INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH SYSTEMIC DISABILITIES

Systemic disabilities are conditions affecting one or more of the body’s systems. These include the respiratory, immunological, neurological, and circulatory systems. There are many kinds of systemic impairments, varying significantly in their effects and symptoms; below are brief descriptions of some of the more common types.

- **Cancer** is a malignant growth that can affect any part of the body. Treatment can be time consuming, painful, and sometimes result in permanent disability.

- **Chemical dependency** is considered a disabling condition when it is documented that a person has received treatment for a drug or alcohol addiction and is not currently using. Chemical dependency can cause permanent cognitive impairments and carries with it a great deal of stigma.

- **Diabetes mellitus** causes a person to lose the ability to regulate blood sugar. People with diabetes often need to follow a strict diet and may require insulin injections. During a diabetic reaction, a person may experience confusion, sudden personality changes, or loss of consciousness. In extreme cases, diabetes can also cause vision loss, cardiovascular disease, kidney failure, stroke, or can necessitate the amputation of limbs.

- **Epilepsy/seizure disorder** causes a person to experience a loss of consciousness. Episodes, or seizures, vary from short absence or “petit mal” seizures to the less common "grand mal." Seizures are frequently controlled by medications and are most often not emergency situations.

- **Epstein Barr virus/chronic fatigue syndrome** is an autoimmune disorder which causes extreme fatigue, loss of appetite, and depression. Physical or emotional stress may adversely affect a person with this condition.

- **Human immunodeficiency virus** (HIV+), which causes AIDS, inhibits one’s ability to fight off illness and infections. Symptoms vary greatly. People with HIV or AIDS are often stigmatized.

- **Lyme’s disease** is a multi-systemic condition which can cause paralysis, fatigue, fever, dermatitis, sleeping problems, memory dysfunction, cognitive difficulties, and depression.

- **Lupus erythematosus** can cause inflammatory lesions, neurological problems, extreme fatigue, persistent flu-like symptoms, impaired cognitive ability, connective tissue dysfunction, and mobility impairments. Lupus most often affects young women.

- **Multiple chemical sensitivity** (MCS) often results from prolonged exposure to chemicals. A person with MCS becomes increasingly sensitive to chemicals found in everyday environments. Reactions can be caused by cleaning products, pesticides, petroleum products, vehicle exhaust, tobacco smoke, room deodorizers, perfumes, and scented personal products. Though reactions vary, nausea, rashes, lightheadedness, and respiratory distress are common to MCS.
• *Multiple sclerosis* (MS) is a progressive neurological condition with a variety of symptoms, such as loss of strength, numbness, vision impairments, tremors, and depression. The intensity of MS symptoms can vary greatly; one day a person might be extremely fatigued and the next day feel strong. Extreme temperature can also adversely affect a person with MS.

• *Renal disease/failure* can result in loss of bladder control, extreme fatigue, pain and toxic reactions that can cause cognitive difficulties. Some people with renal disease are on dialysis and have to adhere to a rigid schedule.

**Some considerations:**

• Students affected by systemic disabilities differ from those with other disabilities because systemic disabilities are often unstable. This causes a person’s condition to vary; therefore, the need for and type of reasonable accommodations may also change.

• Some common accommodations for students with systemic disabilities include conveniently located parking, notetakers, extended time to complete a task, modified course or workload, flexible deadlines, relocation of a meeting or class, early syllabus, priority registration, and exam modifications.

**Instructional Strategies**

The following strategies are suggested to enhance the accessibility of course instruction, clinical assignments, materials and activities. They are general strategies designed to support individualized reasonable accommodations for which a student is eligible, as determined by the Office of Student Life.

Systemic disabilities often require instructional strategies similar to those listed for other disability conditions. The use of such strategies will depend on how the disability is manifested. In addition, the following are suggested to enhance your work with students who have disabling medical conditions.

• Medical conditions, including medication side-effects, can cause problems with fatigue and stamina which adversely affect attention and concentration. For these reasons, students with medical conditions may need extended time on exams.

• Students with some medical conditions may become dizzy and disoriented, or may lack physical stamina. Thus they may be unable to get from one location to another on campus within the expected time frame. Be considerate if they are late to class.

• Preferential seating may be necessary to meet student needs. In a few instances, students may be unable to use the furniture of a particular classroom and may need to request furniture assistance. If students are forced to stand during class, students may need podiums on which to rest open books or to write.

• Instructors in courses requiring off-site visits need to work with their students to ensure that the students’ needs are met. For example, the students may need assistance with special seating or frequent rest-breaks.
• Some students experience recurrence of a chronic condition requiring bed rest and/or hospitalization. In most situations students are able to make up the incomplete work, but they may need extra time.