

Physical Disabilities

Physical disabilities are relatively uncommon in people under the age of about 50. When they do occur, the major effects tend to be ones that interfere with mobility, or make it very difficult. These students may have problems getting to class, especially during winter months. They may require a little extra time to move from class to class. Some, particularly people who have cerebral palsy, encounter problems in taking notes. At any given moment in time, very large numbers of Americans have temporary limitations--they may break a leg, for example. We define "temporary" as lasting six or fewer months. If you have students who sustain injuries during a course term, you may need to make short-term adaptations. These may include relocating the class, at least temporarily, to a ground-floor room or even to another, more accessible, building. You can also give students a little advice: Wheelchairs can be rented for as little as \$5 a day. Scooters (battery-powered carts) are somewhat more expensive. Crutches are even less expensive; forearm crutches are a good choice, because they are easier to use than are full-length crutches and because they do not (as regular crutches do) cause underarm discomfort. Walkers are excellent mobility aids; although most people associate them with elderly residents of nursing homes, the fact is that walkers provide very good stability, easy maneuverability, and ready storage when not in use. Among others, Maddak (1-800-443-4926, www.maddak.com), North Coast Medical (1800-821-9319, www.ncmedical.com), and Sammons Preston (1-800-323-5547, www.sammonspreston.com) have daily living aids, including some that assist in academic work (reading, writing, etc.).

Teachers having students with disabilities, whether permanent or temporary, should first of all ensure that the classroom building, and the room itself, are physically accessible. This means doors that are at least 36 inches wide, building entrances that are flush with outdoor walkways, elevators in multi-story buildings, and the like. Educators should also consider distance learning techniques, especially two-way video, to relieve the student's mobility problems, particularly in inclement weather.