

# Students with Disabilities: Challenges and Recommendations

## Executive Summary

### PURPOSE

Data from the UC system-wide climate survey (2011) revealed less favorable outcomes for students with disabilities. As part of UCLA's action plan for improvements, SAIRO was tasked with conducting a qualitative study to further explore the experiences of students with disabilities at UCLA. Interviews addressed areas of climate, challenges, sources of support, and recommendations from the students while pursuing their academic success at UCLA. Students discussed their individual experiences as well as how they perceived and understood the attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and other students. This brief explores in more detail findings related to challenges and the recommendations of students as revealed in interview data.

### FINDINGS

Analysis revealed the following key findings:

- Students face strain on their bodies from everyday student experiences resulting in daily, occasional, or unpredictable physical challenges. These physical challenges affect their academic pathways and their ability to fully engage in academic and extracurricular activities.
- Variations in the visibility of a student's disability often resulted in others' questioning the validity of the disability. Perceptions of unfair advantage and cheating held by peers and faculty limited students' desire to seek resources and services, ultimately having negative academic consequences.
- Students also faced various social challenges. Students had difficulty establishing friendships, attending social events, and engaging with the campus social environment.
- Students identified challenges with campus resources. These challenges included difficulty accessing particular resources (e.g., van services, note taking services). In addition, variation in awareness of available resources and unclear understanding of roles between the institution and students in the advocacy for assistance or accommodation also contributed to student challenges.
- Five overarching participant recommendations were identified: 1) improve van services, 2) institute faculty training on Students with Disabilities, 3) expand testing accommodations/ options, 4) improve food labeling, and 5) increase publicized information about available resources.

### IMPLICATIONS

As a result of these findings, institutionalized training programs for faculty and staff should be created to educate them on the needs of students with disabilities. These trainings should focus on educating the UCLA community on various types and forms of disabilities, adaptive academic accommodations and options, and how to interact with students with disabilities. Additionally, an expansion in marketing and publicized information on the resources available for students with disabilities is necessary. Through these specific recommendations, student and faculty interactions can improve and students can become familiar with the available resources on campus.

## Introduction

Data from the UC system-wide climate survey (2011) revealed less favorable outcomes for students with disabilities. As part of UCLA’s action plan for improvements, SAIRO was tasked with conducting a qualitative study to further explore the experiences of students with disabilities at UCLA to inform Student Affairs’ work to improve campus climate and services to better meet diverse student needs, refining our understanding of what is working and what needs to be improved. This report presents key findings of the nineteen interviews SAIRO conducted to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities. Specifically, this report explores the findings related to challenges and recommendations. Overall, findings indicate that UCLA has many areas for improvement that would enhance the experience for this student population.

## Method

This study used participant interviews to explore the experiences of students with disabilities at UCLA. In winter quarter 2015, SAIRO invited undergraduate, graduate, and professional students living with a disability to participate in interviews. A disability was defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment, 2009). Recruitment materials went out to students registered with the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)<sup>1</sup> as well as those who do not register with OSD through the SAIRO website and emails. Nineteen students with varying disabilities, as shown in Table 1, were interviewed. Transcripts were analyzed and coded into major thematic areas.

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

Types of Disabilities	Autism Spectrum Disorder (1), Blind or Visually Impaired (1), Chronic Condition (5), Deaf or Hard of Hearing (3), Learning Disability (1), Psychological Disability (3), Temporary Disability (1), Traumatic Brain Injury (2), Urinary Incontinence (1), Food Allergy (1)
Gender Identity/ Expression:	Androgynous (1), Female (13), Male (4), Gender non-conforming (1)
Self-reported Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino (4), Mixed Race/Two or more (3), White/Caucasian (11), Pakistani (1), Middle Eastern (1)
Student Status	Undergrad: 1 <sup>st</sup> (1), 2 <sup>nd</sup> (4), 3 <sup>rd</sup> (2), 4 <sup>th</sup> (8), 5 <sup>th</sup> (2) Grad: 3 <sup>rd</sup> (1), 5 <sup>th</sup> (1), 6 <sup>th</sup> (1)
Area of Study*	African American Studies (1), Anthropology (2), Biochemistry (1), Economics (1), Electrical Engineering (1), English (2), Environmental Science (1), Epidemiology (1), History (2), Mathematics (1), Medical School (1), MIMG, Philosophy (1), Political Science (2), Psychology (3), Sociology (1)

\*Some participants have double majors

## Findings

Overall the study explored many areas of students’ experiences. This brief focuses specifically on the areas of student challenges and participant recommendations for improvement.

## Challenges

Students with disabilities face an array of challenges in navigating their UCLA experience. All participants expressed experiencing challenges at some point of their UCLA experience. One participant explained, “It’s harder to be a student at UCLA and have a disability, because you’re slower, you’re working harder, you have to take time off from school.” Though many of the challenges faced by participants may have been specific to their individual type of disability, commonalities arose among their experiences and four themes emerged: physical challenges, academic challenges, social challenges and challenges with campus resources. Table 2 summarizes the areas of challenge reported by students.

<sup>1</sup> The Office for Students with Disabilities had a name change in 2016 to the Center for Accessible Education. However at the time of the study the OSD moniker was in place, so that was used in the report for accuracy.

## Physical Challenges

Participants expressed challenges emerging from physical symptoms and constraints arising from their disability. More than two-thirds of participants spoke about the strain on their bodies from everyday student experiences, such as opening doors, carrying backpacks, or having to walk across campus. Participants commonly shared that the strain and presence of these physical symptoms ranged from being a daily to occasional experience, but was sometimes unpredictable. Additionally, a few participants shared that access to campus buildings was complicated by their physical disabilities. For example, accessing Powell Library was difficult for a participant with a temporary physical disability resulting from a surgery. Participants explained that these physical challenges lead to effects on their academics. Physical challenges influenced participants' engagement in office hours, their ability to fully engage in lectures, and dictated the types of academic activities they would engage in, to the type of classes and majors they chose. Some students also had particular physical challenges that limited their ability to engage with materials specific to certain courses due to the limits of current adaptive technologies.

### *Everyday Physical Challenges*

"I'm able-bodied enough to get myself around if I have to and push myself if I have to and I'm not confined to a chair and anything of the like but if I push myself too much then my body is not so forgiving."

"Powell has a weird thing. If you go in, you have to use two different elevators. It's not one set elevator. There's like a really weird hidden one that goes up half a floor to the next level there and then you have to go to the elevator. It's really weird. And then unless you want to do that backwards again, if you want to just take the elevator to the ground floor and go out, there's no way out unless they help you out. You have to have a key."

### *Physical Challenges and Campus Engagement*

"[W]hen I wanted to go to office hours, I just didn't. I just hadn't gone to any office hours 'cause it was kind of a hassle. Even if they drive you to the total other side of campus, say their office hours are anywhere besides that loop, you're crutching it quite a ways and it takes up a lot of time, the waiting you do...three times about this quarter I felt like I needed to go to office hours and I just didn't because it's a hassle. Also, I get tired getting around the campus."

"[I]f there's a club meeting or something when the hours is up that's not ready and that's a really difficult thing for me or if a teacher is holding office hours that I can't make because it's

**Table 2. Challenges Summary Table**

Challenge	Description
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical symptoms/restraints due to their disability</li> <li>● Strain on their bodies from everyday student experiences               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Opening doors, carrying backpacks, walking across campus</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Daily experiences to occasional to unpredictable</li> <li>● Affects their academics/engagement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Attend office hours, classes, participate in social events, participation in student activities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Based on visibility of their disability               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Perceptions of peers and faculty</li> <li>▪ Questioning validity of their disability</li> <li>▪ Limit their want to seek services</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Faculty Members               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Not equipped to handle or understand how to deal with a student with disability</li> <li>▪ Testing accommodations not suitable to their conditions</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Choices: limited the type of classes and majors chosen</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ability to establish friendships/relationships               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engagement with peers</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Attend social events               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Large gatherings, time of events, location of events</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Campus Engagement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Involvement in student activities, clubs, and resources available</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Campus Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Van Services               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and Community Service Officers (CSO)</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Academics               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Note takers: Difficulty following notes and questioned qualification</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Awareness of services available</li> </ul>

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like, 'Oh, well I don't have a ride at that time and it would be really hard for me to get there,' and all of this that's a bitch of a struggle for me because I can't hit some of those extra academic things."

"I'm taking Spanish 4 right now. I started taking it last quarter, but I had to drop it because the online portion of the course for language classes, they do a lot of online homework now and that wasn't accessible on my computer with the voice program and everything."

"I'm an English major because, well, I love English, but also because math and science would be that much harder for me. There's so many graphs and pictures and visual explanations for things. So if I were in those classes, I would need so much more accommodation. So I think I would definitely appreciate math and science way more if that wasn't such a big problem that I'm always dealing with within those classes."

## Academic Challenges

Participants expressed many academic challenges resulting from their disability. For many participants, some academic challenges were based on the lack of visibility of their disability and resulted from the perceived negative perceptions of peers and faculty. Participants expressed that peers perceived them as receiving an unfair advantage, were suspicious of them cheating, and questioned the validity of their disability due to their accommodations. Participants expressed that these perceptions limited their desire to take advantage of the services and accommodations available to them. Additional academic challenges arose with faculty members. About a third of the participants overwhelmingly expressed that faculty were not equipped to handle or understand how to deal with a student with disability. Participants spoke about always having to be the ones with a solution to their need for accommodation. Moreover, many academic challenges resulted from the very accommodation they were given. About half of the participants spoke of testing accommodations and how not all were suitable to their condition. They expressed that faculty were not understanding, unwilling, or simply did not know how to reformat tests to best fit their needs.

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**No, nobody wants to hear it. In academia, it's almost like there's no room for weakness here. There's no space for that.**

**–Interview participant**

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### *Accommodations & Peer Perceptions*

"I had a time when my roommate thought that I was – yeah she thought that I was like cheating or like getting away – like just because I had a separate testing environment she thought that I had some sort of advantage or something...I think that's the biggest issue that I've had to deal with people thinking that I'm lying about my disability just so I can be away from the rest of the class, but that's not true. So I've had a lot of people think that I'm just you know trying to get away with something when actually I'm not."

"I recently had an exam and what happened was that I signed-up with OSD (Office for Students with Disabilities) to take that exam, but that exam was structured in such a way where like you had to – like my accommodations are a separate testing environment and 50 percent extra time. So what this professor had planned for the test was that you would – and this is a two-hour class, you would take the exam the first hour by yourself and then the next hour you would get into your groups and then collaborate with your group members and redo the test and whatever score you got would be added onto your base score of what you did alone. So I felt when I was taking the exam I felt really rushed that I had to finish on time, make sure I got to the classroom. It was just a bit stressful."

### *Faculty Lack of Understanding*

"Well I feel they treat me differently. As soon I tell them this, I go on a different treatment level. Like they don't treat me like a normal student, they kind of treat me like, 'Oh, we got to

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be a little bit more politically correct and make sure we don't offend her.' ...I just noticed that they treat me different ...like the way they phrase things to me or like, 'Are you ok? Can we sit you down here? Is that ok? Am I not prying into your rights? Like the right that you have? I want you to make sure you know that you have rights if you need anything.'"

"It's very nerve wracking because I want to be taken seriously as just a student and as a person. And if someday I want to get to know a faculty very well, well enough to ask for a letter of recommendation or something like that from somebody, I don't want them to look down on me. I want to have the same level of opportunity as any other student out there."

"No, nobody wants to hear it. In academia, it's almost like there's no room for weakness here. There's no space for that."

## Social Challenges

Participants expressed various social challenges resulting from their disabilities. For example, their disabilities limited their ability to establish friendships and relationships with peers, attend social events, and engage in campus activities. A large number of participants described how their specific disabilities affected their ability to interact and make lasting friendships with peers. They also expressed how their disabilities limited their ability to attend large social gatherings, hindering their opportunity to meet other students on campus. Participants commented that these social challenges resulted in their limited campus involvement.

"It's hard to be social. I feel like since my symptoms started I became a lot less social and it's been a lot harder to make friends. So just in that sense I haven't been able to make friends. And just the fact that I can never be honest with people because most people don't understand that kind of thing. And I'm not very open about my condition with everybody. So I don't connect with a lot of people."

"Not being able to make friends or talk to people is just really difficult sometimes."

"Socializing. I guess it's very difficult for me to socialize in large groups of people. I don't go to parties. Being in a room full of students, with a bunch of students and we're all expected to talk to each other at the same time, that just flips me out. I get dizzy, I need to like leave the classroom, I go into the fight or flight moments and I have to just get out of the room."

"Right now I really don't have any friends on campus because I get anxious. It triggers all sorts of things. So yeah, it really does impact the social aspect of the campus."

## Challenges with Campus Resources

Participants discussed experiencing challenges with campus services and accommodations. Almost all participants with a disability affecting their mobility expressed challenges with OSD and CSO's van service. Participants expressed the challenges with overcrowding, limited availability, and pick up/drop off locations of the van service. A handful of participants also expressed concerns with note takers provided by OSD. They expressed having difficulties following notes and questioned the selection and qualification of students participating as note takers. Participants praised OSD as a great resource; however, they expressed not knowing the extent to which OSD could assist them or all services available to them. As one participant described it, "It feels like they sort of expect you to figure out what to ask for, when I'm not even sure, well, what is possible." Though seen as an important resource, participants still faced challenges understanding the full range of services and resources available from OSD.

"Like this morning I called the OSD and I was like, "I need to be somewhere by 9:00." They're like, "Oh, we're full." I was like, "Well, that's unfortunate." So I was like, "I'll just start walking and hope for the best.'"

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“The van, the disability van in the daytime, will almost pick you up anywhere obviously because you're disabled, right? But when I told the CSO van that, they'll be like, "No, you have to go all the way," like weird places that they're even driving by or something. So I wanted to eat at Covell and so I had the disability van drop me off at 5:00 or something right there and so I crutched it up those weird stairs.”

“It's gotten really hard when it comes to some of the notes from note takers, because it's a little hard to follow their notes at the same time. It doesn't always help.”

“Well some of the data, like minor details are sometimes incorrect? Or like the notes are not exactly organized in a nice manner. Sometimes it's uploaded under the wrong week like right now there's like three uploads of week 3 but it's supposed to be week 4 and 5, you know, included into it. So it's not organized very well but I think it's because they rely on whoever's uploading the information to be on top of things.”

## Participant Recommendations

Participants were asked to provide recommendations that would improve their UCLA experience. Overall, five common recommendations emerged across participants.

### Van Services

Almost all participants with a disability affecting their mobility called for the expansion of the van services. Participants expressed a desire for more vans, expanded hours, and weekend services.

“I think definitely not having any sort of transportation available on the weekends is a bigger deal than maybe this campus thinks 'cause it sounds like it's only set up for helping you get to academic stuff but you gotta eat to live to do the academics.”

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#### Participant Recommendations:

- Improve van services
- Institute faculty and staff training
- Expand testing accommodations
- Improve food labeling
- Increase publicity of resources

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### Faculty Training on Students with Disabilities

A specific recommendation made by eight participants was the need for faculty and staff training regarding visible and invisible disabilities, student needs, and policies affecting students with disabilities.

“Maybe it would be nice if – I don't know, I don't know if the school is aware of how the students – like the admissions or the professors are aware of their impact on their students, not just on an academic life but they should also think of their mental health and their physical health too. 'Cause I know this supposed to be academic but like they...not all of them, but a majority of them, take no consideration on the psychological aspect of how they're teaching...So maybe if the teachers were a little bit more aware of...how they're impacting the students emotionally, physically, then maybe they wouldn't be so rough...like a training course.”

“I don't care if you're here to publish your research, and you're here – that's what you're here for. You still have to teach, and you have students, so a conversation, an interaction, is important between professor and student, I think, and TA, some kind of training on how to deal with – and also, training of people within the OSD office themselves, just like we're training with gender pronouns, the ginger – oh, sorry – the gender bread men or the gender – same thing with disability, you know? I think a training about disability – "ies" in parentheses – is required, and for professors.”

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## Testing Accommodations/Options

Participants spoke of the need for faculty and staff to have a better understanding of how to interact with students with disabilities and approach accommodation requests, specifically expanding testing accommodation to be specific to an individual's needs.

“A conversation to where it's saying, first of all, what are my specific needs, 'cause I think every individual is different, and then this is their requirements.”

## Food Labeling

All participants suffering from food allergies expressed a want for better labeling of campus foods.

“Yeah. I think if you ask at the Bomb Shelter Bistro sometimes they have a list of what's in it, but there are new places where they have a little symbol and each symbol says it's; vegetarian, vegan, it has dairy, it has gluten... Or they could even just print it out and have it on the side and laminate it or something. That would be super helpful.”

## Publicity of Resources

A recommendation amongst a third of participants was for the increase in publicized information regarding the services available for students with disabilities. Additionally, participants expressed the need to further publicize the services available through OSD.

“As long as the resources, such as OSD and CAPS, were available enough and publicized enough so that everyone with disabilities actually knew about them, then I think that would be enough for people. And I don't know how much they are, but that would just be my recommendation. I wish I could have known specifically how the services...maybe they could have just given me more of an education about.”

## Conclusion and Implications

This report sought to identify the challenges faced by students with disabilities at UCLA. Four areas of challenge faced by UCLA students with disabilities were identified: physical challenges, academic challenges, social challenges, and challenges with campus resources. In seeking to address the challenges faced by UCLA students with disabilities, their voices should be part of the conversation. By highlighting their experience as expertise, five overarching participant recommendations were identified: 1) improve van services, 2) institute faculty training on Students with Disabilities, 3) expand testing accommodations/options, 4) improve food labeling, and 5) increase publicized information on available resources. In conclusion, UCLA students with disabilities face an array of challenges as they seek to navigate the educational environment and earn their degrees. The university must evaluate and improve services offered to assist students with disabilities and utilize participants' actionable recommendations to improve their experience on campus.