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OPINION

Let's talk about etiquette: Students with disabilities



A graphic to represent tips on disability etiquette. Photo by [Madison Champion](#) | The Auburn Plainsman

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As I tread down the hallway, walker in front, I see out of the corner of my eyes shuffling feet – a student shoves his bookbag out of the way against the wall and another rushes ahead of me to hold the door.

This is my typical trip through the Haley Center as I leave class. I had plenty of space to get through and an automatic button to open the door, but people see my walker and assume I need some sort of help. As a person with a disability, a genetic and neuromuscular disease called Friedreichs Ataxia, my presence seems to make some people uneasy.

Of course, I truly appreciate those who hold the door and who mean to be kind and look out for others around them, but often times, the alarm that goes off in people's head when they see a person with a disability simply going about their day is unwarranted.

It's hard to know how to best treat everyone when interacting with people with disabilities might not be familiar to many people – especially since, for many students, moving to college might be the first time interacting with people with disabilities or dealing with a person that has a type of disability they've never seen or heard of before.

The University isn't helping this issue, either.

According to a study done by 2023 Fellow with the Longmore Institute on Disability at SFSU, Bowen Cho, [Auburn is one of 61 of the top 66 universities that don't have mandatory disability etiquette training](#). Only two of the 44 top public universities that were surveyed had such training.

When I contacted Auburn's Office of Diversity and Inclusion to ask about the University having disability etiquette training, I got no response.

Just like Auburn has diversity and inclusivity training to help people be educated on interacting with people of different cultures, training on disability etiquette would help inform people on how to interact with a group that doesn't fit the "norm."

"I think there needs to be more training with students and faculty to help understand [people with disabilities]," said Emily Hrabovsky, master's student in clinical rehabilitation counseling and Office of Accessibility practicum student. "The EAGLES program has training every year, which is great, but that's not the only group of people that need training to be honest with you. Let's face it: there's employees with disabilities, there's students with disabilities – you can't avoid that. It needs to be more of a normal thing."

With no guidance, disability etiquette can seem tough, but it is more simple than people think. Here are some ideas to keep in mind to improve your disability etiquette.

Disability isn't an umbrella term

Don't pile "disability" into one big category. Everyone is different, and that includes people with disabilities.

Disability for one person might mean a walking device, for another it might mean needing visual or auditory assistance and for another it might mean struggling with social cues, etc. But when it comes down to it, everyone deserves respect regardless of their differences.


On the other hand, not everyone who uses a wheelchair, for example, has the same needs or the same wishes when it comes to receiving assistance from others. It is important to realize that even among people with disabilities, people have different lifestyles, perspectives and personalities.

“Every person with the same disability is different, so it’s important not to generalize, like: ‘This is how all of these people are,’” Hrabovsky said. “So, I guess just viewing everyone in a more human way regardless of differences.”

Focus on the person, not the disability

In the case that someone does have an assistive device or a physical difference, don’t stare, and it is best not to start the conversation by pointing out their differences.

For example, I get a lot of unnecessary, while maybe lighthearted, comments like: “Oh, my grandma uses a walker, too,” or “Man, you’ve got the best seat in the house” in reference to me sitting on my walker or wheelchair. A walking device or another type of assistive device is something used out of necessity and to maintain independence and not for comfort and definitely not out of choice.

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Treat a college student like a college student. A disability doesn’t change that.

“There’s so much more to me than a disability,” Hrabovsky said. “Sometimes, I feel like [people with disabilities] are viewed with – almost pity or as inspiration porn. It’s hard for people to know what to do with something they don’t understand in their head... I’ve been infantilized myself, and I’ve seen others be infantilized. It drives me crazy.”

Disability doesn’t have to be a limitation

Aidan Anderson is an Auburn University junior in computer science who has a disability called Leber’s Hereditary Optic Neuropathy that causes vision loss. He brought up another good point that it’s often assumed that people with disabilities are missing out or can’t live life to the fullest.

“I get told a lot, especially when it comes to academics, ‘If I were in your situation, I couldn’t do it,’” Anderson said. “But I mean, I’m here doing it. I’m still thriving; I’m still happy. I have a great life, great family, great friends, great girlfriend, you know?”

Don’t assume

Always speak directly to the person with the disability, not while looking at their device or whoever is with them.

Just because someone has a physical disability doesn't mean they can't communicate. In the case that someone is not able to hear or answer your question, it's okay to defer to someone who is with them, but never assume that's the case.

Also, just like in my example with the Haley Center, don't assume that people with disabilities are incapable of living independently or that they need help before they ask for it. Chances are, if someone is navigating a college campus alone, it's because they are able to handle their own business.

"You have to let (a person with a disability) be the executioner of their own help," Anderson said. "That way, you're not removing the disabled person's autonomy, but you're also allowing them to vocalize to you: 'Hey, I need help seeing the board,' or 'Hey, can you help me in this way?' But if you see someone struggling, you can also offer help as a general thing, and then they can say 'Well, I need help in this way.'"

Again, kind gestures are appreciated, and I would never frown upon someone in the moment who is trying to help, but it is not always necessary. Use your best judgement and don't ignore someone who is obviously in need, but try not to assume just because someone has a disability they are reliant on others.

It doesn't hurt to ask

A lot of times, able-bodied people have good intentions but just don't know the best thing to do. It can be hard to get that intent across, and it can lead to awkward interactions.

In that situation, it never hurts to ask what's on your mind. Some people with disabilities (like me) are comfortable talking about their disability and sharing their story, and some are not. It's good to be respectful of that, but it's also okay to ask questions. Just don't take it personally if the person is not willing to share, and try not to pry for personal information right away.

"It really is okay to ask," Hrabovsky said. "Nine times out of 10, the person will feel like: 'Wow, you care about me and my humanness enough that you ask and want to know and want to learn.'"

Loosen up, smile

Many times, I feel like people are afraid to say something offensive or hurtful, so they say nothing at all. The chances that you offend someone when your intentions are good and you are clear about them are slim.

Do your best to respect others, be kind, be aware of your surroundings and don't be afraid to mess up. Making mistakes and learning from them often leads to learning about people around you, and therefore, building empathy and respect for your community.

Nobody's perfect, and people with disabilities can give grace, too. We know it's not always easy to say the right thing.

"It's trial and error," Hrabovsky said. "No matter what, you're probably going to mess up, and that's okay. As long as you're learning from your mistakes and know what to do differently. It's just being patient and trying your best."

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