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AHEAD 9.02 MEDIA YEAR IN REVIEW: DECONSTRUCTING DOMINANT DISABILITY NARRATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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OBJECTIVES



Learning Objectives

- Identify dominant media narratives
- Discuss the impact in higher education
- Review legal and research alignment of narratives
- Go over practical communication strategies and tools

THREE PART AGENDA

**Part 1: What
Narratives Are
Shaping Campus
Perceptions?**

**Part 2: How Are
These Narratives
Showing Up on
Campuses?**

**Part 3: How Are
Disability
Leaders
Responding?**

PART I:
WHAT NARRATIVES ARE
SHAPING CAMPUS
PERCEPTIONS?

A National Media Narrative Emerges (2024–2026)

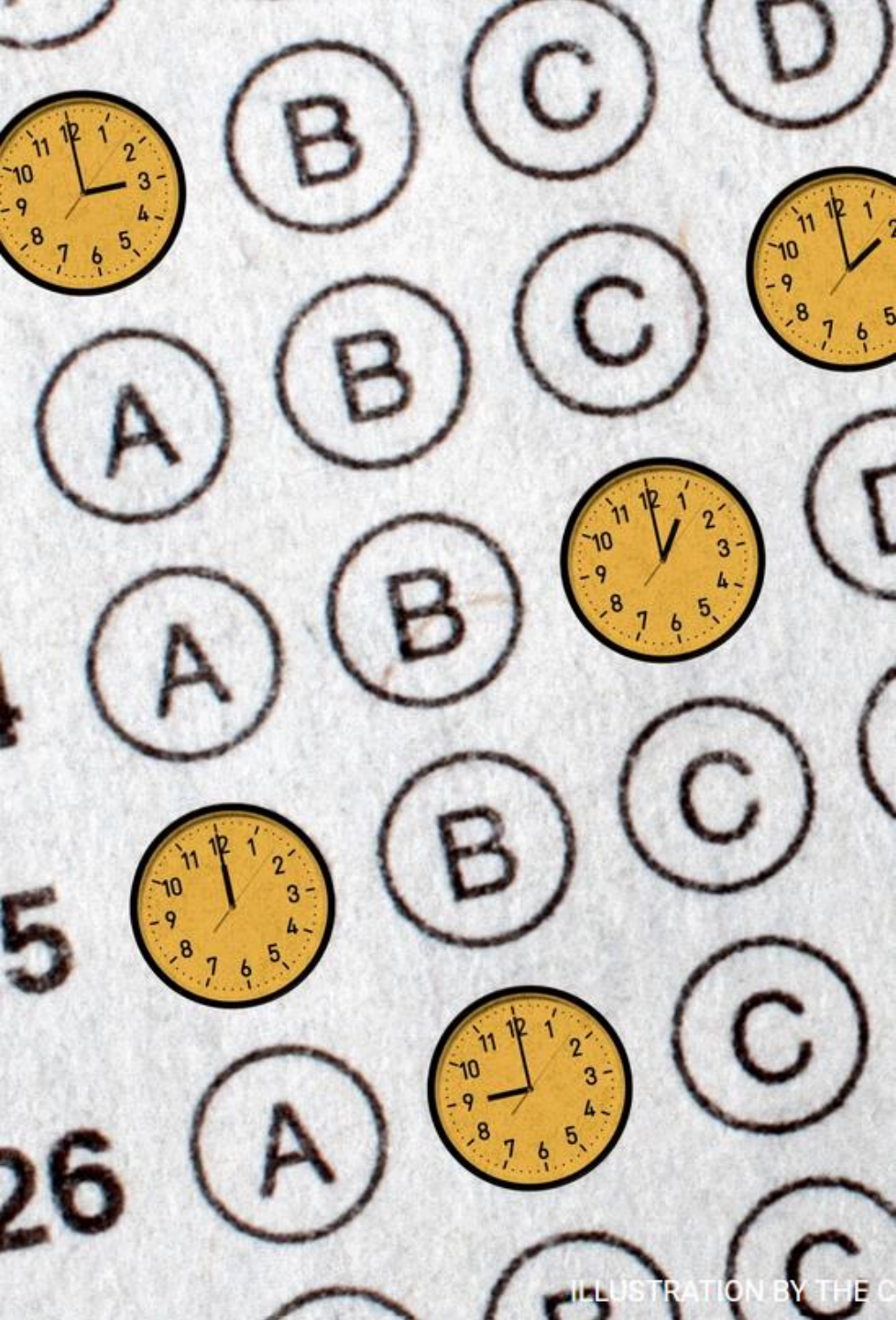


Legend

Red (Large) = Strongly Critical (Chronicle, Forbes, Atlantic, WaPo)

Yellow (Medium) = Trend Reporting (NY Times, WSJ)

Green (Small) = Counter-Narrative (AHEAD, Chronicle, US. News)



I. ARE COLLEGES GETTING DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS ALL WRONG?

- Source/Date: The Chronicle in Higher Education
- (September 2024)
- Article Cluster: Philosophical Critique
- Dominant Narrative: Accommodation may undermine resilience if colleges have become too permissive.
- Core Claims: Accommodation growth may weaken resilience and independence; Academic integrity preservation is needed
- Narrative Framing: Educational philosophy is in question; questions about fairness, evidence, documentation, resource allocation, and the impact on workforce readiness.



2. HOW CHEATING SPREADS AT LAW SCHOOLS

- Source/Date: Wall Street Journal (June 2025)
- Article Cluster: Strongly Critical
- Dominant Narrative: Accommodation as cheating; Schools are too permissive.
- Central Claim: Extended time may distort grading and standards.
- Narrative Framing: Fairness, integrity, competence and professional readiness.

3. **ACCOMMODATION NATION**

- Source/Date: The Atlantic (Dec 2025)
- Article Cluster: Strongly Critical
- Dominant Narrative: Elite colleges have an extra-time problem.
- Central Claim: Extended time has expanded beyond its intent.
- Narrative Framing: Fairness, Unfair advantage and institutional inequity concerns.

4. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES HAVE A PROBLEM DEFINING DISABILITY

- Source/Date: Forbes (Dec 2025)
- Article Cluster: Strongly Critical
- Dominant Narrative: Definitions are overly broad.
- Central Claim: Disability eligibility has expanded excessively.
- Narrative Framing: weak standards, Questionable gatekeepers, affluent family access; professional readiness concerns.

- Source/Date: AHEAD's Response (Dec. 2025)
- Article Cluster: Professional Response
- Dominant Narrative: Evidence-based rebuttal.
- Central Claim: Media narratives misunderstand disability practice.
- Narrative Framing: Civil rights, evidence, standards.

**5. AHEAD
RESPONDS TO
ACCOMMODATION
NATION ARTICLE**



6. AMERICA'S FRAGILE FUTURE ELITE WILL MEET THE REAL WORLD EVENTUALLY



- Source/Date: Washington Post (Jan 2026)
- Article Cluster: Strongly Critical
- Dominant Narrative: Accommodation fuels fragility.
- Central Claim: Students gain advantages that reduce readiness.
- Narrative Framing: Resilience, workforce readiness.

7. COLLEGES SEE SPIKE IN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING ELITE SCHOOLS



- Source/Date: NY Times (Mar 2026)
- Article Cluster: Trend Reporting
- Dominant Narrative: Accommodation growth is a national trend.
- Central Claim: Colleges face a major increase in requests.
- Narrative Framing: Growth, fairness, response. Competing narratives.



- Source/Date: Wall Street Journal (Apr 2026)
- Article Cluster: Trend Reporting /Professional Competence
- Dominant Narrative: Licensure integrity threatened.
- Central Claim: Accommodation growth raises fairness concerns.
- Narrative Framing: Public trust, standards; Professional competence.

9. ARE THAT MANY STUDENTS REALLY FAKING DISABILITIES?



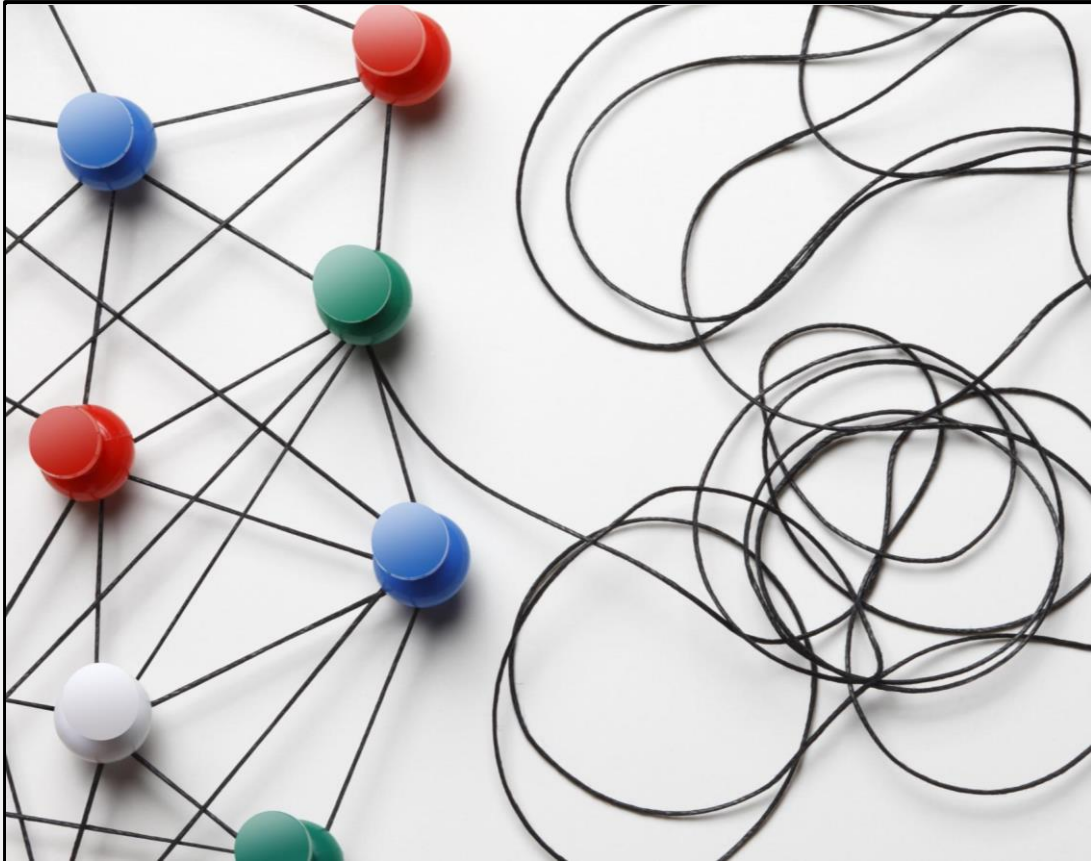
- Source/Date: Chronicle (May 2026)
- Article Cluster: Balanced Corrective
- Dominant Narrative: Fraud narrative challenged; and centers equitable access considerations
- Central Claim: Evidence does not support widespread abuse.
- Narrative Framing: Stigma, capacity, access.

- Source/Date: U.S. News (May 2026)
- Article Cluster: Leadership Framework
- Dominant Narrative: Accessibility is leadership.
- Central Claim: Growth is an opportunity, not a crisis.
- Narrative Framing: Access, success, excellence.

10. SPIKE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IS A CALL FOR SCHOOLS TO BET ON ACCESSIBILITY, NOT SUSPICION



THE NARRATIVE ECOSYSTEM ACROSS MEDIA OUTLETS



- **Critical Opinion Influence**
- **Trend Reporting Amplification**
- **Professional Responses**

Ecosystem Recognition Importance

Recognizing this narrative ecosystem explains perceived consensus among faculty and administrators.

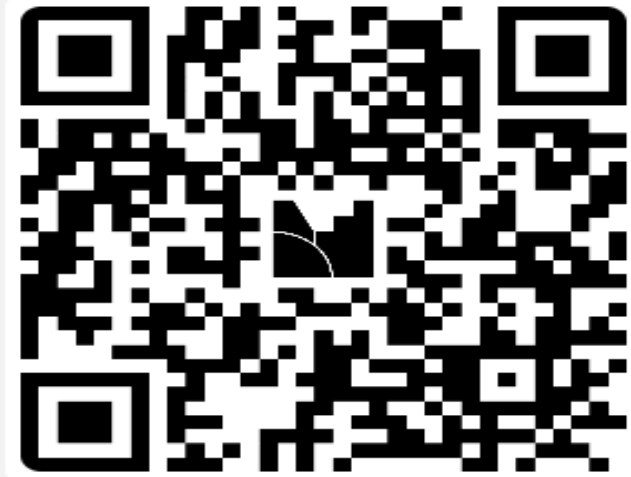
FIVE DOMINANT MEDIA NARRATIVES

Narrative	Articles
Too many students are disabled	Atlantic, Forbes, NYT
Extended time is unfair	Atlantic, WSJ, Washington Post
Students are gaming the system	WSJ, Forbes
Accommodations undermine resilience	Chronicle, Washington Post
The real world won't accommodate	Washington Post, Forbes, WSJ

MENTIMETER POLL #1



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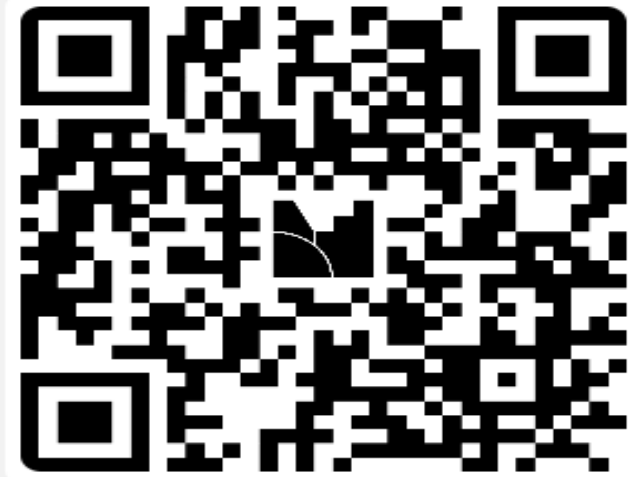
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PART 2:
HOW ARE THESE
NARRATIVES SHOWING
UP ON CAMPUSES?

MENTIMETER POLL #2



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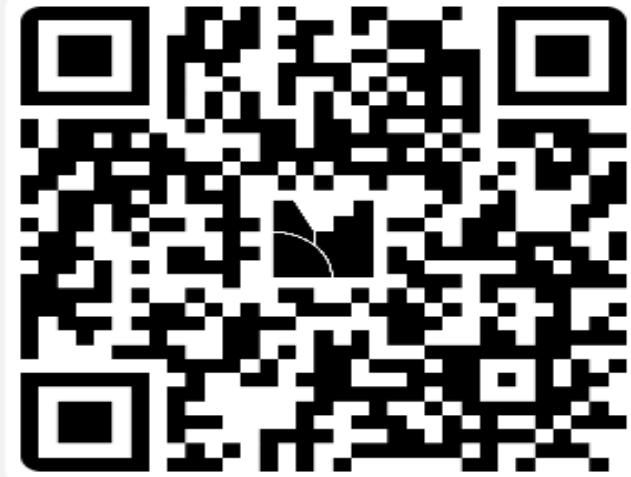


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MENTIMETER POLLS # 3-6



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FROM MEDIA NARRATIVE TO CAMPUS REALITY

What faculty & administrators are saying

- “We don’t have the resources to support all these accommodations.”
- “Are you sure they aren’t trying to game the system?”
- “We should prepare them for the real world.”
- “I don’t want to water down the curriculum.”
- “At least half these students should be taking a leave of absence.”
- “This gives an unfair advantage.”
- “You are approving too many accommodations. How can we limit them?”
- “We should require new documentation each year.”

Impact of Media Narratives

Media discourse fuels campus skepticism about accommodations, surfacing widespread professional challenges.

Shared Professional Experiences

Disability professionals report the same patterns of scrutiny and questioning across institutions.

Reframing Challenges

Recognizing the structural cause reduces isolation and shifts the response from defensive to strategic.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND CAMPUS CLIMATE



Media-Driven Skepticism Effects

Skepticism fueled by media increases stigma and anxiety among students with disabilities.

Reluctance to Disclose Disabilities

Students hesitate to disclose disabilities due to fear of judgment and public suspicion.

Impact on Retention and Equity

These challenges negatively affect student retention and equity efforts in institutions.

Shifting Leadership Conversations

Focus moves from abstract fairness to concrete educational consequences for improved leadership decisions.



INSTITUTIONAL RISK MATRIX: REACTIVE VS. STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Reactive Responses

Reactive actions often increase complaints and legal risks while seeming immediately responsive to issues.

Strategic Responses

Strategic responses focus on education, individualized review, and evidence-based policies to mitigate risk effectively.

Shaping the Governance Perspective

The matrix offers a governance framework aligning with leadership priorities and risk management principles.

A National Media Narrative Emerges (2024–2026)



Legend

Red (Large) = Strongly Critical (Chronicle, Forbes, Atlantic, WaPo)

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Green (Small) = Counter-Narrative (AHEAD, Chronicle, US. News)

PART 3:
HOW ARE DISABILITY
LEADERS
RESPONDING?



REFRAMING THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Shift from Suspicion to Support

Focus on Institutional Capacity

Leaders assess if institutions can uphold academic integrity while adapting to changing demographics.

**Aligning Disability Access
Priorities**

Integrate disability access within broader institutional goals to foster inclusion and legal compliance.

MEDIA NARRATIVE VS. LEGAL REALITY



ADAAA Broadened Coverage

The ADA Amendments Act expanded legal protections to cover more individuals with disabilities.



Institutional Authority Maintained

Institutions retain authority through the fundamental alteration standard despite broader coverage under ADAAA.



Accommodations vs Academic Standards

Accommodations are provided without changing or lowering academic standards.

THE LEADERSHIP PIVOT: FROM COMPLIANCE TO STRATEGY



Shift from Compliance

Disability professionals transition from solely enforcing compliance to embracing broader leadership roles within institutions.

Consultative Partnership

Encourages building collaborative partnerships that integrate disability services into institutional planning and decision-making.

Strategic Leadership Role

Positions disability services as key contributors to institutional effectiveness and proactive risk management strategies.

A LEADING STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

“FOR EVERY CLAIM,
REFRAME”

R - Recognize the narrative

E - Examine the evidence

F - Focus on law

R - Respond with research

A - Address faculty concerns

M - Manage institutional risk

E - Engage leadership proactively

TWO
ESSENTIAL
REFRAME
TOOLS



WHAT DOES DISABILITY LAW SAY?

- ADA Title II (1990)
- ADAA (2008)
- Section 504 (1973)

Accommodation decisions must be based on individualized assessment, not public narratives or generalized assumptions.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?



Differential Benefit: Students with disabilities gain more from extended time than non-disabled peers.

Construct-Irrelevant Variance: The key question is not "*Does time matter?*" but "*Is speed being measured?*"

Assessment Integrity: When speed is not a learning outcome, extended time improves access without altering academic standards.

WHICH DISABILITY INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ARE MOST EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTED AND USED IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS?

Average

Inclusive Practice Category

31%

Use of capacity building practices – working towards a shared responsibility to be inclusive; decentralizing disability inclusion or accessibility work; offering disability or accessibility resources and training to all stakeholders. (1)

15%

Use of counter-narratives – re-framing disability, disrupting norm narratives, broadly sharing disability as diversity messaging or individual stories of dis/abled individuals, universal design, social justice models, disability studies, disability pride, cripp culture, non-ableist language, acknowledging ableism. (2)

22%

Use of a community of disability champions – collaborations with existing institutional allies, recruiting new inclusion champions, networking with other allies (e.g., digital accessibility, facility ADA staff, students, staff, or faculty with dis/abilities). (3)

19%

Use of disability representation – Ensure dis/abled individuals are represented in programs and recruited for positions, and they are able to fully participate and influence decisions that impact them. (4)

31%

Making systemic changes - Transforming systems, practices, procedures, and policies that were implicitly or explicitly exclusive and intentionally implement disability-inclusive practices; Implement universal design principles institution-wide (e.g., all videos are automatically captioned, ASL interpreters are hired for all public events, require all units to annually report on disability statistics, earmark funding for accommodations). (5)

REFRAME TOOLS



Research Perspective



Evidence-Based Responses (Law)



Leadership Response

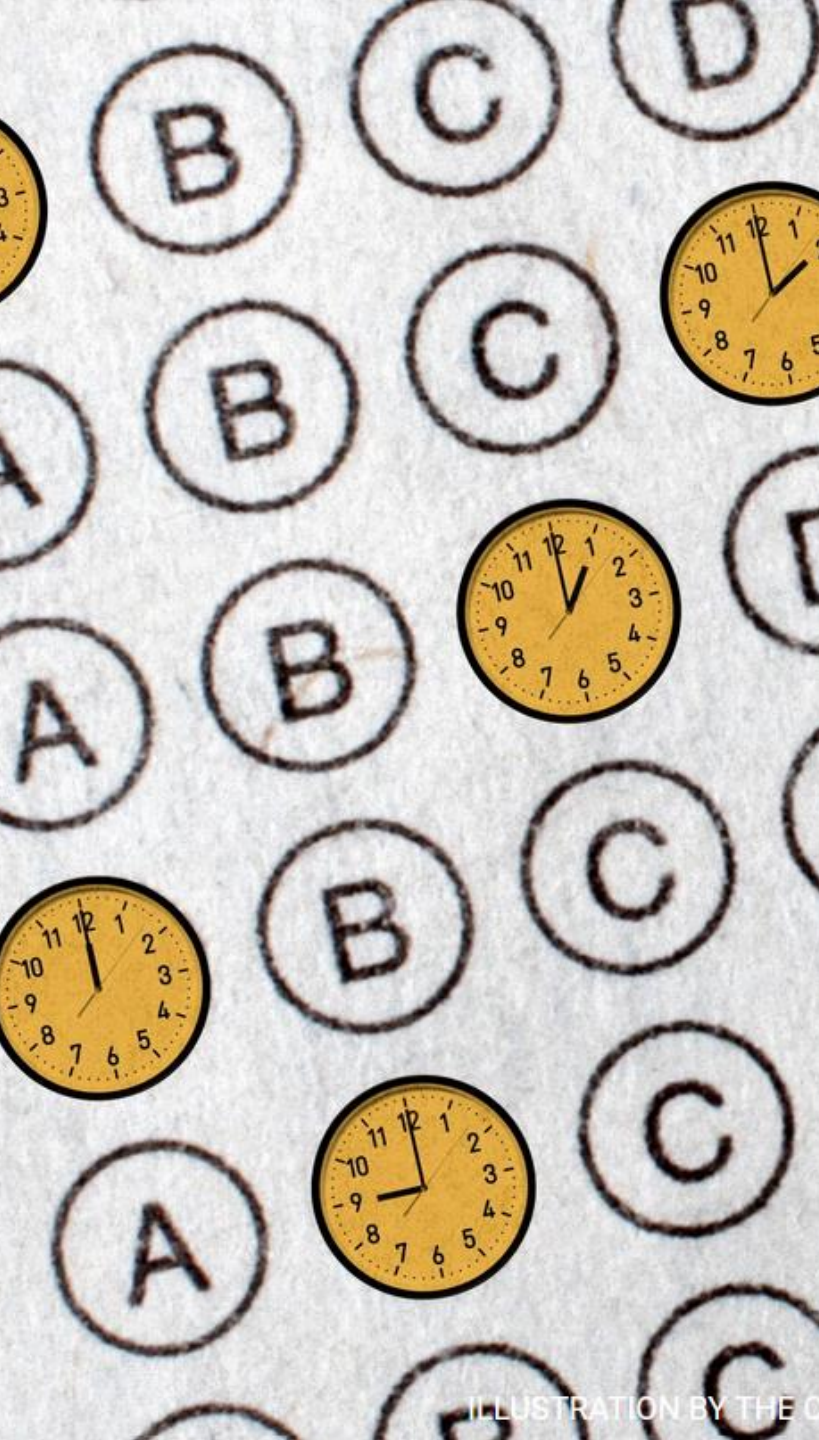


Practical Implication

OPTIONAL
HANDOUT

FIVE DOMINANT MEDIA NARRATIVES

Narrative	Articles
Too many students are disabled	Atlantic, Forbes, NYT
Extended time is unfair	Atlantic, WSJ, Washington Post
Students are gaming the system	WSJ, Forbes
Accommodations undermine resilience	Chronicle, Washington Post
The real world won't accommodate	Washington Post, Forbes, WSJ



I. ARE COLLEGES GETTING DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS ALL WRONG?

- Source/Date: The Chronicle in Higher Education (Sept 2024) *Higher education's maximally inclusive approach hurts those it attempts to help.*
- Dominant Narrative: Accommodation may undermine resilience if colleges have become too permissive .
- Evidence-Based Response: The ADA requires individualized access decisions—not philosophical judgments about resilience or accommodation rates.
- Leadership Response: Reframe the conversation from "Are we accommodating too much?" to "Are we ensuring equal access while preserving essential academic standards?"
- Practical Implication: Help others distinguish between essential learning outcomes and disability-related barriers when discussing accommodations.



2. HOW CHEATING SPREADS AT LAW SCHOOLS`

Source/Date: Wall Street Journal (June 2025)

Dominant Narrative: Accommodation as cheating; Schools are too permissive.

Research Perspective: Research does not support the claim that appropriately assigned testing accommodations invalidate academic standards. Their purpose is to reduce disability-related barriers while maintaining assessment validity.

Evidence-Based Response: The ADA requires individualized, case-by-case accommodation decisions that provide equal access while preserving essential academic requirements—not competitive advantage.

Practical Implication: Educate faculty about the distinction between equal access and academic advantage by explaining the interactive process, individualized review, and the concept of fundamental alteration.

3. ACCOMMODATION NATION`

Source/Date: The Atlantic (Dec 2025)

Dominant Narrative: Elite colleges have an extra-time problem.

Legal Evidence-Based Response: ADAAA broadened access; The ADA requires individualized determinations based on functional limitations—not assumptions about rates or trends.

Research Response: Testing accommodations are intended to improve the validity of assessment by reducing disability-related barriers—not to guarantee higher performance.

Practical Implication: Reframe conversations around assessment validity: From "Are accommodations fair?" to "What knowledge or skill is this assessment intended to measure, and does the accommodation preserve that construct?"

4. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES HAVE A PROBLEM DEFINING DISABILITY`

- Source/Date: Forbes (Dec 2025)
- Dominant Narrative: Definitions are overly broad.
- Evidence-Based Response: The ADAAA intentionally broadened disability coverage and requires individualized assessment based on functional limitations—not narrow medical categories or assumptions about prevalence.
- Research Perspective: Increased identification does not equal misidentification. Research suggests growth is associated with improved diagnosis, reduced stigma, greater self-disclosure, and expanded access to services.
- Practical Implication: Educate campus stakeholders on how disability determinations are actually made by emphasizing functional limitations, the interactive process, and individualized review.

- Source/Date: AHEAD's Response (Dec. 2025)
- Dominant Narrative: Evidence-based rebuttal.
- Evidence-Based Response: Accommodations are structured and individualized.
- Research-Based Response: Growing accommodation requests are consistent with expanded disability identification, reduced stigma, and increased help-seeking—not, by themselves, evidence of widespread abuse.
- Practical Implication: Proactively educate campus stakeholders - Lead with law and interactive process, provide evidence, and address risk management.

5. AHEAD RESPONDS TO ACCOMMODATION NATION ARTICLE`



6. AMERICA'S FRAGILE FUTURE ELITE WILL MEET THE REAL WORLD EVENTUALLY`



- Source/Date: Washington Post (Jan 2026)
- Dominant Narrative: Accommodation fuels fragility.
- Research Perspective: Decades of research show that stigma itself is a barrier to access. Reducing stigma doesn't lower standards.
- Evidence-Based Response: ADAA broadened the definition of disability because it was too narrowly interpreted. ADA protections extend into employment.
- Practical Implication: Educate stakeholders on the different between lowered standards and removing disability barriers. Connect accommodations to workplace rights.

7. COLLEGES SEE SPIKE IN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING ELITE SCHOOLS`



- Source/Date: NY Times (Mar 2026)
- **Dominant Narrative:** Accommodation growth is a national trend.
- **Research Perspective:** Increased accommodation use reflects multiple factors—including expanded disability awareness, reduced stigma, improved diagnosis, and greater willingness to disclose disabilities—while disparities in access remain for many underserved student populations.
- **Evidence-Based Response:** Growth does not prove abuse; access should not be limited based on rates or institutional averages.
- **Practical Implication:** Use prevalence context to address assumptions about growth rates; Review your campus practices for inequities in the process.



- Source/Date: Wall Street Journal (Apr 2026)
- Dominant Narrative: Licensure integrity threatened.
- Research Perspective: Research indicates that accommodations support equal access—not diminished competence—and self-advocacy during college is associated with stronger postsecondary and employment outcomes.
- Evidence-Based Response: Licensure exams remain subject to ADA requirements of an individualized assessment – not assumptions.
- Practical Implication: Discuss continuity of rights both in and after college; Partner with Career Services

9. ARE THAT MANY STUDENTS REALLY FAKING DISABILITIES?



- Source/Date: Chronicle (May 2026)
- Dominant Narrative: Fraud narrative challenged.
- Research Perspective: Many students never request accommodations because of stigma.
- Evidence-Based Response: Students deserve individualized review.
- Practical Implication: Focus on infrastructure and services that create unnecessary barriers

- Source/Date: U.S. News (May 2026)
- Dominant Narrative: Accessibility is leadership.
- Research Perspective: Accessible learning environments, early engagement with disability services, and inclusive institutional practices improve persistence, retention, and graduation outcomes for students with disabilities without compromising academic rigor.
- Evidence-Based Response: Access is a civil rights obligation and is protected under the ADA – Individualized assessments-no assumptions are required.
- Practical Implication: Shift conversation toward institutional leadership.

10. SPIKE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IS A CALL FOR SCHOOLS TO BET ON ACCESSIBILITY, NOT SUSPICION`



• Q & A



**LIKE A CACTUS,
YOU HAVE WHAT IT
TAKES TO THRIVE IN
DRY AND HOSTILE
ENVIRONMENTS
BECAUSE YOU ARE
SHARP AND KNOW
WHEN TO CONSERVE
AND USE YOUR
RESOURCES TO
BLOSSOM WHEREVER
YOU ARE PLANTED.**





Access Handout



[Access the Handout](#)

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Session Feedback

