Teaching Students with a Physical Disability

The Challenges

Students with a physical disability may not be able to...

- control spontaneous limb movement
- control speed of movement
- move quickly or have coordination
- perform manual tasks such as gripping and turning a handle, keys or knobs, holding a pen, and typing
- move arms or legs fully (e.g., negotiate stairs)
- move around independently (e.g., walking any distance, standing for extended periods of time, getting in and out of a vehicle easily)
- reach, pull, push, manipulate
- perform tasks that require endurance and strength

Consider the Following...

Not all physical disabilities are visible. Students may have difficulty performing some tasks yet, may not otherwise appear to have a disability. Conditions in which a disability may not be visible include:

- arthritis
- heart and peripheral vascular disease
- multiple sclerosis and other progressive neurologic conditions
- joint replacements
- hemophilia
- cancer
- diabetes
- Parkinson's

Students using wheelchairs and scooters cannot always take the most direct route and may need additional time to travel from one building to another.
Personal Assistive Devices

Devices include…
- cane, crutches, or walker
- brace
- wheelchair or scooter
- escorting companion
- service dog

Physical Assistance

Provide time for person to move or perform task themselves, if they would like to do so. Offer assistance… don’t provide it without asking unless the need is emergent.

Best practices

…in Your Classroom
Most classrooms have wheelchair accessible student stations. Ensure these desks are available for students who need them and report any missing tables and chairs to cts@uoguelph.ca.
Arrange information and handouts so they can be seen and picked up without undue bending and turning.
Make class assignments available in electronic format.

…in Your Lab
Offer assistance, but don’t provide it without asking unless the need is emergent.
Arrange information and handouts so they can be seen and picked up without undue bending, turning and reaching.
Locate lab equipment and supplies within reach so as not to expose student to hazard.
Provide adjustable tables and chairs.
Allow extra time for setting up and completing work.
Consider using a document camera to demonstrate on a large screen.
Make beakers with handles available.
Consider extended eyepieces on microscopes for students in wheelchairs.
Discuss safety concerns taking into consideration students may not be able to avoid or react quickly to dangerous situations.

…when Conducting Field Work
Try to have field trips in accessible locations.
Include special needs in requests for field trip vehicle reservations.
Consider alternate assignments
- review video of field work
- analyze samples other students have collected
- write a paper on the topic

…when Communicating
Don’t be afraid to offer a handshake to a person with a missing or artificial limb, or to those who use a cane or crutches.
Position yourself in front of the person so that they don’t have to change position to face you.
Make eye contact. Don’t stand too close.
Sit when speaking with a short person or person in a wheelchair.

Avoid…
- speaking loudly
- bending over during conversations
- pushing, pulling or leaning against a wheelchair without permission
- lifting, supporting or moving a person unless you understand safe techniques and are asked to do so