

## Mobility Impairments

### DESCRIPTION AND FACTS:

The term mobility impairment refers to a broad range of disabilities which includes orthopedic, neuromuscular, cardiovascular and pulmonary disorders. Students with these impairments often must rely upon assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, canes and artificial limbs to obtain mobility. The mobility impairment may either be congenital or the result of injury or disease. Disabilities frequently seen are arthritis, spinal cord injury, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy and amputation. Some students may have hidden (nonvisual) disabilities which include pulmonary disease, respiratory disorders, epilepsy and other conditions.

### POSSIBLE BARRIERS:

- Decreased physical stamina and endurance
- Decreased eye-hand coordination
- Decreased notetaking and test-writing ability due to weakness or paralysis
- Impaired verbal communication
- Inability to gain access to inaccessible classrooms

### INTERACTION WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS:

1. Speak directly to the student as you would any other student.
2. If a student uses a wheelchair, conversations at different eye levels are difficult. If a conversation continues for more than a few minutes and if it is possible to do so, sit down, kneel or squat and share eye level.
3. A wheelchair is part of the person's body space. Do not automatically hang or lean on the chair because it is similar to hanging or leaning on the person.
4. Words like "walking" or "running" are appropriate. Sensitivity to these words is not necessary. People who use wheelchairs frequently use the same words.
5. When it appears that a student needs assistance, ask if you can help. Most students will ask for assistance if they need it. Accept a "no, thank you" graciously.
6. Accept the fact that a disability exists. Not acknowledging this fact is not acknowledging the person.
7. Students are not "confined" to wheelchairs. They often transfer to automobiles and to furniture. Some students who use wheelchairs can walk with the aid of canes, braces, crutches or walkers. Using a wheelchair some of the time does not mean an individual is "faking" a disability. It may be a means to conserve energy or move about more quickly.
8. If a student's speech is difficult to understand, don't hesitate to ask him or her to repeat.

### TEACHING A STUDENT WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS:

Campus access is one of the major concerns of the student who uses a wheelchair or has mobility impairments. The student must learn routes to and from classes and across campus that do not present barriers. A barrier may be a stair, a curb, a narrow walkway, a heavy door, an elevator door that has no delay mechanism, a vehicle blocking a ramp, etc.

It is difficult to make generalizations about the classroom needs of students with mobility impairments because some students may be able to stand for short periods of time while others will not be able to stand at all. Some will have full use of their hands and arms while others will have minimal or no use of them. There are, however, some **general considerations** that will apply to most, if not all, students with mobility impairments.

**1. Communication:** Students are encouraged to talk with their instructors to describe their functional difficulties and needs, and develop a course of action acceptable to both parties.

**2. Inaccessible Rooms:** If a faculty member's office is inaccessible, it will be necessary to find an accessible location. A classroom can become inaccessible to an individual with a mobility impairment due to elevator failure, furniture that has been moved, etc. If this or any other conflict occurs, contact the secretary of the Physical Plant (Ext. 9331) and someone will assist the professor and student.

**3. Tardiness and Absence:** If breaks between classes are short (10 minutes or less), the student who uses a wheelchair may frequently be a few minutes late. Usually, the student must wait for an elevator, take a circuitous (but accessible) route, and maneuver along crowded paths and corridors. If a student who uses a wheelchair is frequently late, it is, of course, appropriate to discuss the situation with the student and seek solutions. Most students will be aware of time restrictions and will schedule their classes accordingly. However, it is not always possible to leave enough time between classes. Early classes, attendant personal care schedules, van service difficulties, parking, and weather may cause a student to be late or absent. In addition, physical problems may require prolonged absences for medical treatment. Students and instructors may want to plan for these occasions so that the student does not miss important class material.

**4. Class Changes/Field Trips:** If a class involves field work or field trips, a student using a wheelchair may have to make arrangements well ahead of time if they rely on attendants or adapted vans for transportation. Instructors should make sure they plan ahead.

**5. Internships/Student Teaching:** These may require advance preparation to ensure that the site is barrier-free and that accessible transportation is available. See above.

**6. Labs:** Lab tables may need to be modified to accommodate wheelchairs. Students and instructors should cooperatively develop methods to enable a student who cannot do the "hands-on" work to learn the use of equipment theory and methodology involved. The student can give all instructions to an aide and learn everything except the physical manipulation of the lab equipment. Aides can be arranged through Lori Musser, Coordinator of Student Disability Services (Ext. 9516).

**7. Tests:** If needed, students should discuss alternative test-taking methods with the instructor. Possible alternative testing options will be listed on the *Authorized Accommodation Memo*.

**8. Notetaking:** Each student will have his or her own preferred method for notetaking. Students may take notes for themselves, tape lectures and take notes from the tapes or work with a designated notetaker.