

Guidelines for Collection and Use of Disability Data

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance on best practices when asking students, employees, and/or alumni to self-report aspects of their identity related to disability at the University of San Diego. See p. 4 for survey question and event statement.

BACKGROUND

It is important to remember that disabled individuals interact with USD marketing, programming materials, applications, forms, and surveys. When individuals encounter questions or processes that ignore or minimize their experiences, it can reinforce feelings of exclusion and create barriers to accessing resources and support. Thoughtfully designed questions that acknowledge disability in an affirming and inclusive way help foster a sense of belonging and ensure that individual needs are recognized and valued.

Following these guidelines is an important step in creating an environment where disabled students and employees feel seen, respected, and empowered. In doing so, you also demonstrate a broader commitment to accessibility and inclusion, reinforcing that the university values all aspects of diversity.

These guidelines are grounded in philosophical, legal, and practical considerations:

- **Mission Aligned:** As a Catholic university grounded in *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), the University of San Diego is committed to fostering an environment that supports the holistic well-being of all community members, including disabled community members. These guidelines align with *Lighting the Way to 2030's* second goal, *Inclusive Excellence: Create an inclusive community where the dignity of each person is affirmed and celebrated and they can thrive in every dimension of their lives*. The guidelines also support efforts to ensure that disabled individuals experience full participation in the academic, social, and co-curricular life of the university.
- **Legal Mandate:** In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and California state laws, USD is committed to ensuring that all students and employees have equal access to education, employment, programs, and services. Thoughtful question design helps to prevent discriminatory practices and aligns institutional data collection with best practices in disability inclusion.
- **Common Language:** This guide provides recommended language and terminology for use when asking about disability on forms, surveys, and applications. A consistent and

affirming approach ensures that students and employees encounter disability-related questions in a way that is respectful, clear, and aligned with national best practices. Standardized language also enables the university to better understand the needs of disabled students and employees and to develop programs and services that promote equity and access.

APPLICATION

These guidelines apply to any content that asks students or employees to self-report aspects of their identity relating to disability. With that, you should bring these design principles to all applications, surveys, and forms. There are four primary guidelines. Together, they outline (1) what types of questions to include and how often they should appear in your content, (2-3) considerations of privacy, rationale, and disclosure, and (4) how to design inclusive questions.

As you develop your forms, remember that disability is a deeply personal and sometimes changing social construct. For many disability diverse individuals, these questions are weighted with their own process of self-discovery and reclamation. Throughout their time with the university, an individual's answers may change and comfort with sharing varies widely. Holding these complexities in mind can help you develop content with sensitivity and an appreciation for the diversity of their experiences. While, for many nondisabled users, you might be asking a simple question, for disabled individuals, these are questions that many have thought deeply about, and will likely inform their experience of your content. If this way of thinking is new for you, see the glossary of terms and further resources in the appendix. To start designing disability inclusive forms, keep this general hierarchy in mind:

1. Include access needs as a standard question for events and programs;
2. Only ask about disability identity when your program and/or assessment needs require it;
3. The need to ask about specific diagnosis is very rare.

In partnership with the Disability and Learning Difference Resource Center (DLDRC), Student Affairs Assessment and Research recommends that all university forms and surveys relating to disability follow the outline below.

GUIDELINES

1. Ask only what is relevant

Identify what information you actually need and only ask for that information. For the vast majority of contexts, your application, survey, or form does not need information beyond whether an individual identifies as having a disability or not and/or identifying access needs for an event.

2. Take all appropriate measures to protect individuals' privacy

Because disability is a sensitive and not always visible identity category, it is imperative that you take precaution with how data is shared and stored.

- **Collection & Storage** : Data collection and storage devices should be password protected with a strong password and access should only be given to staff members that have been designated as "need to know." It is recommended to use a separate codebook file if personally identifying information is to be kept, which separates data responses from student/employee ID numbers, email addresses, or other identifying information. Any printed copies should be shredded after use.
- **Dissemination** : Think critically about who has access to student/employee information and take reasonable measures to minimize how many people have access to data files. When sharing qualitative assessment data, mine the responses for any identifying information. Keep in mind that some disabled individuals who are on campus have not shared that information. Disaggregated qualitative data could be linked to a specific person.

3. Explain why you are asking

When asking about disability, be clear about how the information will be used.

Participants want to know why the information is being collected and how their privacy will be protected. It is useful to include a statement of affirmation alongside this explanation.

e.g. We ask this question to assess our program outcomes across demographics including disability. We honor our disabled participants and want to evaluate the experience for specific underrepresented communities. This information will only be shared with limited staff and is stored on a password protected server.

4. Ask questions that affirm disability

Because of the size of our community and the sensitivity of disability data, we recommend only asking the following question to identify disabled person responses. Limiting survey questions to ask if an individual identifies as having a disability is less intrusive and helps protect an individual from being identified.

Survey Question

If you are administering a survey to USD faculty, staff, students, and/or alumni, use this question to allow individuals to identify aspects of their identity related to disability.

To help us better understand and support the needs of our community, we ask the following confidential question. Your response will not be shared individually and will only be used for research and program improvement.

Do you have a disability (either temporary or long term) that affects your vision, hearing, mobility, self-care, learning, memory, concentration, ability to be independent outside the home, or ability to work?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

For any surveys in Qualtrics, email the Associate Dean of Student Affairs Assessment and Research, Tim Novara (tnovara@sandiego.edu), to receive a pre-populated copy of this question.

Event Statement

To ensure that all programs and events are accessible and inclusive, it is essential to allow participants to identify disability-related access needs. All individuals planning events are expected to include this statement as part of their standard process to support full participation (sourced from [Cornell University](#)).

We strive to host inclusive, accessible events that enable all individuals, including individuals with disabilities, to engage fully. To be respectful of those with allergies and environmental sensitivities, we ask that you please refrain from wearing strong fragrances. To request an accommodation or for inquiries about accessibility, please contact [name, email, phone]).

LIMITATIONS

While these guidelines support you in designing access-oriented and disability-inclusive questions, keep in mind that this practice should not exist in a vacuum. Take time to review, and implement, broader inclusive strategies within your professional practice. This includes developing an understanding of accessibility, universal design principles, and accommodations. You should also be familiar with University of San Diego policies and

resources relating to disability, including those provided by [Human Resources](#) and the [Disability and Learning Difference Resource Center \(DLDRC\)](#).

Your familiarity not only supports broad access and ADA compliance; it positions you to be a resource for those seeking accommodations, services, and support. While these guidelines offer a standardized approach to asking about disability, they cannot account for every individual experience or need. Accessibility encompasses many different lived experiences and requires ongoing reflection and adaptation.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adapted from [Glossary of Disability-Related Terms](#)
(<https://www.washington.edu/doit/glossary-disability-related-terms>)

Accessible: In the case of a facility, readily usable by a particular individual; in the case of a program or activity, presented or provided in such a way that a particular individual can participate, with or without auxiliary aid(s); in the case of electronic resources, accessible with or without assistive computer technology.

Access barriers: Any obstruction that prevents people with disabilities from using standard facilities, equipment and resources.

Accommodation: An adjustment to make a program, facility, or resource accessible to a person with a disability.

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA): A comprehensive federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, public services, public accommodations and services operated by private entities, and telecommunications.

Assistive technology: Technology used to assist a person with a disability, e.g., wheelchair, handsplints, computer-based equipment.

Captioned film or videos: Transcription of the verbal portion of films or videos displayed to make them accessible to people who are deaf.

Captioning: Text that is included with video presentations or broadcasts that enables people with hearing impairments to have access to the audio portion of the material.

Disability: Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). **Discrimination:** Act of making a difference in treatment or favor on a basis other than individual merit.

FM Sound Amplification System: Electronic amplification system consisting of three

components: a microphone/transmitter, monaural FM receiver and a combination charger/carrying case. It provides wireless FM broadcast from a speaker to a listener who has a hearing impairment.

Hearing impairments: Complete or partial loss of ability to hear caused by a variety of injuries or diseases including congenital defects.

Interpreter: Professional person who assists a deaf person in communicating with hearing people.

Major life activities: Functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, and participating in community activities (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

Mobility impairment: Disability that affects movement ranging from gross motor skills such as walking to fine motor movement involving manipulation of objects by hand.

Physical or mental impairment: Any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive; digestive; genito-urinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine; or any mental or psychological disorder, such as intellectual disability, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

Screen reader: Software used to echo text on a computer screen to audio output, often used by people who are blind, with visual impairments, or with learning disabilities.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act: Legislation that requires federal agencies to develop, procure, and use accessible electronic and information technology.

Sensory impairment: A disability that affects touch, sight and/or hearing.

Sign language: Manual communication commonly used by deaf. The gestures or symbols in sign language are organized in a linguistic way. Each individual gesture is called a sign. Each sign has three distinct parts; the handshape, the position of the hands, and the movement of the hands. American Sign Language (ASL) is the most commonly used sign language in the United States. Deaf people from different countries speak different sign languages.

Specific Learning Disability: Disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in difficulties listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing mathematical calculations. Frequent limitations include hyperactivity, distractibility, emotional instability, visual and/or auditory perception difficulties and/or motor limitations, depending on the type(s) of learning disability.

Speech impairment: Problems in communication and related areas such as oral motor function, ranging from simple sound substitutions to the inability to understand or use language or use the oral-motor mechanism for functional speech.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI): Open and closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, including cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. The term does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital, degenerative, or induced by birth trauma.

Universal design: Designing programs, services, tools, and facilities so that they are useable, without modification, by the widest range of users possible, taking into account a variety of abilities and disabilities.

Universal design of instruction: The design of instructional materials and activities that make learning achievable by students with a wide variety of abilities and disabilities.

Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973: Act prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability which applies to any program that receives federal financial support. Section 504 of the Act is aimed at making educational programs and facilities accessible to all students. Section 508 of the Act requires that electronic office equipment purchased through federal procurement meets disability access guidelines.

Vision impairments: Complete or partial loss of ability to see, caused by a variety of injuries or diseases including congenital defects. Legal blindness is defined as visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with correcting lenses, or widest diameter of visual field subtending an angular distance no greater than 20 degrees.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The two sample questions mentioned in the Guidelines section 4 have already been created in Qualtrics; if you would like to add them to a survey, contact Tim Novara (tnovara@sandiego.edu) for information.

If you are in need of further education around disability identities and experiences or if you would like support in crafting disability affirming questions specific to your program, contact disabilityservices@sandiego.edu or [access this website](#) for more information.

See the following links for additional glossaries, trainings, and other resources related to disability inclusion and affirming practices.

- [Humanizing Disability Experiences in Our Pedagogies and Practices.](#)
- [Access is Love Reading List](#)
- [Places to Start](#)

- <https://adata.org/glossary-terms>
- <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>