

# DISABILITY JUSTICE CAUCUS

## DISABILITY@HKS SURVEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

DECEMBER 2, 2022



**Special thanks to the following individuals and organizations for making this survey and publication possible:**

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# Introduction



**Priscilla Mensah, DJC Chair  
MPP '23**

During the 2021-2022 academic year, matters of disability justice and inclusion garnered renewed awareness and urgency from the HKS student community. As a result, the Disability Justice Caucus, originally established in 2017, created the Disability@HKS survey. This report represents the culmination of a year's worth of data collection and organizing by a group of dedicated disabled students eager to see HKS fulfill its stated values of diversity, inclusion and belonging.

In the midterm examination period of Fall 2021, MPP I students with disabilities were directed to begin their exams at 6:30 AM relative to the 8:00 AM start time of their non-disabled peers; it became incumbent upon disabled students to explain to fellow classmates and teaching staff that arriving at school before sunrise constituted exclusionary teaching practices, as the open letter to the faculty read:



*The 6:30 AM exam accommodation reflects a misunderstanding between the principles of equality and equity. While the accommodation in this case may be equal, in that it allows all students to finish the individual portion of the exam at the same time, it is certainly not equitable: an equitable solution would not place additional burdens on our peers who are entitled to accommodations:*

- Those who use dining hall or cafeteria services to feed themselves would not be able to get their breakfast that morning given the later opening times of the dining halls and cafeterias.*
- Those who use, or may even require, transportation services to get to campus would be inconvenienced.*



The ultimate reversal of this directive was a pivotal moment for disability advocacy at HKS, in particular, student allies who signed the open letter began to recognize just how differently HKS systems could operate for their disabled peers; this survey sought to further understanding of disability challenges across HKS. While exclusion seemed perceptible to DJC members, we concluded only a data-driven snapshot could adequately unearth veiled assumptions, community attitudes, and unmet expectations held by administrators, students/teachers and disabled community members, respectively.

At the DJC's 'Disability Open House' staff/student dialogue on April 13th, 2022, it was noted that the number of HKS students who identify as disabled has been rising every year, reflecting wider trends within the higher education sector and beyond. While the exclusion of even a handful of disabled learners would warrant introspection at the systems level, the aforementioned trends compel us to question whether the status quo can adequately meet growing demands for a disability-inclusive educational experience. We hope the survey's findings set in motion constructive improvements for disabled students' experience at HKS. We also hope the findings are digested in their entirety and the recommendations are thoroughly scrutinized for the purposes of implementation. Above all, we would like this report to be viewed as an opportunity to grow an under-represented but vital area of policy leadership internal to HKS systems and beyond.



Priscilla Mensah  
Disability Justice Caucus Chair 2022-2023

# Executive Summary

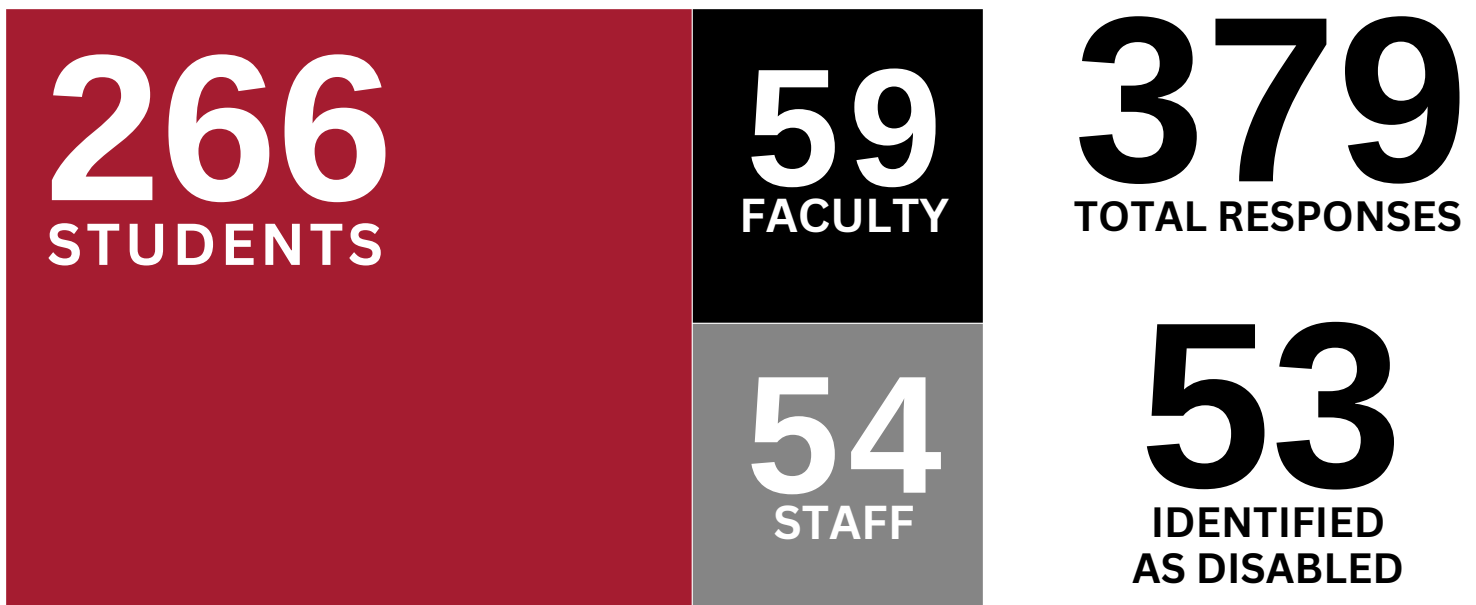
- A large proportion (42%) of non-disabled respondents somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement “The Harvard Kennedy School is inclusive of people with disabilities,” while this number rises to 59% for respondents who identify as disabled.
- The overwhelming majority of HKS students surveyed do not believe the Kennedy School is doing enough to adequately prepare its students to work with populations including disabled people upon graduation. 81% of total respondents expressed some or strong disagreement with the statement “I think HKS is doing enough to prepare its students to work with populations with disabilities once they graduate.”
- The perception of the physical accessibility of HKS varied dramatically based on the identity of the respondent (disabled or non-disabled) and type of disability. Over a third (36%) of non-disabled respondents somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement “The Harvard Kennedy School’s campus is physically accessible to people with disabilities,” while 50% of respondents with disabilities somewhat or strongly disagreed.
- The overwhelming majority of HKS students surveyed believe the HKS curriculum is lacking content on disabilities. 77% of students somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement “Courses at HKS include enough content on disability.”
- A considerable majority (61%) of HKS staff and faculty do not recall receiving information on accessibility during the onboarding process for their current position.

# Methodology & Overview

The Disability@HKS survey was designed by Priscilla Mensah (MPP, '23) using the Qualtrics application ([harvard.qualtrics.com](https://harvard.qualtrics.com)) and disseminated to members of the HKS community between April 28 and May 31, 2022. "Member" was defined as those working, teaching or studying at the Harvard Kennedy School. Those eligible to complete the survey therefore included affiliates of other schools who were enrolled in, or taught a class at the Kennedy School at the time of survey completion. To validate survey eligibility, respondents were asked to provide their Harvard email address. Respondents who did not provide such an address (and for whom an HKS/Harvard email address could not be retrieved from the internal address book) were eliminated from the data set. Responses were subsequently anonymized.

The survey received a total of 391 responses, ultimately **379 responses** once cleaned, with a **99% response quality rate**.

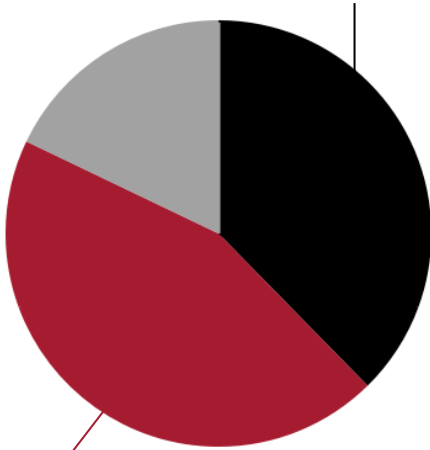
All told, the survey represented **27% of the HKS student body**, **36% of faculty** and **11% of staff and administrators**.



# Overall Responses

All respondents—students, faculty, and staff alike—were presented with the statements below, and asked if they strongly disagreed, somewhat disagreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, somewhat agreed, or strongly agreed.

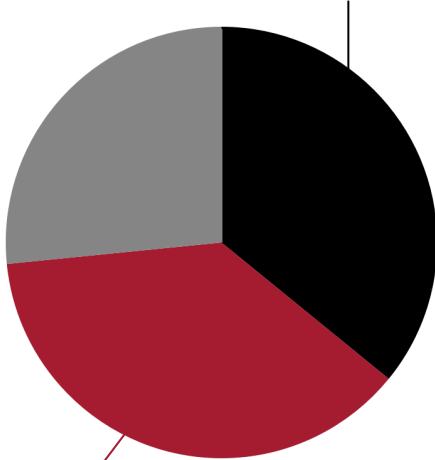
30.6% somewhat or strongly agree



44.5% somewhat or strongly disagree

**The Harvard Kennedy School is inclusive of people with disabilities.**

28.5% somewhat or strongly agree



37.5% somewhat or strongly disagree

**The Harvard Kennedy School's campus is physically accessible to people with disabilities.**



# Student Responses

Some questions were asked only of students. The survey response at right characterizes a trend reflected further in the quantitative responses: that while HKS does make accommodations possible, barriers to access are far too high. On the following page, responses show that while there are *some* learning opportunities available, HKS student by and large are not adequately prepared to learn about or serve populations that include people with disabilities.

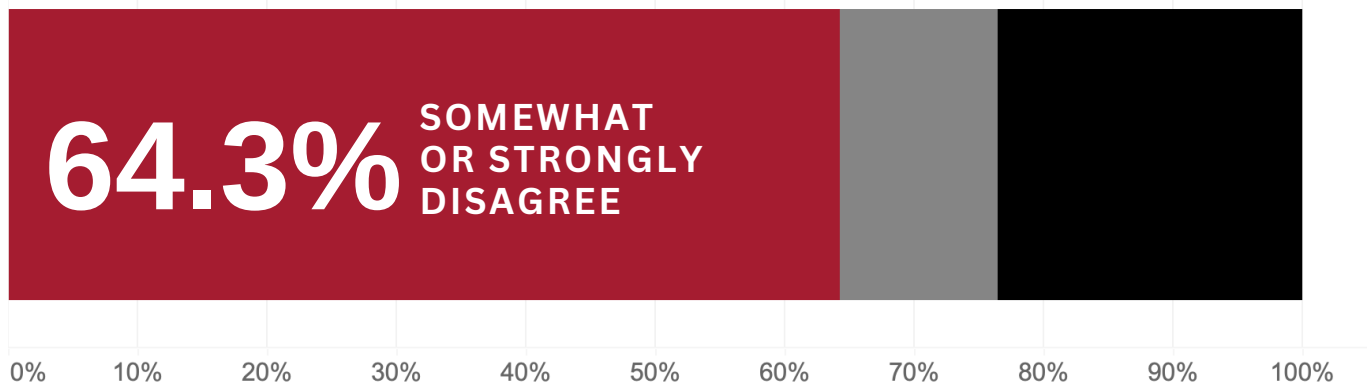
“ Battling with the HKS administration to get the information and support I need has been **exhausting, frustrating, and demoralizing**, on top of all the challenges caused by my illness. **HKS should not make things harder for students.** ”

Student Response

## Students with disabilities have their needs met by the Harvard Kennedy School.

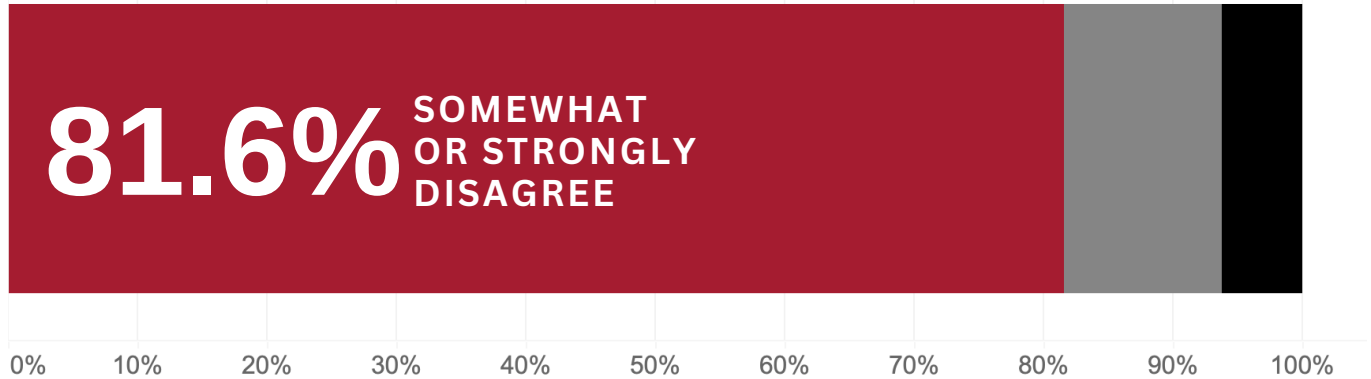


## If I needed short term or long term modification to my education due to a disability, I know who/what office in HKS to contact.



# Student Responses

I think HKS is doing enough to prepare its students to work with populations with disabilities once they graduate.



“ I have been lucky to take the **Disability Law and Policy class**, and through that experience, to make the acquaintance of many more persons with disabilities (including HKS students) than I would have otherwise. This has added so much to the **richness of diversity in my experience** at HKS and I wish it for other classmates as well. ”

Student Response

“ I only learned to take note of students with disabilities as a TA this year. **I've TA'ed all 3 years at HKS.** Not only was I disappointed in myself at this, but I was disappointed that it took \*multiple\* students with learning needs for me to pay attention to it. Now I try to raise the best practices I learned in everything I do. ”

Student Response

Courses at HKS include enough content on disability.



# Faculty Responses

I think the faculty, overall, are committed to providing the necessary accommodations and more generally, genuine support, but there isn't widespread understanding of what is required. **Good will, but not enough skill.**

Faculty Response

The survey response shown at left underscores the fundamental problem: HKS faculty do indeed care, and make remarkable efforts to be as inclusive as possible, but are underprepared to offer universal accessibility in the classroom. While the finding on the bottom of this page (that faculty know where to get information on accommodations) is encouraging, the finding on the following page (a majority of faculty do not recall accessibility training during onboarding) is concerning.

**I feel I am well prepared to manage the accessibility accommodations of students in my classroom.**



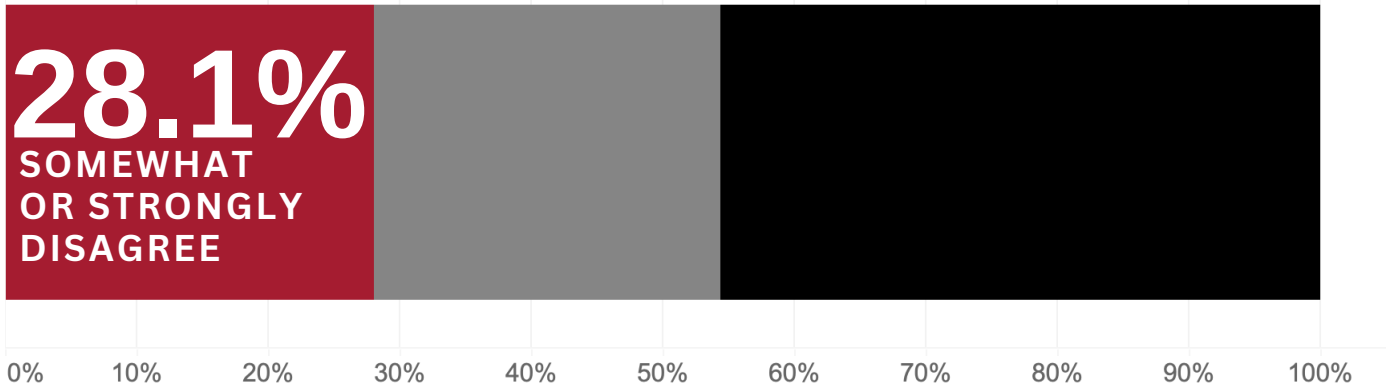
**If I needed support to accommodate a student with a disability, I know where to get the right information.**



0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

# Faculty Responses

I feel that HKS offers teaching staff sufficient resources on disability to aid teaching in an accessible way.



Information about accessibility was shared with me during the onboarding process for my current position.

**54%**  
OF HKS FACULTY  
SOMEWHAT OR  
STRONGLY DISAGREE

# Staff Responses

**67%**  
OF HKS STAFF  
SOMEWHAT OR  
STRONGLY DISAGREE

Information about accessibility was shared with me during the onboarding process for my current position.

How frequently do issues of disability and accessibility feature in your work at HKS?



I know where to obtain information on disability if it became relevant to my work at HKS.



0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

# Recommendations

The recommendations below represent a good faith attempt by members of the DJC to consult with fellow students, faculty, and administrators on first steps to realize positive change throughout the institution. Transformation requires action on several fronts, but these steps together will account for a substantive plan of action. The recommendations below are by no means exhaustive:

- HKS must put institutional heft behind building and maintaining an evidence base on matters of disability inclusion, such as committing resources to the continuous iteration and annual dissemination of the Disability@HKS survey.
- HKS course evaluations should integrate questions on accessibility and the presence of disability-related content within courses to identify areas for new intersectional perspectives and disability-specific case studies.
- HKS should seek external expertise through the process of an accessibility audit of its built educational environment and swiftly act on the consequent recommendation to improve the physical accessibility of the campus.
- Relevant departments of HKS should conduct a review of the clarity and availability of resources on disability, accessibility, and potential accommodations. HKS should consult with the DJC, the Kennedy School Student Government and the wider student body on strategies for disseminating this information to students.
- HKS should increase the number of faculty and administrators possessing policy expertise and practice in the area of disability and accessibility.
- All HKS orientations for new students should include a comprehensive introduction to disability-inclusive classroom norms (such as the consistent use of microphones and closed captioning) and make additional resources available for students to maintain their learning throughout their academic career.
- All HKS onboarding for faculty and staff should include basic principles of accessibility and training.
- All teaching support staff with direct interaction with the classroom experience should undergo onboarding which includes training on the basic principles of accessibility and disability inclusion.

**Get involved with the DJC!**



