

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS**

Access is one of the major concerns of the student who uses a wheelchair. 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, a vehicle blocking a curb cut or ramp, a sign in the middle of what would otherwise be a wide enough walkway, etc.

**STANDARDS:** The following standards are appropriate for laboratory stations:

1. Under-counter knee clearance at least thirty-two inches in width and a height of 27 1/2 inches, working counter top height not to exceed thirty inches, and no sink wells.
2. Facet handles (blade type), gas jets, and spouts, etc. should be beyond an eighteen-inch horizontal working reach from the counter edge.
3. Doorways should be at least thirty-six inches high, and ramps should have a gradient no steeper than 1:12.
4. Classrooms with tables (provided there is an under-table clearance of at least 27 1/2 inches) are more accessible to students in wheelchairs than rooms with standard classroom desks. It is better if the tables and chairs are movable rather than stationary.

It is difficult to make generalizations about the classroom needs of students who use wheelchairs 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 who use wheelchairs:

1. If a classroom or faculty office is inaccessible, it will be necessary to find an accessible location or alternate class section that is held in an accessible location. The Office of Instruction that handles room scheduling can assist the professor and student as necessary.
2. If a class involves fieldwork or field trips, ask the student to participate in the selection of sites and modes of transportation. If the college or university provides transportation for field trips, it is required to provide accessible transportation for students who use wheelchairs.
3. Classes in physical education and recreation can always be modified so that the student in a wheelchair can participate. Classmates are usually more than willing to

assist, if necessary. Most students who use wheelchairs do not get enough physical exercise in daily activity, so it is particularly important that they be encouraged, as well as provided the opportunity, to participate.

4. Classes taught in laboratory settings (science, language labs, kitchenettes, art studios, etc.) will usually require some modification of the workstation. Considerations include under-counter knee clearance, working counter top height, and horizontal working reach and aisle widths. Working directly with the student may be the best way to provide modifications to the workstation. However, if a station is modified in accordance with established accessibility standards, the station will be usable by most students in wheelchairs.
5. For those students who may not be able to participate in a laboratory class without the assistance of an aide, the student should be allowed to benefit from the actual lab work to the fullest extent. The student can give all instructions to an aide - from what chemical to add to what type of test tube to use to where to dispose of used chemicals. The student will learn everything except the physical manipulation of the chemicals.
6. Students who are not "confined" to wheelchairs often transfer to automobiles and to furniture. Some 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.
7. Most students who use wheelchairs will ask for assistance if they need it. Don't assume automatically that assistance is required. Offer assistance if you wish, but do not insist, and accept a "no, thank you" graciously.
8. When talking to a student in a wheelchair, if the conversation continues for more than a few minutes, sit down, kneel, or squat if convenient.
9. A wheelchair is part of the person's body space. Don't automatically hand or lean on the chair - it's similar to hanging or leaning on the person.
10. Some students who use a wheelchair are now using dogs to help them with their daily living skills. These dogs are specifically trained to perform tasks such as carrying books, fetching and delivering items, and opening and closing doors. These dogs also accompany their owners to and from classes.

Students, use wheelchairs as a result of a variety of disabilities including spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, post-polio, multiple sclerosis, severe arthritis, quadriplegia, paraplegia, amputation, muscular dystrophy, and so on. Wheelchairs come in a variety of styles and sizes with many types of optional attachments available. Wheelchairs are either manual or powered (electric). Most students who are unable to manually propel the chair themselves will use an electric powered wheelchair. An aide who pushes the

chair assists some students, but this creates a dependency on another person that most students prefer to avoid.

Some of the standard accessories that college students may add to their wheelchairs are special seat cushions (to prevent pressure sores which result from long periods of sitting), tote bags that attach to the chair back or arms, and trays that fit over the arms of the chair to serve as a desk. Some wheelchairs are designed with desk arms that are lower in front so that the chair will fit under a desk or table. Most students use this type of chair. There are also wheelchairs that are modified for athletic competition.