



Faculty >TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED STUDENTS

The following suggestions may help you overcome any discomfort you feel and avoid misunderstandings and embarrassing situations when communicating with disabled students. Keep in mind that most people with disabilities do not mind speaking openly about their disability as long as questions are sincere and well-meant.

STUDENTS WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

Definition: Mobility impairments range from the loss of fine motor skills to partial or complete paralysis, and may be caused by spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, amputation, or arthritis.

Tips for Communicating :

- Offer before providing assistance to allow the person the option of accepting or refusing. Most people in wheelchairs will ask for help when they need it.
- Direct questions, concerns and comments to the person with a disability rather than communicating through a third party.
- During an extended conversation with a person in a wheelchair, try to be seated or move to a comfortable eye level.
- Patting a person on the head is a common demonstration of affection; however, for people in wheelchairs, it is perceived as demeaning and patronizing.
- Hanging or leaning on a person's wheelchair is comparable to hanging or leaning on the person. Unless you are close friends, the person in the wheelchair may consider such actions offensive.

Students with Visual Impairments

Definition: Visual impairments range from restricted vision to total blindness and may be hereditary or the result of injury, degenerative

diseases, or other illnesses, such as diabetes.

Tips for Communicating:

- If necessary, identify yourself at the beginning of a conversation, and notify the student when you enter or exit the room.
- Nonverbal cues are often difficult and sometimes impossible for these students to read. Verbally acknowledging key points in the conversation facilitates the communication process.
- If a student who is blind or visually impaired asks for mobility assistance, offer your elbow rather than taking the student's arm. Inform the student of upcoming obstacles with phrases such as, "The chair is to your right," or "The stairs start in about three steps."
- When speaking with a person who is blind, changing the tone of your voice or your vocabulary is unnecessary. Phrases such as "see you around", or "see you later" have meanings for blind persons similar to those for sighted persons and are not offensive.
- Some students use guide dogs which are not pets but are professionally trained animals. These dogs by law can access any public facility. When "in harness" the dog is working and should not be petted or otherwise distracted without the owner's permission.

Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- To enhance communication, face the person to whom you are speaking; some hearing impaired persons can read lips. Speak normally; exaggerated movements make lip reading more difficult.
- Although some people who are deaf or hearing impaired read lips, only 40 to 50 percent of speech is understandable by watching lips. The use of body language aid comprehension.
- Ask the individual how to communicate best. Use pen and paper if necessary.
- Be patient and casual, and do not be afraid to ask a student for repetition or clarification if his/her speech is difficult to understand. Try not to say that you understand when you do not.

- Some students who are deaf or hearing impaired will say that they understand you when they do not. If you think that a student does not understand, write what you have said and show it to the student.
- If the student communicates through use of a sign language interpreter, direct your conversation, comments, and questions to the student rather than to the interpreter.

Students with Learning Disabilities:

Definition: The term “learning disabilities” covers a wide range of specific, neurological disorders, such as dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD) and memory disorders. Also, symptoms resulting from head injuries may manifest themselves as learning disabilities.

Tips for Communicating:

- Because a learning disability is not easily perceivable, students often fear that faculty will not believe that they have a disability. Offer the student a chance to express his/her needs in a nonthreatening atmosphere.
- Students with learning disabilities sometimes become nervous or distraught over examinations or assignments. Speak with them calmly and let them know that you are available for any questions they have.
- Due to the nature of some learning disabilities or medications for those disabilities, students may display inappropriate social behavior and attitudes. Students may invade your “personal space,” be unusually irritable, easily angered, or excessively anxious. Be aware that such behavior is not directed at you personally. If you and the student cannot resolve a particular situation, contact the SSD coordinator at 473-6545.

Student with Other Disabilities:

Definition: “Other” disabilities are these that do not fall under the previous categories. Some examples are epilepsy, lupus, diabetes, cancer, asthma, and various psychological disorders. Medications that treat the conditions may cause more academic difficulties for students than the disabilities.

Tips for Communicating:

- Some conditions may cause students to miss more class than allowed by the attendance policy, or they may have to leave class early or unexpectedly. Students are still responsible for missed work. Faculty members who are open and available encourage students to stay abreast of the course material.