

*They face obstacles,
but their strength of spirit and resolve keeps them on course
to achieving their college education.*

***Listening to
Students with Physical Disabilities***

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*Listening to
Students with Physical Disabilities...*

“As a student with an illness, learning has become very difficult.

At the start of my illness many professors were not considerate. Over the years the CSUS system have made significant improvements regarding accommodations for those similar to myself.”

—24 years old male with UC (Ulcerative Colitis)

“I’ve recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It hasn’t really affected me much besides damaging my vision in my right eye a bit. I can still see in that eye, but the vision is a bit cloudy. It has put unneeded stress on my school life though. I find myself constantly worrying about things like grades when I know I’m doing fine. I’m worrying about how this will affect me once I’ve graduated when that’s still a year away. I worry too much.”

—Somewhat disabled

“It feels okay. There’s not much struggle”

—Physical challenge

“I don’t like the indifference the teacher shows to students.”

—Mormon/disabled – back disc are out, older (57 yrs old)

“I seek help from SSWD and get my notes written for me and it helps with passing my classes.

My experience overall has been what I made of it, which was great.”

—Female, 22, Arthritic

“I am worried that since I have MS one day I might not be able to feel my legs and will have to miss school. It could be anything. I have found out that some of my professors have MS and are doing fine so I feel comfortable here overall.

(I like) Just talking with professors. They’re pretty cool people.”

—22 years old, Has MS

“There aren’t any challenges that have come my way. Adjusting to a new school and new surroundings wasn’t all that difficult. Being as unsocial as I am sometimes I’d say the hardest part has just been meeting new people.”

—19 yrs old, with tourettes syndrome

“It’s sometimes difficult because my disabilities are invisible. They don’t know that I have all of these disabilities, nine eye surgeries, and a chronic illness, Lupus. It’s a double-edged sword—I blend in most of the time, but you get people who question your disabilities. For example, I get cart service here and people question that or joke around, ‘How can I get limo services here?’

It’s hard enough when a person with chronic illness (bad days and flare-ups) has to deal with pain, much less students confronting me. Because they’re ignorant. I want to say ‘I’m sorry you didn’t recognize my disabilities without the blue placard and the wheelchair.’ There’s a sort of ‘what are you doing here?’ attitude, off-campus and even here. For the most part, though, students are respectful.

I have a difficult time relating to some of the students due to the maturity.

Trying to live on SSDI, trying to live on what I’m eligible for, paying for medications, it’s hard. I have to fight for what I’m eligible for. My cost of living is barely enough to get by. But when people think of social security disability benefits, they think it’s easy money, even more money. Unless they know me and my financial situation, people have these assumptions.

I’m really impressed with the SSWD services. They are really top notch. Especially compared to the community college I came from. Here, they’ll go step by step and tell you, help you to get the accommodations. They are all approachable, helpful, willing to find out, and check up on you. They do it all. If that wasn’t available, I would be struggling even more. So now I don’t feel so lost and I can even enjoy my classes because now I can keep up. With KURZWEIL, I am able to comprehend, and it actually stays in my head. A big contribution to maintaining my grades. My counselor ... is very empathetic. I feel very lucky. I am very blessed and thankful to have the services here.

I have testing accommodations for double the exam time, so I need to go to the Testing Center. One professor argued with me about taking my test there, insisting that taking it in class would be fine. ‘You can do it, it’s just half an hour. You don’t need to take it in the Testing Center.’ And then I bombed it. A few of my instructors don’t realize that the day of the exam and the availability of the Testing Center (which only has two time slots) don’t always match up. So instructors don’t want to give the exam early, even one day early, even one hour early.

But the rest of my professors are great, and say, ‘Great, and if there’s anything else you need, just let me know.’

I had one professor, my writing intensive class professor, who really understands. I write about my illness in my papers. He has cancer, so he understands.

(I don’t like that) I got stuck in an elevator for 45 minutes. I called, but it took a long time. It was a big thing.”

—student with disabilities, physical disabilities, chronic disease

“It can be distracting when I have physical challenges. It also makes it hard when your grades get docked for your absences.

Even though I have that condition (epilepsy) I still feel accepted

(I like) having teacher office hours but also being able to email them when I have an appointment or have to be at home.

(I don’t like) not having enough make up time after being hurt.”

—has physical challenges

“Many people do not believe someone is disabled. I am on medication w/side effects. I believe a lot could be done, but they tried, it’s a complex issue.

I am disabled due to some medical issues. Classes have been tough...I learn to cope and adapt.”

—Asian, f, 33, medical conditions, returning to school, parent

“I am currently 21 years old. Some of challenges I face are hemoplegic migraines/blood clotting disorder and anxiety.

I think staff is greater here all teachers are very knowledgeable and are great working with students.”

—21 years old

“An absolute privilege and rewarding experience.

The professors in my department...are devoted and an honor to learn from.”

—20, systematic lupus

Students with Physical Disabilities

The causes of physical disabilities may vary greatly, but generally fall into three main categories:

1. Neurological conditions are caused by damage or incomplete development of the brain or spinal cord and include: Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Spina Bifida, Acquired Brain Injury, Traumatic Brain Injury, Paraplegia, and Quadriplegia.
2. Orthopedic conditions are caused by damage, disease, or lack of development in the bones, muscles, or joints of the body and include: Muscular Dystrophy, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Multiple Sclerosis, Fibromyalgia, and loss of limb(s).
3. Health conditions are caused by acute or chronic disease and include: AIDS, Asthma, Cancer, Cystic Fibrosis, Diabetes, Hepatitis C, Sickle Cell Anemia, respiratory problems, heart disease, and obesity.

Other physical disabilities might include such things as Tourette Syndrome, Epilepsy, and Narcolepsy.

An Important Note

We may not always realize that students with physical disabilities may also be struggling emotionally.

For some students, the disability is recent and adjustment to their new lives may be difficult. Some may feel uncertain or afraid (often in the case of recent vision loss), confused or lost (often in the case of recent hearing loss), or frustrated or embarrassed (which may be the case for recent mobility or speech impairment). Other students may have lived their whole or most of their lives with their physical disability in a world that makes it hard on them, which can take a real toll.

No matter how long the student has had the physical disability, they may also be struggling psychologically, especially at a new school or if slipping in grades. You can help the student to get the help they need by referring them to appropriate campus resource, listed at the end of this document.

In This Document and Those on Other Types of Disabilities

In the pages to follow, you will find information regarding students with physical disabilities and medical conditions.

There are also sections on students with mobility limitations, students with vision limitations, students with hearing limitations, and students with speech limitations, and more on the

[Listening to Students Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/retention-academic-success/spotlights/listening-to-students.html)

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All of these sections were written with regard to students with verified physical disabilities receiving accommodations through Services to Students with Disabilities (SSWD), as well as students who don't know they qualify for or choose not to use their accommodations for their disabilities for any number of personal reasons, including their reluctance to disclose or the need to feel independent or as much the same as their classmates as possible. Also kept in mind are students whose limitations or difficulties are not such that they are eligible for accommodations but who may still have a harder time than the majority of their peers on campus.

What We Can Do

Students with physical disabilities encounter in their daily lives myriad obstacles that are physical, technological, communicative, and/or attitudinal. As staff and faculty, there is much we can do to help them experience greater ease, comfort, and engagement on our campus.

Communication

Understand just how important good communication with students with disabilities is and teach by example.

Students with visible disabilities, such as those with wheelchairs, canes, or interpreters, often feel a sense of isolation and even loneliness because their peers may feel uncertain of what to say or do and, therefore, limit or avoid interaction altogether. Then, too, there are others who may unintentionally talk down to or talk over people with physical disabilities, making the encounter hard for that student. As members of an institution of higher learning, we are well-positioned to model good communication practices with people with disabilities for the campus and surrounding community.

Greet the student as you would any other student, including offering your hand to shake, if that is what you typically would do, and looking to see if they are extending their own hand to you, as they might typically do or expect you to do. Sometimes people hesitate to shake the hand of a person with a disability, such as someone in a wheelchair or who has an interpreter. Please note that people with limited hand use or artificial limbs usually can shake hands, too.

Look and speak directly at the student with a disability. Many people engage in less eye contact with people with physical disabilities, as well as make the mistake of addressing remarks and/or eye contact to the student's companion, interpreter, or note-taker, when one is present.

Talk with your usual volume and pace, adjusting if the student asks or you can see that the student needs it. Many folks slow down or speak more loudly to people with physical disabilities, even with those without hearing loss.

Be yourself. The student with the disability and any others in the conversation familiar with you will typically discern change to your usual manner and this might cause a perception of artificiality or sense of awkwardness. Being your natural self helps everyone to more easily relax and enjoy the interaction.

See the student for all they are. Discussing the student's interests, educational goals, likes and dislikes, and so on may help the student to feel seen as a unique person in a world where people with disabilities are often viewed primarily through the lens of their disability. This would also give any surrounding peers a more well-rounded look at their classmate, which can increase comfort level for all and spark conversation for them, as well.

Don't worry about using natural expressions such as "Have you heard the news?" or "listen to this," with a student with hearing loss or "as you can see..." or "look at it this way," with a student with vision loss. Students with these other disabilities are unlikely to take offense when such common sayings are used, and may use the opportunity for humor. You will, of course, want to avoid other phrases that may cause offense, such as "the blind leading the blind" or "that's a lame excuse."

Prevent others from asking the student how they got the disability. Some students may welcome this question or volunteer that information themselves, but many students would not want to be put on the spot like that or disclose something they may find deeply personal or even painful. Faculty and staff, of course, are legally prohibited from asking in order to ensure student privacy.

Inclusion

Students with disabilities often experience a sense of separation from others for a number of reasons. There are, however, many things we can do to help the student feel a greater sense of inclusion in the classroom and out on campus.

Conduct an icebreaker of some sort in the classroom in order to get students introduced to one another, especially at the start of the semester. Some students may feel awkward around a person with a visible physical disability, so the opportunity to get to know one another on a personal basis can reduce that initial unease for everyone and create a supportive climate.

Keep in mind that students with physical disabilities may have encountered much in the form of lowered expectations from others, especially in the academic realm from faculty, staff, and peers in all of their prior years of education while having that disability. A faculty or staff member noting with sincere appreciation or respect the student's academic strengths or achievements, consequently, may help to mitigate the effects of such a background on the student's sense of academic competence and belonging, as well as lessen any preconceived notions there may be in the minds of their peers.

Note that there may also be logistical factors that increase a sense of separation from their peers, in the form of typical seating for students with a wheelchair, interpreter, or cane, that is to the side or back of the classroom or event venue. You might need to take extra care to ensure that the student feels a part of the class, involved in class discussions, and engaged in pair or group work.

Understand that the student may feel a real disconnect from the majority who cannot fully understand what it's like to live with that physical condition or limitation. Some students will remain silent on this count, while others may choose to be more disclosive. When the student chooses to talk, present, or write about what it's like to live with a disability, that can be a significant way for the student to reach out and share their life in order to make known issues of disability and be known more fully as a person. Creating a safe and supportive space where such disclosure is volunteered and reception is respectful, as well as opportunities to do so (without putting a student on the spot), can be a beautiful gift for the student and everyone else who will learn so much.

Understanding

Because some students have a physical disability in the form of serious medical conditions, it is important that we understand the struggles of living with pain and illness such as AIDS, Asthma, Cancer, Cystic Fibrosis, Diabetes, Hepatitis C, Sickle Cell Anemia, auto-immune disorders, respiratory problems, and heart disease.

They are striving to achieve their education in the face of health problems that may take great physical and psychological toll on them. Some may be living with conditions they have had all or most of their lives. Others have been diagnosed only recently and may be struggling to come to grips with their new reality. For some, the health problem is medically manageable, while for others the prognosis may be more dire.

In addition to providing all accommodations required for a student with health disabilities, below you will find further suggestions for the classroom setting and beyond for students with health conditions.

1. Remember that students with health problems may be living with nausea, headaches, dizziness, weakness, fatigue, and sleeping problems—and the medications they need might cause adverse side effects, as well. This is a lot for anyone to deal with, much less a student trying to achieve their higher education, who may also have work and/or family responsibilities, too.

Consider the impact this may have on their learning and course performance: They may find it difficult to focus in class, be foggy-headed as they try to do coursework at home, or have exhaustion or trouble remembering material while taking an exam.

2. Be aware that students with health conditions may be in real discomfort or severe pain. It may hurt the student to sit, stand, move, walk, talk, or breathe, yet we may not realize they are suffering as they sit in our classrooms or across from us at our office desks.

Understand that pain can cause raw nerves: The student may be silent or short in their remarks, impatient or irritable in their interactions. Living with pain can furthermore cause exhaustion, depression, and/or anxiety.

3. Be aware that class attendance may be difficult for the student, for all of the reasons described prior. *For some, every single class attended is a hard-won victory that comes at tremendous cost.* Then, too, some students' health conditions and/or medication may preclude driving, making them reliant on others or public transportation to get to school. Give consideration to which days of your course the student truly needs to be present, and which times the student might instead access course material in other ways without reducing the quality or quantity of the information (e.g., through online or print materials, and/or communication with the instructor or classmates). You might also think about allowing students to submit assignments or take exams online, as well as the use of electronic class discussion or group collaboration in classes with discussion or group work, as other ways to reduce the number of days the student with medical problems needs to be physically present in class or on campus.

4. Understand that students with some medical conditions may need to stand at times during class (to relieve discomfort) or even leave the classroom from time to time (to take medication, walk off some forms of pain, get fresh air to clear their head or alleviate nausea, or find privacy to deal with severe pain).
5. Keep in mind that students may have health problems that come and go, improve or worsen intermittently. Some diseases include temporary remission, some conditions change in relation to weather and allergens, and sometimes the symptoms of illness subside or are exacerbated based on the level of stress or exertion at any given time. Students sometimes worry that their “good days” may result in instructors, staff, or classmates thinking they are faking or over-exaggerating an illness. Understanding that symptoms and conditions may fluctuate prevents misconceptions, and helps us to put uneven academic quality of work in perspective, rather than misinterpret lower levels of performance, should this happen.
6. Have any exam accommodations in place for the student:

For on-ground exams, make tests available for the student in the Testing Center at least five business days before the scheduled exam date for conversion to accessible formats for students with print-related disabilities.

[Testing Center Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/testing-center/) <https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/testing-center/>

Remember that online exams might require creation of extended time for the student. Instructions for how to do so may be found on Canvas.

You might also consider allowing students to turn in exams via electronic mail or disk, which may be helpful to some.

7. Consider where time needed to be spent on lab work, field work, and so on might be divided, so that the student with debilitating health problems can put in the same time as the other students, but in more incremental amounts over a longer period of time conducive to the student’s management of pain and symptoms.
8. Adapt to any physical, visual, hearing, or communication impairment that a student’s health problems may also cause. You will find further information regarding these types of disabilities in the other sections of this work on students with disabilities at the [Listening to Students Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/retention-academic-success/spotlights/listening-to-students.html)
<https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/retention-academic-success/spotlights/listening-to-students.html>

With regard to student accommodations: Please note that students will give professors an official approved accommodation letter from SSWD and at that point those accommodations for the student’s disabilities are required. If professors feel any of the accommodations constitute a fundamental alteration of their course, they should consult with SSWD to discuss their concerns and potential alternatives for access.

(With appreciation to all who work with students with disabilities on our campus, including Services to Students with Disabilities, for assistance.)

Campus Resources

Services for Students with Disabilities (SSWD)—

Offers a wide range of support services to ensure students with disabilities have equal access and opportunity to pursue their educational goals. Application instructions are provided on the website for students with mobility or other physical disabilities, blindness/visual impairment, psychological disorders/cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, and ADD/ADHD, and students who are deaf/hard of hearing. Services and accommodations for students may include, but are not limited to: specialized educational materials, adaptive equipment, adaptive computer training and use, note-taker services, testing accommodations, consultation with faculty for students with special academic needs, library assistance, disability management advising/counseling, on-campus housing accommodation, and graduate and professional program assistance and information referrals. Students with questions and faculty with inquiries or wanting to make a referral are welcome to contact or come by the office for more information.

Location: Lassen Hall 1008

Phone: (916) 278-6955

[SSWD Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/) <https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/>

Assistive Technology Lab (ATL)—

Provides technological services to students with disabilities referred by SSWD counselors/specialists, including: a lab with alternative access to computers for students with disabilities to work on coursework and a training room for students to receive instruction on the adaptive technology appropriate to the student's disability (such as screen magnification and reading, scan/read programs). The ATL also provides consultation and assistance to faculty to convert course textbooks, syllabi, exams, class web content, slides, and handouts into alternative formatted instructional materials for students (such as Braille).

Phone: (916) 278-7915

ATL Computer Lab: Academic Information Resource Center 2011

ATL Training Lab: Academic Information Resource Center 2010

Maryjane Rees Language, Speech and Hearing Center—

Offers speech, language and hearing services for people with communication challenges and/or cognitive disorders, including but not limited to: hearing loss, reading disorders, speech sound disorders, stuttering, cleft palate, voice disorders, and conditions associated with stroke, brain injury, concussion, progressive disorders, and other neurological impairment. Services are free to all, and those interested may get further information on the website, call, or stop by.

Location: Folsom Hall (7667 Folsom Blvd.) Room 2203 Phone: (916) 278-6601

[Center Website](https://www.csus.edu/college/health-human-services/community-services/language-speech-hearing-center.html) <https://www.csus.edu/college/health-human-services/community-services/language-speech-hearing-center.html>

TRiO Student Support Services Program (through SSWD)—

Provides to students with disabilities, who meet TRiO eligibility requirements and are in need of academic support to better stay and succeed in college, services that include: supplemental instruction, tutoring, adaptive equipment, readers, note-takers, proctors and test arrangements, specialized instruction materials, individualized counseling, transition coaching, assistance with graduate school admission, and more.

Location: Lassen Hall 1008

Phone: (916) 278-6955

[TRiO Website https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/student-resources.html](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/student-resources.html)

Counseling (Student Health and Counseling Services)—

Helps students to cope with such things as stress, academic difficulties, cultural adjustment, relationship issues, anxiety, depression, bereavement, post-traumatic symptoms, questioning sexuality and coming out, eating disorders, addiction and alcohol abuse. The privacy and confidentiality of all who use Counseling Services is maintained fully within the bounds of law and professional ethics.

Location of Counseling Services: The WELL, Second Floor

Phone: (916) 278-6461

Location of Urgent Care Clinic: The WELL, First Floor

[Counseling Services Website https://www.csus.edu/student-life/health-counseling/counseling/](https://www.csus.edu/student-life/health-counseling/counseling/)

Students in an immediate crisis should contact 911 or the Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Students with urgent concerns who would like to see someone right away may walk in to receive counseling at the Urgent Care Clinic (WELL, First Floor) any time during its hours of operation or call to speak with the After Hours Nurse at: (916) 278-6461.

Students who want to receive counseling or explore if counseling is right for them may schedule an appointment by calling or coming in Counseling Services, or going online through the Patient Portal. This typically begins with a consultation appointment, where the student can talk about their concerns and receive support and feedback. Many students find that they feel better and their needs are met in just one session. Students who want to continue counseling may choose individual counseling in follow-up single session appointments (to meet their needs in the moment) or short-term individual therapy (more than one session with the same mental health clinician). Students may also join group therapy (with five to ten other students).