

## The Culture of the Physically Disabled and Speech Impaired

by Clay Rooks

According to the National Organization on Disability (NOD) 54 million Americans, almost 1 in 5, suffer disabilities, and, according to the U. S. Census Bureau, over 33 million, almost 1 in 8, suffer from severe disability. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 defines “disability” broadly as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual or a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment.” Major life activities include caring for oneself, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, performing manual tasks, and learning (“Fact Sheet”).

Disability knows no race, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. “But people with disabilities remain pervasively disadvantaged,” according to NOD President Alan A. Reich. “Everyone knows people with disabilities, and anyone can acquire a disability at any time.” An accident, an injury, or a disease can cause temporary or permanent disability. Some common disabilities include blindness or vision impairment, problems with motion or mobility, deafness or hearing impairment, psychological disability, speech or language impairment, developmental disability and learning disability.

Harris Poll Chairman Humphrey Taylor, who has directed several NOD/Harris Surveys on disability, states that only 35 percent of people with disabilities report being employed full or part time, compared to 78 percent of those without disabilities; three times as many live in poverty (26%), with annual household incomes below \$15,000; people with disabilities remain twice as likely to drop out of high school (21%), and those with disabilities rely on assistive

technology (i.e., wheelchair), with a third saying they would lose their independence without this technology.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only 22 percent of people 25-64 who have severe disabilities have college degrees as compared to 43 percent of people without disabilities. These statistics are actually an improvement over previous studies' results. As medicine and technology have advanced, so has the ability to assist those who are disabled, but there are still significant gaps in social and economic conditions and the disadvantages people with disability suffer in our society. Though progress has been slow, three landmark pieces of legislation have helped to protect and outline the rights of those with disabilities and to make possible the strides that have been made ("Disability Support Services"). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 outlawed discrimination of those with disabilities, among other provisions; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 set laws and guidelines for accommodating disabled children in schools; and the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) of 1990 continued to set laws and guidelines for employment, education, public access, and so forth. Today these acts continue to be updated and re-enacted.

This report will look primarily at physical disabilities, including speech impairment, and at the challenges faced by our students who cope with these disabilities and the college's role in facilitating their educational goals. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 60 percent of students with disabilities who attend postsecondary institutes, attend community colleges because "community colleges typically serve adults in their surrounding communities by providing low-cost education through a wide range of programs, including remedial, vocational, and occupational courses" (Savukinas).

Physically disabled students typically suffer from limitations with range of motion or mobility functions (Administrative Code, Title 5), which can be caused by severe injury (paralysis, amputation, brain or spinal injury) or diseases such as cerebral palsy, polio, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, or arthritis. Such limitations may be apparent or not and may be temporary, sporadic, or permanent and vary in intensity and duration, but typically students suffering these disabilities use canes, crutches, walkers, or wheelchairs.

Previously, obtaining access to buildings, public facilities, and public transportation was a major impediment, but since enacting the aforementioned laws this is not the problem it once was. Ramps, elevators, and lifts are commonly found in public buildings and transportation these days. According to Dr. Janice Emerzian, District Director of Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSP&S) for the State Center Community College District (SCCCD), the biggest challenges faced by physically disabled students today are need of “personal assistance,” presences of “other health issues” complicating their conditions, “financial insecurity,” and “inadequate housing” for their needs.

It is becoming more common that students with multiple disabilities are seeking college education, which is a great challenge for them and for the colleges that serve them. According to Joe Hemphill, an older FCC student with cerebral palsy who uses a power wheelchair, access is not his major challenge, for he also has a “profound speech disorder,” therefore “not being capable to communicate in the common manner.” (He did his interview via email.) A speech disability is defined as “a disorder of expressive or receptive language, articulation, voice, or fluency of speech” (“DSP&S Programs and Services”). The other major problem he has faced is the inability to turn pages in a book. He has learned to be an auditory learner, but does read from

a computer screen. However, very few textbooks have auditory tapes or computer versions, like some popular novels do.

The previously mentioned laws require that reasonable accommodations be made for disabled citizens, including in education. In most cases, it is the student's responsibility to seek a referral and once disability is verified, all services and programs are made available. Typical accommodations include "priority registration; reducing a course load; substituting one course for another; providing note takers, recording devices, sign language interpreters, extended time for testing, and equipping school computers with screen-reading, voice recognition or other adaptive software or hardware" ("Students with Disabilities").

Locally, Fresno City College and the SCCC are leaders in "signature" services and programs through Disabled Students Programs and Services, established in 1970. According to Dr. Emerzian, DSP&S serves over 1800 students, and offers programs in Academic/School to Work counseling, Adaptive Horticulture, Adaptive P.E., Independent Living, and the High Tech Center offers Basic Computer Training, Adaptive Software Training, Adaptive Hardware Training. These programs are complemented by 24 classes, ranging from 1 to 4 units, that are specifically geared and adapted to disabled students, and cover everything from Consumer Skills to reading, writing, and arithmetic to Adaptive Recreation and Strength Training. The list of services (25 in all) is even greater, including academic advising, mobility assistance, note taking, peer counseling, alternative media, and vision assisting devices, to name only a few. All of these have been carefully devised to offer disabled students the opportunity to have a positive and successful college experience, to be supportive and respect their dignity as individuals.

However, these programs and services are of little use if they are not taken advantage of and if instructors are unaware of them or fail to encourage students who would benefit to use

them. Instructors are key to making these accommodations work in the classroom. Ensuring that students who need can have preferential seating, note-takers, test taking assistance, tape recordings of lectures, use of computers for written work, and so forth, can make a great difference in performance and success.

The relationship that the instructor establishes with students is most important, especially with disabled students. “People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. The person should always be stressed first. Treat the person as an individual, not as a disability” (“Disability Etiquette”). Just give them the same respect and consideration you would anyone else. But perhaps most of all, it is important to remember “students with disabilities are more similar than dissimilar to their peers. First and foremost – they are students” (“Reasonable Accommodations”).

#### Works Cited

Census Brief. “Disabilities Affect One-Fifth of All Americans.” U.S. Census Bureau. U.S.

Department of Commerce. Washington, D.C., Dec. 1997.

“Disability Etiquette: Interacting with Persons with Disabilities.” Access and Fairness Advisory

Committee. Administrative Office of the Courts. San Francisco, 2006.

Emerzian, Janice. Email interview. 20 Oct. 2006.

“Fact Sheet: Your Rights as an Individual with Handicaps Under Section 504.” Office of Civil

Rights. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 2006.

“Fresno City College Disabled Students Programs and Services.” 11 Oct. 2006

< <http://www.fresnocitycollege.edu/student-services/dsps/Programs&Services.html> >

Hemphill, Joe. Email interview. 14 Oct. 2006.

“Landmark Disability Survey Finds Pervasive Disadvantages.” NOD.org. 25 June 2004. 14 Oct.

2006 < <http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=1430&nodeID> >

Pacifici, Tamara, and Kristen McKinney. “Disability Support Services for Community College Students. ERIC Digest.” ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges. Los Angeles, 1997.

“Reasonable Accommodations: Faculty Guide.” Georgia Southern University. Archived on

CODI: Cornucopia of Disability Information. 13 Oct. 2006

< <http://codi.buffalo.edu/archives/colleges/.gasouth/.physical.htm> >

Savukinas, Robert. “Community Colleges and Students with Disabilities.” GW Heath Resource

Center. 2003. 11 Oct. 2006 < <http://www.heath.gwu.edu> >

“Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and

Responsibilities.” Office for Civil Rights. U.S. Department of Education. Ed.gov. June

2006. 11 Oct. 2006 < <http://www.ed.gov/print/about/offices/list.ocr.transition.html> >

U.S. Census Bureau. “More Than 50 Million Americans Report Some Level of Disability.” U.S.

Department of Commerce. 12 May 2006. 14 Oct. 2006 < [http://www.census.gov/Press-](http://www.census.gov/Press-release/www/releases/archives/aging_population/006809.html)

[release/www/releases/archives/aging\\_population/006809.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-release/www/releases/archives/aging_population/006809.html) >