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HEALTH

# Technology For Life: How Students With Disabilities Are Attending College At Record Rates

By [Jackie Fortier](#) ([people/jackie-fortier](#))

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Esha holds up a keyboard for low vision students.  
*Credit Jackie Fortier / KUNC*

Esha Mehta and Bill Casson had unique qualifications in mind when they looked at universities to attend.

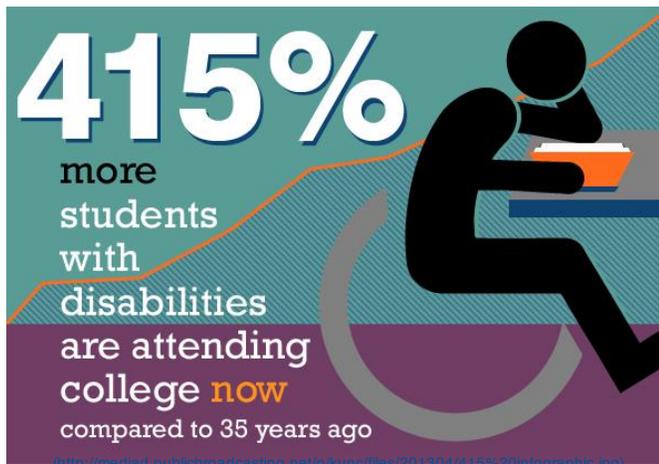
Both chose the [University of Colorado](http://www.colorado.edu/) (<http://www.colorado.edu/>), where Mehta is pursuing a bachelors degree in psychology, and Casson is getting a master's degree in computer science. But their decision to come to Boulder wasn't like many others. They weren't lured by mountain sports or football rankings, but by the reputation of the CU disability services office. Both Mehta and Casson are blind.

## Listen

4:56

Attending college with a disability requires planning. And that's where campus resources can either make or break a student's college experience.

"This is like a utopia, it's so great here. The staff here is just so supportive, they really go above and beyond for the students. It's just amazing," says Mehta.



<http://media2-publicbroadcasting.net/kunc/files/2016/04/19%20img01apmc.jpg>

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau  
Credit Jackie Fortier / KUNC

The [Disability Services Office](http://disabilityservices.colorado.edu/) (<http://disabilityservices.colorado.edu/>) at the University of Colorado assists over 2,000 students on campus, a tiny fraction of the overall student population. Some staff act as liaisons between the students and professors, while others aid in getting materials for students, like textbooks in braille. There is a computer lab outfitted with screen readers and desks that can be raised or lowered for students in wheelchairs. Students can print an image on a specialized printer that will outline it in braille-like tactile dots that can be felt, or print documents in braille for them to read. It's not about an advantage, but equality.

Before CU, Mehta first attended a school in the east, which we've chosen not to name. She says they lied to her about their facilities for blind students and that when she discovered the truth, she was startled.

"I thought, well if they're telling me that they have great equipment, and that they're really prepared, why would I not believe them?"

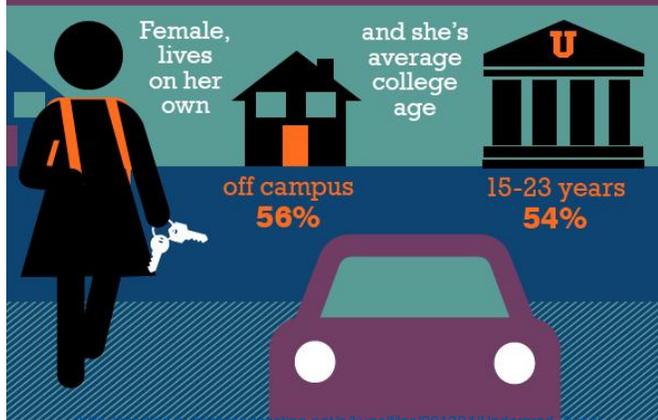
"They hadn't seen a blind student in 25 years," said Mehta. "You can't just go by what they're telling you you really have to investigate for yourself, and really ask to see what equipment they have. I didn't do that. I thought, well if they're telling me that they have great equipment, and that they're really prepared, why would I not believe them?"

Mehta says she had to use demo versions of screen readers which timed out after 40 minutes, making her restart the computer. She tried to get her needs addressed, but she says the school administration was unresponsive.

"I was so angry. I took it up with the provost of the university, and the office of equality and nothing was being done. For me I felt like I didn't have the support I needed to succeed," said Mehta.

She left after one semester, and attended the [Colorado Center for the Blind](http://coloradocenterfortheblind.org/) (<http://coloradocenterfortheblind.org/>) in Littleton, where she heard about CU.

## The average undergraduate student with a disability is



[http://media.gopublicbroadcasting.net/komemedia/2015/07/Undergrad\\_01.jpg](http://media.gopublicbroadcasting.net/komemedia/2015/07/Undergrad_01.jpg)

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau

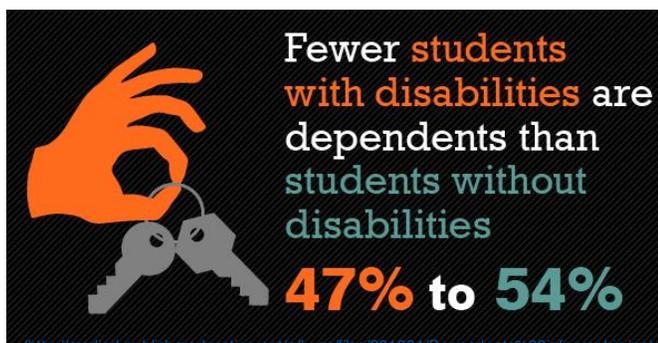
Credit Jackie Fortier / KUNC

It's not just about access to braille textbooks. The amount of visual communication happening in a classroom, from powerpoint - which are ubiquitous with higher education, to the diagrams and pictures shown to illustrate a concept make up the majority of time in any given class. Having dedicated resources that assist students with visual disabilities like Mehta and Casson can help them feel included rather than marginalized.

"Sometimes people are surprised when I tell them what I study," says Casson. "You have to get past the initial shock of a blind person coding when it's such a highly visual thing. I use a screen reader on my laptop, and no one thinks anything of it."

Mehta describes with relish her excitement at being able to touch and hold a human heart in her anatomy class. Though not necessarily what every student would want, the simple act of bringing the class content from abstract to concrete made the course come alive for her.

Like most students with disabilities, both Mehta and Casson live on their own, with roommates. Mehta says she gets tired of people acting differently around her, "sometimes I think, would you be talking to me like this if I wasn't blind? Probably not," said Mehta.



[http://media.gopublicbroadcasting.net/komemedia/2015/07/Dependents\\_020infographic1.jpg](http://media.gopublicbroadcasting.net/komemedia/2015/07/Dependents_020infographic1.jpg)

Data from the American Community Survey, U.S. Census

Credit Jackie Fortier / KUNC

Even though institutions of higher education are required by law to give "equal access" to higher education, the reality is much different. In a [survey](http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/591436.pdf) (<http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/591436.pdf>), conducted by the [U.S. Government Accountability Office](http://www.gao.gov/) (<http://www.gao.gov/>), participating universities reported they did not receive enough funding to adequately provide services for their students.

The schools also reported that "while faculty are generally receptive to supporting these students, some faculty members showed resistance to providing accommodations. School officials... cited faculty lack of awareness and understanding of the legal requirements as key factors. Faculty members generally define academic standards through

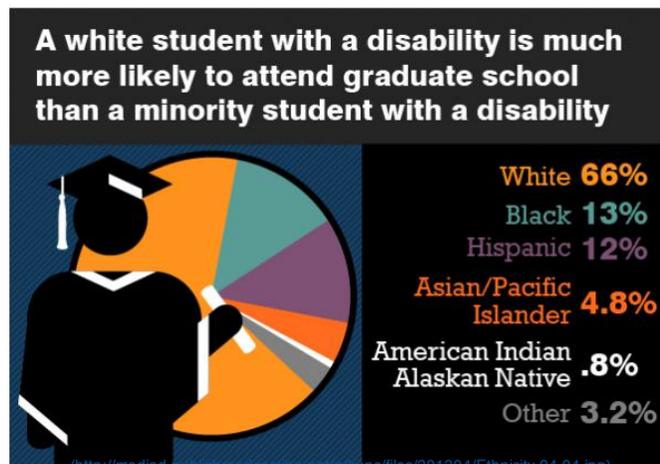
development and delivery of course requirements and materials, and some believe that accommodations may undermine their academic authority and compromise academic standards and values, according to school and association officials..."

This conflict between deciding what is a reasonable academic adjustment and what isn't can put the student with a disability at odds with their professor, which is why having assistance from a disability office can make or break a student's experience. While Mehta and Casson say CU provides lots of assistance, there is a few places it could improve.

"In some buildings, there isn't any braille for the room numbers, so I have to ask directions, which can get annoying," says Mehta.

"Just because it's different doesn't mean it can't be done."

Though more students with disabilities are attending higher education, some trends remain. The gender and minority gaps persist in students with disabilities, with more women attending higher education than their male counterparts and many more white students attending both undergraduate and graduate school than minority students.



Data from the U.S. Census Bureau  
Credit Jackie Fortier / KUNC

Mehta will be receiving another service dog this summer - her first was more interested in squirrels than guiding. She and Casson both say people should be more educated about people with disabilities, and what they are capable of.

"It's a different way of doing things, and it's not any less, it's not any more, it's just a different way of doing things," says Mehta. "Just because it's different doesn't mean it can't be done."

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