their advisor's research projects (Fuhrmann et al., 2011; Friedensen et al., 2024). International students with disabilities may additionally be at the mercy of their advisor or program to demonstrate continuous funding and degree progress to maintain visa status (Rice et al., 2009). Student concerns for their safety and access to medical care are a critical component of graduate student life and may strain relationships with supervisors and mentors who expect long hours or physically demanding work (Friedensen et al., 2024). For many disabled students in the US, maintaining continuous medical coverage through good academic standing and on-campus employment that covers insurance premiums and medical expenses is essential (White, 2002). Mentors who do not see this connection might prematurely cut students' funding or assign grades that lead to academic probation, inadvertently exacerbating some disabilities and removing important supports that enable academic progress.

In the academy, there are often few disciplinary role models for how to be a disabled professional (Friedensen et al., 2021a). Lack of visibility reduces the transparency of disability in general and disabled faculty as a potential resource for disabled graduate students in particular, making it more difficult to broach accessibility conversations in many graduate programs. Students with disabilities may therefore delay disclosing and seeking support from their faculty mentors until challenges overwhelm them (O'Shea & Thurman, 2017). Without a department culture of accessibility and normalizing flexibility, graduate students may not have sufficient support to successfully complete their degree and transition into the professional workplace.

2.1.3. Time Demands and Classification as Students and Employees

In the US, Canada, and some European countries, many graduate students fund their education through on-campus employment such as teaching or research assistantships (Torka et al., 2022). In these situations, it can be unclear whether graduate students are students or employees. Employee accessibility may be governed by a different set of laws and managed through different organizations on campus separate from academic accommodations. Due to their dual roles, students—and occasionally staff—may not understand where students should go for help, sometimes resulting in delays and frustration with little hope of resolution. Without careful attention, advocacy, and mentoring, their accessibility needs can fall through the cracks between these two roles (Lund, 2023; Saltes, 2022).

In US higher education, including post baccalaureate training, individual students must both disclose and request accommodations from their institution, which then manages the implementation of approved requests with individual faculty and advisors (Toutain, 2019). While faculty and advisors are free to provide flexibility and accommodations without this central approval, legal compliance can only be facilitated through the official request, review, and approval process (Toutain, 2019). Graduate students with disabilities may need to be encouraged and mentored through this process. Although educational accommodations are governed by different legislation in different countries, there are many similarities between US, Scandinavian, UK, Irish and Australian systems (Cliffe et al., 2020; Jorgensen et al., 2018; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014).

Academic accommodations tend to focus on formal instruction (e.g., courses), so disability services may not offer accommodations for graduate-specific research experiences, and disability services staff have less experience adapting accommodations to qualifying exams and research settings (Tamjeed et al., 2021; Zimdars, 2022). Fewer graduate students access formal academic accommodations than undergraduates for reasons including being unaware of the process, assuming graduate students are not eligible for services, and

negative experiences requesting accommodations at their prior institutions (Hanrahan, 2024; O'Shea & Thurman, 2017; L. F. Perez, 2013; Spier & Natalier, 2023; M. A. Sukhai, 2019; Zimdars, 2022).

Additionally, long hours and time demands often characterize graduate study. Like staff, graduate students are expected to take fewer breaks between academic terms during which they can rest and recover from academic demands. Graduate training workloads often require balancing large amounts of coursework, research, employment, and personal obligations (Martinez et al., 2013). For some disabled students, these tasks require double or triple the time to complete due to the inaccessibility of materials, the nature of their disability, and the paperwork involved in documenting their disability and obtaining formal accommodations (Hannam-Swain, 2018; Hanrahan, 2024; M. A. Sukhai, 2019; Teichman, 2010). Mentors and peers who are familiar with the institution may be able to help navigate these delays (Lund et al., 2016). In many graduate programs, there is the expectation of longer class periods as compared to undergraduate programs. A class or meeting of 2–3 h can be a long time for people with a disability or health condition that requires frequent breaks and attention to physical endurance needs. In laboratory sciences, there is a similar multiplicative increase in expected hours spent in a lab conducting dissertation research and associated expectations for focus and mental endurance (Friedensen et al., 2024). Such expectations have been critiqued as exclusionary and ableist (Dolmage, 2017; Spier & Natalier, 2023).

2.2. A Different Kind of Mentoring

Given these many barriers, faculty mentors are arguably the most crucial link between disabled students and strategies to mitigate the negative effects of accessibility barriers (Sverdluk et al., 2018). This section offers insights on mentoring frameworks that represent a shift in thinking from accessibility as only relating to classroom accommodations to how graduate faculty can make their training and preparation for the workforce more accessible for all, including students with disabilities.

Mentoring disabled graduate students is not, for many faculty, something they may intentionally set out to do. When embarking on a faculty career, many individuals focus mostly on the possibility of working with students like themselves, rather than considering the full spectrum of students they may encounter. Given the prevalence of disability in the adult population, and the knowledge that a large majority of those disabilities are non-apparent (e.g., US Centers for Disease Control, 2024), academia needs to better equip its faculty to include accessibility in their mentoring practices. Faculty need an understanding of how to navigate mentoring in times of crisis, skills to identify where accessibility barriers may lie, and strategies to mitigate their impact on student performance and the larger research enterprise (Reddick & Young, 2012). Helping graduate students develop skills that will help them not only in higher education but throughout their careers ensures the future of our fields (Fuhrmann et al., 2011). Attending to accessibility enables diverse viewpoints and talents to enrich research and practice (Mannix & Neale, 2005).

Reddick discusses the concept of “mentoring across difference” with students or junior colleagues who come from a different racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or familial backgrounds (Li et al., 2018; Reddick & Young, 2012). This framework assumes that mentors come from more highly resourced and less marginalized backgrounds than mentees. For example, only 3% of the disabled graduate students and professionals in Lund et al.'s (2014) survey were mentored by a faculty member or professional with a disability. One of the key ideas behind this framework is that there must be a sustainable, two-way relationship, where each person is finding value and purpose and connection, drawing upon the co-mentoring or reciprocal partnership model of mentoring (Mullen, 2000). This requires

the mentor to embrace vulnerability, depart from the familiar, and move instead toward purposeful disruption of understanding (Reddick & Young, 2012).

3. Methods

3.1. Author Positionality

The first two authors are full professors with many years of experience advising our own graduate students and serving as graduate coordinators in our departments, responsible for admissions and dealing with tough cases of students falling behind or needing to switch advisors. We share many years of experience that help us identify gaps in the graduate student pipeline when it comes to disability and accessibility, and we are committed to learning from the experiences of our students as part of a relational mentoring approach. We acknowledge that as full professors, we have the privilege and responsibility to provide flexibility and customize workloads for our advisees, as slower student progress is unlikely to negatively impact our careers. We triangulate this experience with feedback from our own graduate mentees and a systematized search of the literature on supporting graduate students with disabilities. Ariel is a STEM Education researcher and ecologist currently working as a National Science Foundation postdoctoral fellow. She is a deaf/hard of hearing individual whose research focuses on accessibility and identity in lab and field environments. Lily is a blind woman and a PhD student in educational psychology. Her research explores how socio-cultural contexts influence how people experience and identify with disability. Emily is a disabled white woman and a PhD candidate in Mechanical Engineering. She researches disability in higher STEM education, with current projects looking at disabled PhD student experiences and the impact of acoustics on disabled university students. Madeline is a PhD student in Educational Psychology with a research focus on disabled college students. She is currently a student fellow at National Disability Center for Student Success. Desiree is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology. Her research focuses on initiatives to improve accessibility and inclusion for queer disabled students of color on college campuses and institutions. Soren is a graduate student in Educational Psychology. She has personal, relational, and academic experience with disability and comes from a non-traditional educational background. Her research interests understanding human development from a systems perspective, with special attention to digital impact.

3.2. Qualitative Evidence Synthesis Approach

The methodology for this review is a qualitative evidence synthesis, which relies on qualitative approaches to compare themes across individual studies (Grant & Booth, 2009). Qualitative evidence synthesis is gaining popularity in education to answer research questions related to understanding phenomena (such as the experiences of graduate students with disabilities) and associate the broader environment with interventions (such as how mentoring can counteract structural barriers to the success of graduate students with disabilities; Flemming & Noyes, 2021). The current synthesis deviates slightly from established qualitative evidence synthesis methods by including quantitative and mixed methods studies such as surveys in the dataset.

The first author conducted an initial Google Scholar search for “mentoring graduate students with disabilities.” Among the first 100 search results, just nine were relevant sources specifically addressing graduate-level education for students with disabilities. Stated formally, the inclusion criteria were:

1. Focus on doctoral or master’s-level students with disabilities as the mentees. For studies with broad sampling, presentation of least some results specific to graduate students with disabilities.

2. Published in English.
3. A full text could be reasonably obtained by the researchers.

There were no limits on publication date, but the search was conducted in Fall 2024. The exclusion criteria were:

1. Undergraduates as mentees and/or graduate students serving as mentors rather than as mentees.
2. Graduate student mentees who did not identify as disabled, e.g., mentoring teaching assistants to better teach undergraduates with disabilities.
3. Disability was not the focus nor presented as a subset of findings, e.g., disability mentioned only as a facet of diversity addressed by mentoring.
4. No mention of mentoring in title or abstract.

Careful reading of the initial 9 qualifying sources identified an additional 19 relevant cited references, resulting in 28 total qualifying sources, listed in Table A1 in the Appendix A. Among these qualifying sources are 18 journal articles, 7 dissertations/theses, 2 book chapters and 1 report. Overwhelmingly, the sources described the perspectives of graduate students with disabilities, many focusing on barriers and support during their graduate study, $n = 19$ of the sources. Taken together, they represent a tight citation network building across academic fields and countries (17 US, 3 UK, 5 Canada, and one each from South Africa, Australia, and Belgium), representing a form of saturation in sampling. In terms of discipline, 11 of 29 sources are situated in psychology; only two others are discipline specific.

What is missing from this body of literature is a review that translates it into actionable advice for faculty members who supervise and teach graduate students. The current analysis seeks to fill that gap. Specifically, the first author extracted data in two phases as suggested by [Flemming and Noyes \(2021\)](#). First, she tabulated contextual details of each source including country, population and study design for inclusion in an Table A1. Second, she copied and summarized relevant findings from each of the 28 qualifying studies into a single document for analysis. The most useful sources described student experiences, mostly challenges. With iterative feedback from the other authors, the first author conducted thematic synthesis ([Flemming & Noyes, 2021](#)) to group the findings, e.g., formal accommodations, teaching assistantships. The findings section summarizes results from the 28 qualifying sources and is organized according to the final coding scheme. Although thematic synthesis can lead to analytical themes which provide explanations or pose hypotheses ([Thomas & Harden, 2008](#)), the current data are limited in terms of new insights since many studies are focused on description of student experiences within a specific graduate training setting.

There are limitations to this approach. More extensive use of educational literature databases, keywords and Boolean operators would likely have identified additional sources but not enough to warrant the extensive additional effort. As recommended by [Flemming and Noyes \(2021\)](#), we “privilege[d] specificity...over sensitivity” (p. 3) and employed additional strategies including searching the reference lists of all qualifying sources. Additionally, a subset of the authors recently completed a scoping review ([Borrego et al., 2025](#)), screening 12,000 abstracts for studies of undergraduates with disabilities but found few, if any, studies of graduate students with disabilities. We seek to counteract these limitations of the formal literature search with our extensive lived experience as graduate students and faculty with disabilities.

4. Findings

4.1. Disclosure to Faculty

One of the most prevalent topics in the extant literature on graduate students with disabilities is disclosure of disability status to advisors and other faculty members. It is interesting to note that few sources discuss disability disclosure from the students' viewpoint. Rather, advice simply encourages graduate students to disclose to their advisors or search for an advisor to whom it would be safe to disclose. [M. Sukhai and Latour \(2023\)](#) advocate for students to disclose to their advisor directly to build trust. They emphasize the need for open communication about expectations, workload, and the evolving nature of their research and their disability. Similarly, [Collins \(2015\)](#) emphasizes that graduate students with disabilities need to get along with their advisor and find an advisor with whom they can be open about their needs. A good advisor needs to be flexible, not too demanding, and accommodating of differences ([Collins, 2015](#)). [Oledzka and Darby \(2025\)](#) recommend faculty members get to know graduate students whether or not the students mention disability, which can support academic and career success even if students never disclose their disability. Beyond the characteristics of a 'good advisor,' there is little direct advice on how advisors can signal to students their openness to these conversations, placing much of the burden on students.

Beyond the advisor, graduate students struggle with whether, when, and to whom to disclose their disability. Advice about disclosure from [Lund et al.'s \(2016\)](#) disabled participants was very mixed, but more apparent disabilities aligned with early disclosure. Yet in many studies, participants reported negative or mixed reactions to disclosing to faculty ([Lund et al., 2014](#); [Lund & Hanebutt, 2022](#)), such as discrimination, microaggressions, stereotyping, and stigma in their graduate programs ([Hanrahan, 2024](#)). The power dynamic between advisor and student may be exacerbated by an advisor's attitude that disabled persons should do as they are told and challenge the advisor less often than non-disabled students ([M. Sukhai & Latour, 2023](#)). Struggling with disclosure and discussing disability with others can lead to social isolation in a graduate program ([L. F. Perez, 2013](#)). In one survey study, 10% of respondents never disclosed their disability to anyone in their graduate program, while 78% disclosed it to program faculty ([Lund et al., 2014](#)).

Ableist expectations also play a role in decisions to disclose disability status to graduate program faculty. Shame about disability prevents some students from disclosing ([Lund & Hanebutt, 2022](#)). Multiple participants of [Spier and Natalier \(2023\)](#) had unsupportive advisors who made students question themselves and work even harder to prove their worth. Students in [Vergunst and Swartz's \(2022\)](#) study hesitated to disclose out of anticipated misconceptions from faculty and not wanting to be treated differently. These students observed psychology faculty questioning the legitimacy of disability, such as denying the existence of mental illness. Similarly, boundary issues may arise if the advisor researches disability and is overconfident that they know what is best for disabled students ([M. Sukhai & Latour, 2023](#)). Students were also concerned about crossing boundaries in their advising relationship with respect to "personal care and professional care" ([Vergunst & Swartz, 2022](#)).

4.2. Formal Accommodations

As mentioned, graduate students with disabilities may also be less likely to disclose to their institution and use formal accommodations, even though they tend to be more aware of their access needs than undergraduates ([Zimdars, 2022](#)). In one survey, only 45% of graduate students with disabilities disclosed to their disability office at any point during graduate study ([Lund et al., 2014](#)). Some graduate students do not realize they are eligible for formal accommodations ([Hanrahan, 2024](#); [M. A. Sukhai, 2019](#)). [Teichman \(2010\)](#)

found that social work graduate students worked much more closely with faculty than disability services staff because the faculty gave them more benefit of the doubt about their disabilities. Faculty may be less likely to insist on documentation from graduate students than from undergraduates. Academic support services tend to be targeted to undergraduates (Zimdars, 2022), but there is disagreement about whether this is because graduate students are more independent or simply unaware of support services (Zimdars, 2022). One participant in L. F. Perez's (2013) study had less need for formal accommodations as a PhD student than a master's student because they knew the professors better and could discuss accommodations case by case.

However, most studies conclude that fear of stigma (Zimdars, 2022) and wanting to appear independent (L. F. Perez, 2013) are the main reasons graduate students do not use formal accommodations. In surveying disability service officers, O'Shea and Thurman (2017) found fear of stigmatization and disclosure as the most frequent reasons doctoral students do not use accommodations. However, they also found that test-taking accommodations were perceived as most useful and most often used accommodations (O'Shea & Thurman, 2017), which calls into question the extent to which accommodation processes have been adapted to graduate-level research work. Advisors may have concerns it will cost too much money, time or effort to accommodate graduate students with disabilities (M. A. Sukhai, 2019). Finally, Spier and Natalier (2023) interviewed six doctoral candidates about their experiences requesting reasonable accommodations and being frequently denied. The authors critique the provision of "reasonable" accommodations that allows normalized ableism to continue. Faculty have immense power to define what is reasonable in their discipline, often relying on traditional, ableist expectations of long hours and arduous work instead of questioning the core competencies of the discipline.

4.3. Graduate Study Timelines and Institutional Policies

The research suggests students with disabilities may need more time or flexibility with academic timelines. In one survey, 80% of respondents faced academic barriers keeping up with the pace of their program, and 85% reported needing more time to manage their disabilities (Hanrahan, 2024). M. A. Sukhai (2019) explains that reduced course loads extend time to degree and may cause students to accrue more debt. Time to manage their disabilities may encompass dealing with emotions and expectations of bodies (e.g., frustration when rest breaks interrupt work) or taking a leave of absence for surgery (Spier & Natalier, 2023).

Many institutions have policies that do not provide the flexibility needed for students with disabilities. Students in three studies reported difficulties with course load and tuition, including flat-rate tuition (i.e., not reduced for part-time enrollment, Teichman, 2010), scholarships and fellowships that require full-time enrollment (Montoya, 2009), and scholarship payments being stopped after a student has taken the maximum allowed medical leave (Spier & Natalier, 2023). Students with disabilities spend considerably more time dealing with such policies and paperwork, and sometimes institutional bureaucracy is the cause of delays related to accommodations, financial aid and assistive technology (Teichman, 2010). Graduate students with disabilities need—but do not often get—more assistance with course registration, such as priority registration, modified course schedules, and permission to withdraw from courses after published deadlines (Montoya, 2009). M. A. Sukhai (2019) suggests that longer times to completion need to be considered case by case; for example, students could be enrolled full time with a reduced load. Norman (2021) studied disabled students in an online master's program, which provided flexibility for participants to "minimize damage" to their health from graduate study, but since many were still trying to work while in a full-time program, stress offset many of the benefits.

4.4. Workspace Accessibility

Several studies discussed inaccessible materials (L. F. Perez, 2013; M. A. Sukhai, 2019) and inaccessible physical spaces (Saltes, 2022; Spier & Natalier, 2023). The teaching assistants interviewed by Saltes (2022) mentioned being assigned to teach and hold office hours in inaccessible spaces: small offices which did not fit their bodies and assistive devices, classrooms with steps and graduated levels and buildings with no elevators, heavy outer doors, overly steep ramps, or no retrofitting. Similarly, Spier and Natalier (2023) highlight how graduate students do not have as much access to modified workstations or accessible parking, even when requesting disability accommodations. Lack of accessible workspaces forces students to work from home, resulting in a loss of networking and belonging benefits (Spier & Natalier, 2023). Other studies mention social isolation or exclusion from graduate programs experienced by students with disabilities (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; L. F. Perez, 2013). Lack of belonging undermines students' ability to advocate for their needs. Teichman's (2010) participants question, "how much can you fight if you don't feel like you belong?"

Travel to professional conferences to network and present one's research is an important component of doctoral education, yet it is one that excludes many students with disabilities. Hannam-Swain (2018) mentions the impracticalities of conference travel with a disability. M. Sukhai and Latour (2023) suggest that extra funding may be needed for students with disabilities to travel to conferences, as disabled students are often not eligible for scholarships that would offset additional costs (De Picker, 2020). In attempts at equity, programs award students the same amount of travel funded regardless of disability status and actual expenses. Hidden costs of conference travel include taxis and close hotels for rest breaks, as well as the need to bring a caregiver (De Picker, 2020). De Picker (2020) gives a detailed personal account of conference travel as a wheelchair user with Cerebral Palsy. They must contact organizers in advance to ask about presenter seating, microphone systems, and the possibility of video or remote participation. They must carefully research the venues and travel logistics related to airports, train stations and public transit. Conference organizers should consider accommodations that do not isolate disabled attendees, such as multiple options for wheelchair seating and sufficient seating at meals for participants who cannot balance a plate of food in their hands or on their laps.

4.5. Teaching Assistantships

Teaching roles are one place where it is especially unclear whether graduate students are governed by academic policies or human resources (Lund, 2023; Saltes, 2022). Even when a student has already obtained formal accommodations through their disability office, accommodations for teaching may still fall through the cracks (Lund & Hanebutt, 2022). Special teaching considerations for students with disabilities include requesting a teaching schedule at certain times, in certain rooms and in certain buildings, as well as dealing with expectations to stand while teaching, walk around the room, learn students' names and dress professionally instead of for comfort or accessibility (Saltes, 2022). Participants in Saltes' (2022) study struggled with wanting to disclose their disability to students to encourage them to seek help but feeling like disclosure backfires when students have fixated on the disability, for example, in their end of course evaluations. Lund (2023) posits faculty need to reconsider the "essential functions of teaching" without falling back on "the way we've always done it" (p. 102). Lund and Hanebutt (2022) suggest that mentors and peers are helpful to brainstorm when and how to change classroom norms. Having allies with whom to address teaching concerns is important, since negative teaching experiences and the heavy workload deter many students with disabilities from faculty positions (Saltes, 2022).

4.6. Scaffolds

A few studies suggested scaffolds to support disabled graduate student success. Writing is a major component of any graduate program, and multiple studies recommend additional writing support for students with disabilities (Montoya, 2009). For example, an advisor can offer specific help with proofreading (Collins, 2015). However, issues have been raised regarding credit. If a student receives assistance with their research, some advisors may interpret this as reduced right to authorship (M. Sukhai & Latour, 2023) or intellectual property (M. A. Sukhai, 2019).

There are limited research findings on the other types of structure that might assist graduate students with disabilities. As compared with undergraduates with learning disabilities, graduate students reported needing more one-on-one instruction (Montoya, 2009). Zimdars' (2022) survey of advisors concludes that students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (LD) need support in organization, time management, writing, and self-advocacy. Oledzka and Darby (2025) found that deadlines are also important for graduate students with ADHD/LD. They recommend flexible deadlines or giving students autonomy to make their own deadlines, even for qualifying exams and defenses. However, a few participants mentioned that too much flexibility can be detrimental to success; occasional firmness is good (Oledzka & Darby, 2025).

4.7. Advocacy

A majority of disabled graduate students (72%) report having to advocate for themselves in graduate programs, with 48% of disabled students not having mentors and allies for their disabilities within the university (Hanrahan, 2024). Collins (2015) emphasizes that a good advisor of graduate students with disabilities is someone who can help navigate rigid structures and expectations of universities and doctoral programs. Lund et al. (2020) similarly reinforces the need for supportive mentors who can act as advocates when barriers are met. Barriers may include inappropriate questions, inaccessible learning materials, and negative experiences with faculty knowledge and attitudes (Joshi, 2006). Thus, Oledzka and Darby (2025) recommend that faculty advocate for students. For example, one of their research participants gave their advisor permission to disclose their ADHD diagnosis to other faculty members when it helps with advocacy. This advocacy sometimes involves questioning the essential competencies of the discipline, which may lead to flexibility in course and degree requirements (Rose, 2010; M. A. Sukhai, 2019).

4.8. Resilience and Peer Support

Multiple studies discuss the importance of resilience, advocacy and a supportive network. Participants in L. F. Perez's (2013) study said their perseverance, resilience, and stubbornness served them well. Some reframed their disability as an asset, and they worked to cultivate supportive relationships to help them through graduate study (L. F. Perez, 2013). Similarly, resilience was a major finding in Teichman's (2010) study, citing persistence in advocating for themselves with upper-level administrators and viewing misunderstanding with faculty as no reflection of their own inadequacies. They also emphasized the importance of "supportive mentors:" family, staff and faculty who helped them navigate graduate study with a disability. Lund et al. (2016) summarized advice from disabled graduate students to others: find mentors and support groups; advocate for your rights, know your rights, make connections with offices that can help you, get comfortable talking about your needs, get creative; ask professors very directly for specific accommodations; register with the disability service office; and document everything.

5. Comparison of Findings with Prior Studies

Several of the main findings identified for graduate students with disabilities are also present in the literature on undergraduates with disabilities. The main differences arise from the graduate-level commitment to a particular discipline, program and set of faculty members. Disclosure to faculty is a major concern for undergraduates (Friedensen et al., 2021b), but for graduate students, the decision is higher-stakes because they will interact with program faculty for multiple semesters and have a finite pool from which to request recommendation letters and other job-seeking assistance. Formal accommodations are also a strong consideration for undergraduates, as they relate to disclosure and negotiation with instructors (Bettencourt et al., 2018). For graduate students, there are additional concerns that formal accommodations may not effectively address non-course tasks related to research and degree milestones (Tamjeed et al., 2021; Zimdars, 2022). Timelines and policies related to enrollment can negatively impact undergraduates in similar ways to graduate students (Friedensen et al., 2021b). In the US, more graduate students than undergraduates rely on the institution for their funding and may be in a riskier financial position when considering part-time enrollment or leave of absence. Workplace accessibility concerns are more salient for graduate students who may spend years assigned to an office or laboratory, whereas undergraduates deal with accessibility of new spaces each academic term (Jeannis et al., 2018; Stumbo et al., 2011). Writing is arguably more important at the graduate than undergraduate level, with higher expectations that it be done unassisted. Zimdars' (2022) finding about organization, time management, writing and self-advocacy needs for ADHD/LD students applies to their graduate and undergraduate study participants. Finally, advocacy, resilience, and peer support are similarly important for disabled undergraduates (Pfeifer et al., 2021).

In terms of similarities to other studies of graduate student experiences, disabled students do not necessarily have unique experiences, but the challenges are more salient. Degree progress timelines and enrollment policies can negatively impact graduate students with other responsibilities such as caring for family members or working full time (Sallee, 2015). For non-disabled graduate students, office space is rarely mentioned as a concern, and professional conference experiences may actually expand students' views of diversity and belonging in their field (Campbell et al., 2021). All graduate students are subject to the confusion and frustration of being employees, students, both or neither, but graduate students with disabilities have more time-consuming, accessibility-related requests that can fall through these cracks (Lund & Hanebutt, 2022; Saltes, 2022). Among teaching assistants, concerns about authority and professionalism are also found in studies of other marginalized groups (Gomez et al., 2011). Much has been written about the importance of writing training in graduate study (e.g., Kamler & Thomson, 2014), and advice specific to supporting neurodivergent students is just beginning to emerge (e.g., Wallbank, 2025). Advocacy, resilience, and peer support are important for all graduate students. The difference may be that students from marginalized groups may find it more difficult to find such peer support and role models in their graduate programs (e.g., Burt et al., 2025), similarly to the documented experiences of disabled graduate students.

6. Recommendations

The opening of this paper identified challenges experienced by individuals with disabilities as they consider graduate study. It concludes with a targeted list of specific opportunities for faculty and administrators working with graduate students to support disabled students and others. Overall, we encourage our faculty colleagues to embrace the additional but important and rewarding work of advising research students with disabilities. It takes effort to advise graduate students with disabilities, getting to know their

goals, understanding how their disability impacts graduate study, and finding solutions to barriers as they arise. Each student is different, and not all of these recommendations will have positive effects on all students with disabilities. It is crucial to work toward making a difference in an area where many students would otherwise fall through the cracks. This requires a proactive attitude, being creative, and questioning the way your graduate program has always done things. In short, the detailed recommendations provide a roadmap for (a) committing to supporting disabled graduate student success, (b) building a trusting relationship with students that supports honest discussions, and (c) advocating for students in a variety of ways grounded in understanding institutional policies and resources.

6.1. Increase Awareness Among Prospective Students of Resources to Support Them in Postbaccalaureate Training

Partner with your institution accommodations and student support offices to include these resources when at graduate school fairs, at open houses, and in degree marketing materials. Continue this information sharing throughout the academic degree-seeking process (Riggs et al., 2024).

6.2. Commit to Supporting the Success of Disabled Students Who Have Been Admitted to Your Program

Once a student has been admitted to a graduate program, program faculty have an obligation to do everything they can to support their degree completion. Applicants do not always disclose their disabilities in their applications, while others may not be diagnosed until after starting a graduate program (Lund & Hanebutt, 2022). For applicants who do disclose, faculty need to be conscientious of their own and their program's capacity during admissions time. A caveat: "I can't mentor disabled people" is not an excuse and borderline illegal. This hesitation is understandable, but it is more productive to think along the lines of "how and what can I do to support the success of this student?" during admissions decision making. Graduate admissions committees should consider using multiple forms of data to make admissions decisions and reducing reliance on standardized tests, which are less predictive of future academic performance for students with disabilities than for their non-disabled peers (Gregg & Nelson, 2012; Miller et al., 2019). Standardized test requirements that are inflexible with regard to accommodations or high bars for documentation may be inherent barriers to entry into graduate programs requiring them.

6.3. Cultivate Trust and Get to Know Students

To be an effective advisor, students must trust you enough to disclose their disability status and be open to discussing how it impacts their learning and degree progress (Collins, 2015). Be flexible and accommodating of differences by giving students options for how to complete their work. Communicate your expectations about workload to students (M. Sukhai & Latour, 2023). Get to know graduate students so you can support their success whether they disclose a disability or not (Oledzka & Darby, 2025).

6.4. Provide Additional Scaffolding for Research Training

Many disabled students need more support for conducting research, such as intermediate or more structured research tasks, outlines, or assistance taking meeting notes (Oledzka & Darby, 2025; Montoya, 2009; Zimdars, 2022). Neurodivergent students may need more structure before, during and after a meeting (e.g., agendas and notes). Students may also need more explicit guidance translating their ideas into academic language. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools that can provide meeting transcriptions and summaries as well as support editing may be particularly helpful, and additional AI supports are rapidly being developed and accepted in academic research. Specialized research software can

vary widely in its accessibility, for example, to screen readers (Joshi, 2006; L. F. Perez, 2013; M. A. Sukhai, 2019). You may need to think more carefully when selecting software or inventing workarounds to ensure accessibility for all research team members.

6.5. Understand and Educate Students About Your Institution's Policies and Degree Progress Norms

Students with disabilities tend to try to succeed without accommodations, only to realize it is too late to request accommodations when they are really needed (O'Shea & Thurman, 2017). Support students through these difficult times by cultivating a trusting relationship allowing frank discussion of options (Collins, 2015). Encourage students to register with the disability service office even if they do not think they will need accommodations (Lund et al., 2016). It is easier to complete registration steps without additional stress and anxiety over falling behind. Slower pace and medical leaves mean students may not take foundational courses when you assume they would have. Help students map out what a reduced course load or semester leave means in terms of their degree progress (Montoya, 2009). Students may be upset about not being on pace with their peers. Talk about this explicitly. Give them perspective on how long and winding their career is likely to be. Traditional-aged students without work experience are most likely to view graduate study as a race.

6.6. Normalize Longer Time to Degree

Consider normalizing longer timeframes for degree completion (Hanrahan, 2024; Spier & Natalier, 2023). Examine what tasks are essential to occur concurrently and where steps and high stakes deliverables might be conscientiously sequenced (Montoya, 2009). Graduate training workloads often require balancing large amounts of coursework, research, employment, and personal obligations (Martinez et al., 2013). Limiting flexibility in how these are managed excludes some disabled students, due to the inaccessibility of materials or the nature of their disability.

6.7. Intervene as Needed in the Timing and Structure of Qualifying Exams and Other Degree Milestones

Many graduate programs have a deadline of a certain number of years or semesters by which exams must be taken. Help students with disabilities advocate for flexibility on these timelines (Montoya, 2009). Then, consider the format of the exam, specifically whether it is accessible, and suggest accommodations (Bellamy & Sullivan, 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2024). Question the core competencies of the discipline and whether these competencies need to be assessed in the way they always have been (Rose, 2010; M. A. Sukhai, 2019). Being proactive is key—we too often see students fail first, then think about what we could have done to avoid it.

6.8. Run Interference with Other Faculty in Your Graduate Program

Consistent with ableist notions of academic work, faculty may be judgmental about any student who cannot carry a full course load and volunteer for unpaid research or other professional experiences (Joshi, 2006; Spier & Natalier, 2023; Vergunst & Swartz, 2022). Students with disabilities are more likely to have other, more urgent needs related to their health and wellbeing to which they need to attend before taking on optional graduate training opportunities. Your colleagues may need to be reminded of these considerations when setting or enforcing policies and degree requirements.

6.9. Question Ableist Norms in Your Discipline and Department

Think creatively to leverage the collaborative nature of graduate study while giving everyone an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Question academic work norms such as long work hours with limited breaks, as well as thinking and responding quickly in discussions and meetings (Rose, 2010; M. A. Sukhai, 2019). Are these required learning outcomes for success in the discipline or profession, or simply the way we have always done things?

6.10. Support Graduate Students with Disabilities in Navigating the Unique Challenges of Teaching Roles

Graduate students already occupy a liminal space between student and employee (Lund, 2023; Saltes, 2022). When they are employed as instructors or teaching assistants, it can be even less clear who should provide accommodations and flexibility to support them. Help teaching assistants with disabilities to advocate for what they need and brainstorm creative solutions for how they manage their classroom (Lund & Hanebutt, 2022).

6.11. Attend to the Accessibility of Workspaces to Support Student Belonging

Many graduate programs provide offices to graduate students to hold teaching office hours or work on research (Saltes, 2022; Spier & Natalier, 2023). These shared spaces can support incidental learning, collaborating with peers on coursework and research, and integrating socially and professionally with the department. Yet when these spaces are inaccessible to students with disabilities, it detracts from their sense of belonging—and in turn, their success—in the graduate program (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; L. F. Perez, 2013). The ad hoc nature of identifying and assigning graduate student workspace often means not all spaces are completely uniform to begin with, so flexibility, creativity, and advocacy are needed to ensure that different students' accessibility needs are met.

6.12. Help Students Develop Skills and Strategies to Support Their Success as a Student and Professional with a Disability

Navigating graduate study with a disability requires grit, persistence, self-advocacy, creativity and problem-solving skills. Once you have built the trust necessary to openly discuss how their disability impacts graduate study and professional opportunities (Collins, 2015), help students articulate the strategies and skills they bring to graduate study and their future careers (Farran, 2018; Test et al., 2005). Celebrate milestone achievements as you would with any graduate student. Readers are reminded that graduate students with disabilities are likely to encounter discrimination in hiring and the workplace, including but not limited to higher expectations for skills and experience (Kaye, 2009; Sharma et al., 2025). The best way to prepare disabled students for a successful career is not to practice the same discrimination, but to hold them to high professional standards in an environment safe for practicing advocacy skills, building confidence, and learning about their accessibility needs.

7. Future Work

Few qualifying studies included planning and guidance for the transition into the workforce. Many of the psychology studies focus on supervised internships in counseling or rehabilitation. Yet, in other fields, career planning and transitions to work went unaddressed. Related to this, study participants mentioned difficulty finding disabled mentors in their future fields. More work is needed to understand how graduate students with disabilities can be supported in their job search and early careers. Similarly, we noted the literature on disabled graduate students does not address the laboratory environment that

characterizes many STEM disciplines. More research is certainly needed to understand the experiences of graduate students with disabilities in lab and field sciences.

8. Conclusions

In closing, an accessibility mindset is beneficial for all students. All kinds of graduate students need flexibility and access. Some students may be dealing with undiagnosed disability, supporting family, caring for others, and/or working long hours off campus. Much has changed in higher education over the past several years. Do we have legacy expectations that graduate students are on campus for 8 or 10 h days? If the campus is in an area where housing is expensive, do students have a long commute and inaccessible parking to manage? Since graduate students are on reduced incomes, mindfulness around expenses related to time and resources are often connected to expenses related to access. Disability- and accessibility-related costs for individual students are at a higher proportion of their take home income than their non-disabled peers. It is time to rethink how to preserve the most important benefits and outcomes of graduate education while maintaining accessibility for all students. We acknowledge that academic departments, institutions and society must change to create fully accessible graduate experiences. Yet much can be done by individual mentors committing to supporting students, questioning norms and changing practices within their spheres of influence.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.B. and S.C.; Methodology, M.B.; Formal Analysis, M.B.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, M.B. and S.C.; Writing—Review & Editing, S.A., L.G.A., A.C., D.L., E.L. and M.O.; Funding Acquisition, M.B. and S.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, grant number 2422322 and Institute of Education Sciences (IES) #R324C230008. However, its contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the NSF, IES or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. IES Project Officer: Akilah Swinton Nelson, PhD. The APC was funded by NSF.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ADHD	Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
AI	Artificial intelligence
LD	Learning disability
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

Appendix A

Table A1 lists details of all 28 qualifying sources.

Table A1. Details of qualifying sources.

Citation	Type	Country	Population	Study Design
Andrews et al. (2013)	Journal article	US	Supervision experiences of psychology trainees with disabilities in rehabilitation training settings	Literature review
Collins (2015)	Journal article	UK	38 doctoral students with disabilities	Interview study
Daughtry et al. (2009)	Journal article	US	students and professionals with disabilities	Presents a model of mentoring
De Picker (2020)	Journal article	Belgium	PhD student with cerebral palsy	Exploration of authors' lived experiences
Hannam-Swain (2018)	Journal article	UK	PhD student with Brittle Bones	Personal account of author's lived experiences
Hanrahan (2024)	Doctoral dissertation	US	46 disabled students in graduate and professional programs	Interview study
Joshi (2006)	Doctoral dissertation	US	19 blind students in psychology graduate programs	Semi-structured interviews with some quantitative questions
Lund et al. (2014)	Journal article	US	56 psychologists and psychology trainees with disabilities	Survey study
Lund et al. (2020)	Journal article	US	41 psychologists and psychology trainees with disabilities	Analysis of open-ended survey responses
Lund and Hanebutt (2022)	Journal article	US	12 disabled psychology graduate students who had teaching experiences as part of their graduate programs	Interview study
Lund (2023)	Journal article	US	Graduate student teachers in psychology	Literature review
Lund et al. (2016)	Journal article	US	41 psychologists and psychology trainees with disabilities	Analysis of open-ended survey responses
Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer (2016)	Journal article	UK	70 women, black minority ethnic groups, and students living with a disability throughout the course of doctoral study in political science	Survey and 4 interviews
Montoya (2009)	Doctoral dissertation	US	61 graduate and 232 undergraduate students with LD enrolled at their institution's disability services office	Survey study
Norman (2021)	Master's thesis	Canada	Four graduate learners in an online counseling psychology program	Interviews and journaling
Oledzka and Darby (2025)	Journal article	US	20 Doctoral students with LD and/or ADHD	Interview study
O'Shea and Thurman (2017)	Journal article	US	66 staff in disability services at institutions with doctoral programs	Survey study
L. F. Perez (2013)	Doctoral dissertation	US	Author and 3 co-researchers, all graduate students with visual disabilities	Heuristic case study analysis including interviews
Rose (2010)	Report	Canada	Graduate students with disabilities	Working paper

Table A1. Cont.

Citation	Type	Country	Population	Study Design
Saltes (2022)	Journal article	Canada and US	9 disabled graduate students with experience teaching	Photographs taken by participants and interviews
Spier and Natalier (2023)	Journal article	Australia	6 disabled PhD candidates	Interview study
M. A. Sukhai (2019)	Book chapter	Canada	Graduate students with disabilities	Task force findings based on surveys, focus groups interviews, data mining and literature review
M. Sukhai and Latour (2023)	Book chapter	Canada	Graduate students with disabilities	Literature review
Taube and Olkin (2011)	Journal article	US	Psychology internship or practicum students with obvious disabilities	Literature review
Teichman (2010)	Master's thesis	Canada	Two female graduate students with LDs	Interviews
Vergunst and Swartz (2022)	Journal article	South Africa	15 postgraduate students with diagnosed psychological disabilities	Interviews
Wilbur et al. (2019)	Journal article	US	143 supervisors of psychology trainees with disabilities	Survey study
Zimdars (2022)	Doctoral dissertation	US	81 faculty advising psychology doctoral students with LD/ADHD	Survey study

Note

- ¹ This paper will interchangeably use “students with disabilities” and “disabled students.” There are many different perspectives on whether to use person first or identify first language when describing this population, with variations within different fields and disability communities (e.g., Brown, 2011; Liebowitz, 2015).

References

- Andrews, E. E., Kuemmel, A., Williams, J. L., Pilarski, C. R., Dunn, M., & Lund, E. M. (2013). Providing culturally competent supervision to trainees with disabilities in rehabilitation settings. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 58(3), 233–244. [CrossRef]
- Bellamy, S. L., & Sullivan, L. M. (2025). Breaking tradition: Should biostatistics doctoral qualifying exams evolve to better serve our students' ability to demonstrate readiness to conduct independent research? *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13, 1612530. [CrossRef]
- Bettencourt, G., Kimball, E., & Wells, R. S. (2018). Disability in postsecondary STEM learning environments: What faculty focus groups reveal about definitions and obstacles to effective support. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 31(4), 383–396.
- Bodensteiner, A. R. (2017). *A phenomenological study of bullying experienced by graduate students and faculty through the lens of power* [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Dakota].
- Borrego, M., Chasen, A., Chapman Tripp, H., Landgren, E., & Koolman, E. (2025). A scoping review on US undergraduate students with disabilities in STEM courses and STEM majors. *International Journal of STEM Education*, 12(1), 2. [CrossRef]
- Brown, L. X. (2011, August 4). *The significance of semantics: Person-first language: Why it matters*. Autistic Self Advocacy Network. Available online: <http://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/> (accessed on 10 January 2026).
- Burt, B. A., Porter-Beall, T. J., Wallace, J. D., Stone, B. D., Jr., Sato, Y., & Moralez, M. (2025). Adjusting to graduate school: Black male students experience racial isolation, negotiate intra-group connections, and balance belonging. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(2), 155–163. [CrossRef]
- Campbell, A., Wick, D., Marcus, A., Doll, J., & Yunuba Hammack, A. (2021). “I felt like I was not just a student”: Examining graduate student learning at academic and professional conferences. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 12(3), 321–337. [CrossRef]
- Cliffe, E., Mac an Bhaird, C., Ní Fhloinn, E., & Trott, C. (2020). Mathematics instructors' awareness of accessibility barriers for disabled students. *Teaching Mathematics and Its Applications*, 39(3), 184–200. [CrossRef]
- Collins, B. (2015). Reflections on doctoral supervision: Drawing from the experiences of students with additional learning needs in two universities. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(6), 587–600. [CrossRef]
- Council of Graduate Schools. (2005). *The doctor of philosophy degree: A Policy Statement*. Council of Graduate Schools.

- Council of Graduate Schools. (2010). *The role and status of the master's degree in STEM*. Council of Graduate Schools.
- Curda, E. H. (2024). *Higher education: Education could improve information on accommodations for students with disabilities. Report to congressional addressees*. GAO-24-105614. US Government Accountability Office.
- Daughtry, D., Gibson, J., & Abels, A. (2009). Mentoring students and professionals with disabilities. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 40(2), 201–205. [CrossRef]
- De Picker, M. (2020). Rethinking inclusion and disability activism at academic conferences: Strategies proposed by a PhD student with a physical disability. *Disability & Society*, 35(1), 163–167.
- DirectEmployers Association. (2023, July 27). *Exploring invisible disabilities*. Available online: <https://directemployers.org/2023/07/27/exploring-invisible-disabilities/> (accessed on 24 July 2025).
- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.
- Farran, J. (2018). *An examination of the insights and support of self-advocacy by academic advisors when working with students with disabilities in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Central Florida].
- Fleming, G. C., Borrego, M., & Knight, D. (2023). Engineering graduate education in the United States. In *International handbook of engineering education research* (pp. 263–285). Routledge.
- Flemming, K., & Noyes, J. (2021). Qualitative evidence synthesis: Where are we at? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–13. [CrossRef]
- Friedensen, R. E., Bettencourt, G. M., & Bartlett, M. L. (2024). Power-conscious ecosystems: Understanding how power dynamics in US doctoral advising shape students' experiences. *Higher Education*, 87(1), 149–164. [CrossRef]
- Friedensen, R. E., Horii, C. V., Kimball, E., Lisi, B., Miller, R. A., Siddiqui, S., Thoma, H., Weaver, J. E., & Woodman, A. (2021a). A systematic review of research on faculty with disabilities. *Journal of the Professoriate*, 12(2), 1–25.
- Friedensen, R. E., Lauterbach, A., Kimball, E., & Mwangi, C. G. (2021b). Students with high-incidence disabilities in STEM: Barriers encountered in postsecondary learning environments. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 34(1), 77–90.
- Fuhrmann, C. N., Halme, D., O'Sullivan, P., & Lindstaedt, B. (2011). Improving graduate education to support a branching career pipeline: Recommendations based on a survey of doctoral students in the basic biomedical sciences. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 10(3), 239–249. [CrossRef]
- Gomez, M. L., Khurshid, A., Freitag, M. B., & Lachuk, A. J. (2011). Microaggressions in graduate students' lives: How they are encountered and their consequences. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(8), 1189–1199. [CrossRef]
- Goodwin, M. E. (2020). Making the invisible visible: Let's discuss invisible disabilities. *HAPS Educator, Special Conference Edition*, 62–73. Available online: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1294871.pdf> (accessed on 28 March 2024).
- Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 26, 91–108. [CrossRef]
- Gregg, N., & Nelson, J. M. (2012). Meta-analysis on the effectiveness of extra time as a test accommodation for transitioning adolescents with learning disabilities: More questions than answers. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 45(2), 128–138. [CrossRef]
- Gulish, A., Morris, C., Cheah, B., & Strohl, J. (2024). *Graduate degrees: Risky and unequal paths to the top*. Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce.
- Hannam-Swain, S. (2018). The additional labour of a disabled PhD student. *Disability & Society*, 33(1), 138–142.
- Hanrahan, S. Y. (2024). *From ableism to inclusion: Experiences of disabled students in graduate professional programs* [Doctoral dissertation, Alliant International University].
- Hum, D., & Simpson, W. (1996). Canadians with disabilities and the labour market. *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques*, 22(3), 285–299. [CrossRef]
- Jeannis, H., Joseph, J., Goldberg, M., Seelman, K., Schmeler, M., & Cooper, R. A. (2018). Full-participation of students with physical disabilities in science and engineering laboratories. *Disability and Rehabilitation: Assistive Technology*, 13(2), 186–193. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Jorgensen, M., Budd, J., Fichten, C. S., Nguyen, M. N., & Havel, A. (2018). Graduation prospects of college students with specific learning disorder and students with mental health related disabilities. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7(1), 19–31. [CrossRef]
- Joshi, H. (2006). *Reducing barriers to training of blind graduate students in psychology* [Doctoral dissertation, Alliant International University].
- Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2014). *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision*. Routledge.
- Kaye, H. S. (2009). Stuck at the bottom rung: Occupational characteristics of workers with disabilities. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 19(2), 115–128. [CrossRef]
- Leppo, R. H.-T. (2015). *Accommodations experience and retention of students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing in postsecondary education settings* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin].
- Li, S., Malin, J. R., & Hackman, D. G. (2018). Mentoring supports and mentoring across difference: Insights from mentees. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 26(5), 563–584. [CrossRef]
- Liebowitz, C. (2015). *I am disabled: On identity-first versus people-first language*. Available online: <https://dfwhcfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/I-am-Disabled-On-Identity-First-Versus-People-First-Language-TBISNAA.pdf> (accessed on 28 March 2024).

- Lund, E. M. (2023). Addressing the leaking pipeline: Supporting disabled graduate student teachers in psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 50(2), 99–104. [CrossRef]
- Lund, E. M., Andrews, E. E., Bouchard, L. M., & Holt, J. M. (2020). How did we help (or not)? A qualitative analysis of helpful resources used by psychology trainees with disabilities. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 14(3), 242–248. [CrossRef]
- Lund, E. M., Andrews, E. E., & Holt, J. M. (2014). How we treat our own: The experiences and characteristics of psychology trainees with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 59(4), 367–375. [CrossRef]
- Lund, E. M., Andrews, E. E., & Holt, J. M. (2016). A qualitative analysis of advice from and for trainees with disabilities in professional psychology. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 10(4), 206–213. [CrossRef]
- Lund, E. M., & Hanebutt, R. A. (2022). Investigating the teaching experiences of psychology graduate students with disabilities: A qualitative study. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 67(3), 262–272. [CrossRef]
- Magnus, E., & Tøssebro, J. (2014). Negotiating individual accommodation in higher education. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 16(4), 316–332. [CrossRef]
- Mannix, E., & Neale, M. A. (2005). What differences make a difference? The promise and reality of diverse teams in organizations. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 6(2), 31–55. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Martinez, E., Ordu, C., Della Sala, M. R., & McFarlane, A. (2013). Striving to obtain a school-work-life balance: The full-time doctoral student. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 8, 39. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Mattocks, K., & Briscoe-Palmer, S. (2016). Diversity, inclusion, and doctoral study: Challenges facing minority PhD students in the United Kingdom. *European Political Science*, 15(4), 476–492. [CrossRef]
- McLaughlin, J. E., Morbitzer, K., Meilhac, M., Poupart, N., Layton, R. L., & Jarstfer, M. B. (2024). Standards needed? An exploration of qualifying exams from a literature review and website analysis of university-wide policies. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 15(1), 19–33. [CrossRef]
- Miller, C. W., Zwickl, B. M., Posselt, J. R., Silvestrini, R. T., & Hodapp, T. (2019). Typical physics Ph.D. admissions criteria limit access to underrepresented groups but fail to predict doctoral completion. *Science Advances*, 5(1), eaat7550. [CrossRef]
- Montoya, A. (2009). *A comparison of the educational supports needed and provided for undergraduate and graduate students with learning disabilities in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Florida].
- Mullen, C. A. (2000). Constructing co-mentoring partnerships: Walkways we must travel. *Theory into Practice*, 39(1), 4–11. [CrossRef]
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2023). *Digest of education statistics*. Available online: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_311.10.asp (accessed on 24 July 2025).
- National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. (2023, October 27). *Supporting deaf people: Closing the employment gap*. Available online: <https://nationaldeafcenter.org/news-items/supporting-deaf-people-closing-the-employment-gap/> (accessed on 28 October 2025).
- Norman, A. S. (2021). *“Knowing I’d be OK”: Potential peer mentoring benefits for online graduate learners* [Master’s thesis, Athabasca University].
- O’Hara, B. (2004). Twice penalized: Employment discrimination against women with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 15(1), 27–34. [CrossRef]
- Oledzka, M., & Darby, A. (2025). Factors associated with mentoring and supervising US doctoral students with LD and/or ADHD. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 16(3), 245–262. [CrossRef]
- O’Shea, A., & Thurman, S. K. (2017). Perceptions of how doctoral students with learning disabilities and ADHD use disability services. *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, 1(3), 149–157. [CrossRef]
- Perez, L. F. (2013). *The perspectives of graduate students with visual disabilities: A heuristic case study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida].
- Perez, R. J., Robbins, C. K., Harris, L., Jr., & Montgomery, C. (2020). Exploring graduate students’ socialization to equity, diversity, and inclusion. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 13(2), 133. [CrossRef]
- Pfeifer, M. A., Reiter, E. M., Cordero, J. J., & Stanton, J. D. (2021). Inside and out: Factors that support and hinder the self-advocacy of undergraduates with ADHD and/or specific learning disabilities in STEM. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 20(2), ar17. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Ragins, B. R., & Verbos, A. K. (2017). Positive relationships in action: Relational mentoring and mentoring schemas in the workplace. In *Exploring positive relationships at work* (pp. 91–116). Psychology Press.
- Reddick, R. J., & Young, M. D. (2012). Mentoring graduate students of color. In S. J. Fletcher, & C. A. Mullen (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of mentoring and coaching in education* (pp. 412–429). Sage.
- Rice, K. G., Choi, C.-C., Zhang, Y., Villegas, J., Ye, H. J., Anderson, D., Nesic, A., & Bigler, M. (2009). International student perspectives on graduate advising relationships. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56(3), 376. [CrossRef]
- Riggs, R., Starkey, J., Rasmussen, E., & Shannon, K. (2024). Graduate students’ perspectives on the role of faculty advisors in helping students with mental health problems. *Journal of American College Health*, 72(9), 3753–3762. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Rose, M. (2010). *Accommodating graduate students with disabilities*. Council of Ontario Universities Toronto.
- Sallee, M. W. (2015). Adding academics to the work/family puzzle: Graduate student parents in higher education and student affairs. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 52(4), 401–413. [CrossRef]

- Saltes, N. (2022). ‘It’s all about student accessibility. No one ever talks about teacher accessibility’: Examining ableist expectations in academia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(7), 674–700. [CrossRef]
- Schumacher, E. J., & Baldwin, M. L. (2000). *The American with disabilities act and the labor market experience of workers with disabilities: Evidence from the SIPP*. Working Papers 0013. East Carolina University, Department of Economics.
- Sharma, R. H., Asselin, R., Stainton, T., & Hole, R. (2025). Ableism and employment: A scoping review of the literature. *Social Sciences*, 14(2), 67. [CrossRef]
- Spier, J., & Natalier, K. (2023). Reasonable adjustments? Disabled research higher degree students’ strategies for managing their candidature in an Australian university. *Disability & Society*, 38(8), 1365–1386.
- Stumbo, N. J., Hedrick, B. N., Weisman, C., & Martin, J. K. (2011). An exploration into the barriers and facilitators experienced by university graduates with disabilities requiring personal assistance services. *Journal of Science Education for Students with Disabilities*, 14(1), 1–24. [CrossRef]
- Sukhai, M., & Latour, A. (2023). The trainee-mentor relationship in graduate and postdoctoral training in Canada for trainees with disabilities. In *Handbook of higher education and disability* (pp. 229–246). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Sukhai, M. A. (2019). Minding the gap: Perspectives on graduate education for students with disabilities. In *Preparing students for life and work* (pp. 64–77). Brill.
- Sverdlik, A., Hall, N. C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students’ completion, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 361–388. [CrossRef]
- Tamjeed, M., Tibdewal, V., Russell, M., McQuaid, M., Oh, T., & Shinohara, K. (2021). Understanding disability services toward improving graduate student support. In *Proceedings of the 23rd international ACM SIGACCESS conference on computers and accessibility*. Association for Computing Machinery.
- Taube, D. O., & Olkin, R. (2011). When is differential treatment discriminatory? Legal, ethical, and professional considerations for psychology trainees with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 56(4), 329–339. [CrossRef]
- Teichman, S. (2010). *The expert knowledge of university graduate students with learning disabilities: A policy and service analysis* [Master’s thesis, McMaster University].
- Test, D. W., Fowler, C. H., Wood, W. M., Brewer, D. M., & Eddy, S. (2005). A conceptual framework of self-advocacy for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(1), 43–54. [CrossRef]
- Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8(1), 45. [CrossRef]
- Torka, M., Kohl, U., & Mahoney, W. M. (2022). Funding of doctoral education and research. In M. Nerad, D. Bogle, U. Kohl, C. O’Carroll, C. Peters, & B. Scholz (Eds.), *Towards a global core value system in doctoral education* (pp. 110–132). UCL Press.
- Toutain, C. (2019). Barriers to accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education: A literature review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 32(3), 297–310.
- US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022). *Usual weekly earnings of wage and salary workers: Fourth quarter 2022*. US Department of Labor. Available online: https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/wkyeng_01192023.htm (accessed on 24 July 2025).
- US Bureau of the Census. (1997). *Americans with disabilities: 1994–95. Survey of income and program participation (SIPP)*. US Bureau of the Census.
- US Centers for Disease Control. (2024). *CDC data shows over 70 million U.S. adults reported having a disability*. Available online: https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2024/s0716-Adult-disability.html?ACSTrackingID=USCDC_1_3-DM132424&ACSTrackingLabel=CDC%20Newsroom%3A%20Week%20In%20Review%20-%202007%2F19%2F24&deliveryName=USCDC_1_3-DM132424 (accessed on 24 July 2025).
- Vergunst, R., & Swartz, L. (2022). Experiences with supervisors when students have a psychosocial disability in a university context in South Africa. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(5), 695–708. [CrossRef]
- Walker, G. E., Golde, C. M., Jones, L., Bueschel, A. C., & Hutchings, P. (2008). *The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century*. Jossey-Bass.
- Wallbank, A. J. (Ed.). (2025). *Academic writing, assessment, and neurodiversity: Pedagogies for inclusion*. Taylor & Francis.
- White, P. H. (2002). Access to health care: Health insurance considerations for young adults with special health care needs/disabilities. *Pediatrics*, 110(Suppl. 3), 1328–1335. [CrossRef]
- Wilbur, R. C., Kuemmel, A. M., & Lackner, R. J. (2019). Who’s on first? Supervising psychology trainees with disabilities and establishing accommodations. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 13(2), 111–118. [CrossRef]
- Zimdars, M. (2022). *An assessment of ADHD/LD support in PsyD programs from the perspective of faculty advisors* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Denver].

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.