

Diversity

Topic: **Physical Challenges and Disabilities**

Compiled

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Introduction: "The term physical disabilities encompasses a wide variety of conditions that may affect a student's mobility, stamina, and/or functioning." (Source: Mesa State College) Many of our students face physical challenges and disabilities. The uninformed faculty member may view these students as disruptive, off-putting, or bothersome. A few examples of student disabilities I've experienced as a TA in the classroom include the following:

- Two students in an 8 a.m. class who were often late -- and disruptively apologetic about being late -- when they came into the classroom. Both of these students had undergone knee surgeries and had to take special-needs transportation to and from class, plus climb three flights of stairs on crutches. By the end of the semester, they were healed up and coming to class on time -- without the special needs transportation.
- A severely diabetic student who looked sick during the final exam checked his blood sugar and he found that it was dangerously low. He showed me the monitor and then asked to be excused from the exam so he could eat a snack. I knew that a blood sugar level in the low 30s was bad. Ten minutes later he returned to finish his exam, looking much better but still not looking well. Unfortunately for him, he scored so poorly on the final exam that he lowered his semester average a letter grade.
- A non-traditional student who missed several classes and the midterm exam because of complications related to a back surgery that was performed during the winter break before she returned to school for the spring semester. Deadlines had to be adjusted and the exam re-administered. An outstanding student, she earned a strong "A" for the semester despite her challenges.

Students' physical challenges or disabilities may be either permanent or temporary and severe or slight. Whatever the student's challenges, they may create tension in your classroom. This handout attempts to provide basic guidance to help faculty smooth their interactions with physically challenged or disabled students.

Facts

and Tips:

- While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires in clear language that we make reasonable accommodations for disabled citizens, it does not address how to interact sensitively with our disabled students. The ADA provides civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities like those that are provided to individuals on the basis of race, sex, national origin, and religion. ADA guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.
(<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq9805.html>)
- Examples of physical disabilities and/or challenges may include any one of the following:
 - (1) orthopedic impairment (acquired or congenital physical motor impairment)
 - (2) cerebral palsy
 - (3) spina bifida
 - (4) muscular dystrophy
 - (5) arthritis
 - (6) congenital anomalies
 - (7) osteogenesis imperfecta
 - (8) arthrogryposis
 - (9) chronic disease or *manageable* conditions including those associated with diabetes, HIV/AIDS, migraine and cluster headaches, lupus, cystic fibrosis, athesma
- Physical characteristics of students with physical disabilities and challenges may include any one or a combination of the following:
 - (1) paralysis
 - (2) altered muscle tone
 - (3) sensory disturbance
 - (4) unsteady gait
 - (5) non-ambulation requiring alternate means of mobility
 - (6) loss of, or inability to use one or more limbs
 - (7) poor gross/fine and/or oral-motor control
- Remember that the student's disability is only a small part of his or her total identity as a person.
- Tips on relating to students with disabilities (from the University of North Carolina):
 - (1) Always address the student directly, not through an interpreter or caretaker.
 - (2) Ask the student privately what things you can do to facilitate learning.

- (3) Know what the student is able to do and plan alternatives ahead of time.
- (4) Ensure that the student can participate in both class discussions and group work.
- (5) Adapt to the student's needs without lowering your usual course standards.

- From the 2006 Disability Status Report (Cornell University), in 2006 the prevalence of disability in the US was:
 - 15.0 percent for persons ages 5 +
 - 6.3 percent for persons ages 5 to 15
 - 6.9 percent for persons ages 16 to 20
 - 12.9 percent for persons ages 21 to 64
 - 30.2 percent for persons ages 65 to 74
 - 52.6 percent for persons ages 75 +

BY GENDER

- 15.6 percent of females ages 5 and older and 14.4 percent of males ages 5 and older in the US reported a disability in 2006

BY RACE

- 12.7 percent among whites
- 17.5 percent among blacks / African-Americans
- 6.3 percent among Asians
- 21.7 percent among Native Americans
- 11.9 percent among persons of some other race

BY EMPLOYMENT

- 37.7 percent of working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities were employed.

Web Sites:

- <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/publications.html#Section504>
Visit this Department of Education Web site for a comprehensive listing of publications available on-line to assist with your understanding of educational institutions' responsibilities related to people with disabilities.
- <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/DisabilityStatistics/>
Visit this site at Cornell University for disability statistics and reports such as *The 2006 Annual Disability Status Report*.
- <http://ctl.unc.edu/tfi13.html>
Visit this site at the University of North Carolina for more about interactions with the physically disabled student, including appropriate terminology and classroom dynamics.

AEJMC 2009 Boston, MA
“The Doctors Are In”
Elected Standing Committee on Teaching

Citations: Although 20 years old, this article may be useful to some:
Frichten, C., et al (1988). Interaction between college students with
physical disabilities and their professors. “Journal of Applied
Rehabilitation Counseling”. Vol. 19 number 1 pp 13-20.

AUTHOR’S ABSTRACT: The study investigated the nature of
appropriate and inappropriate interaction behaviors between 91 college
professors (74 with experience teaching disabled students) and 38
physically disabled students. Among findings was that professors who had
taught disabled students were more comfortable with such students and
interested in teaching them in the future.