



Teaching Students with Physical and Mobility Disabilities

Physical disabilities are broad in nature. A student may have a back problem that affects sitting or walking, have a chronic medical condition leading to physical problems, have small amputations such as fingers or toes, or have a disability that necessitates the use of a wheelchair for mobility and/or a personal assistant for care.

Mobility disabilities are wide-ranging, occurring from a variety of causes including but not limited to back problems, chronic health issues, amputations, stature, and other causes. The effects range from affecting length or type of terrain a student can walk, to needing to use crutches or canes, to needing to use a wheel chair. In all cases, the tool to assist ambulation may be situational or permanent.

Some examples of possible accommodations that a student with a physical or mobility disability may require include (but are not limited to):

- “Dear Professor Memos” verifying the need for accommodations
- Priority/early course registration
- Relocating a class or lab to a building or classroom that is accessible
- Provision of an accessible table and/or seat in the classroom
- Accommodated testing for in-class and online exams and quizzes
- Note-taking services and/or the use of an audio recorder for class lectures
- Allowance of laptops, tablets, or assistive technology in the classroom
- Regular advising meetings with an assigned D²A² advisor

When interacting with individuals with physical or mobility disabilities, follow these guidelines:

- Allow for (occasional) tardiness in case of inclement weather.
- Do not offer to hold a cane or crutches unless the individual requests.
- When talking with a person who uses a wheelchair, sit down or kneel in order to place yourself at eye level if the conversation is more than a few minutes.
- Don’t touch or push a person’s wheelchair or other equipment without asking for permission or if they need help first. Likewise, don’t put your hand on or lean on a wheelchair as this is invading the individual’s body space.
- People are not confined to wheelchairs. Don’t assume that using a wheelchair is a tragedy – it is a means of transportation.
- Individuals who use wheelchairs often transfer to automobiles and furniture; don’t move a wheelchair away if the user transfers out of the chair.
- Some individuals with physical or mobility disabilities use a wheelchair only some of the time; however, this does not mean that they are “faking” a disability. It may be a means to conserve energy, to reduce pain, or to move about more quickly.
- Do not speak loudly or slowly to a person who uses a wheelchair unless they need you to do so in order to communicate.
- Don’t assume that a person NEEDS help.

The following are some considerations to keep in mind when working with students with physical disabilities or disabilities affecting mobility in the classroom:

- Acquaint yourself with the location of the nearest accessible restroom and water fountain.
- Ensure that there are adequate pathways to your classroom and within your classroom.
- Theater type classrooms may present difficulties unless there are flat spaces in the front or rear of the room large enough to accommodate a wheelchair.
- Ensure that there is space for a table. Tables are more accessible than standard desks, and should have an under-table clearance of at least 27 ½ inches. Let D²A² know if a table is needed.
- If possible, avoid relegating students with physical or mobility disabilities to a doorway, side aisle, or back of the room
- Classes taught in a laboratory setting will usually require some modification of the workstation. Working directly with the student may be the best way to provide modifications to the workstation.
- Identify if the student will transfer from wheelchair to desk and ensure that the chair is nearby for transportation in case of an emergency.
- For fieldwork or field trips, assess the site for type of terrain and slope, and availability of ramps, accessible rest rooms and parking.

Additional Resources:

Mobility Impairments (DO-IT, University of Washington)	https://www.washington.edu/doit/mobility-impairments
Teaching Students with Physical Disabilities (Accessible Campus, Council of Ontario Universities)	http://www.accessiblecampus.ca/tools-resources/educators-tool-kit/teaching-tips/teaching-students-with-physical-disabilities/
Physical Disability (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training)	https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/specific-disabilities/physical-disability/
Students who have Mobility or Dexterity Limitations (Allegheny College)	https://sites.allegheny.edu/disabilityservices/students-who-have-mobility-or-dexterity-limitations/