

# ***Report on the Communication Experiences of SJSU Students with Disabilities: A Follow-up Study***

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## **Introduction**

In Spring 1994, a team of communication studies faculty and students surveyed SJSU students with disabilities about their communication experiences on campus. This semester, with the support of a Student Success Grant, a second communication studies research team conducted a similar survey. SJSU's Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board approved the 1994 and 2007 studies. The questions for both studies focused on four main areas: communication in the classroom, communication with the Disability Resource Center (DRC), communication with instructors and students at SJSU, and respondents' perceptions of their own communication skills. In this report, we present a summary of our findings and offer key comparisons between the responses from the 1994 and 2007 surveys.

## **Procedures**

We used the same questionnaire from the 1994 study, making minor changes in wording for accuracy (for example, in 1994, the DRC was called Disabled Student Services). Go to the Appendix at the end of this report to review the survey.

SJSU's Office of Institutional Research then put the survey online. On March 9, the DRC emailed the survey's URL to the 858 (out of approximately 1000) students with disabilities registered with the Center for which it had correct email addresses. The DRC staff emailed two reminders for students to complete the survey by March 23. Eighty students responded, for a 9.3% response rate (somewhat lower than the 11% response rate in 1994).

After writing the initial draft of this report, four SJSU students with disabilities agreed to read the report and provide feedback in an online discussion. Their comments were integrated into the report.

## **Demographics**

Nearly all the survey respondents were juniors (21), seniors (30), or graduate students (24). The average age of respondents was 35 and they had attended SJSU for an average of 5 semesters. Fifty-eight women and 22 men completed the survey. Thirteen respondents reported having a visible physical disability, 65 reported having a nonvisible physical disability, and 41 reported

having a learning disability (some respondents reported having multiple disabilities). The demographics for respondents in the 2007 study are very similar to those who completed the 1994 survey with one important exception: in 1994, 37% of respondents identified themselves as having a learning disability whereas in 2007, 51% reported having such a disability. Table 1 summarizes the demographic data from the two surveys.

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographic Data**

	1994	2007
Number of respondents	109	80
Class standing	Junior - 28 Senior - 40 Grad student - 29 Other - 12	Junior - 21 Senior - 30 Grad student - 24 Other - 5
Average number of semesters at SJSU	5.1	5.0
Average age	34	35
Sex	F - 75 M - 34	F - 58 M - 22
Type of disability*	Visible physical - 12 Nonvisible physical - 97 Learning - 40	Visible physical - 13 Nonvisible physical - 65 Learning - 41

*\*totals higher than number of respondents due to participants listing multiple disabilities*

## **Experiences at SJSU**

Similar to the 1994 study, students generally felt that individuals without disabilities at SJSU are friendly to them ( $x=4.0$ ). Respondents somewhat enjoy working in small groups ( $x=3.5$ ), and feel fairly comfortable participating in class discussions ( $x=3.8$ ). Unfortunately, students have continued to find class lectures challenging ( $x=3.0$ ), with 41% agreeing that they often find it difficult to follow instructors' lectures. Table 2 summarizes the general experiences of SJSU students with disabilities who responded to the surveys.

**TABLE 2**  
**General Experiences**

*Scale: Strongly agree = 5 Strongly disagree = 1*

	1994	2007
Those without disabilities friendly	4.1	4.0
Enjoy working in small groups	3.7	3.5
Comfortable participating in class discussions	3.9	3.8
Often difficult to follow instructors' lectures	3.1	3.0

***Ways instructors can improve.*** Respondents were asked the open-ended question, "What do you think your instructors could do to help you succeed in their classes?" As in the 1994 study, answers generally fell into three main categories: teaching style, methods of evaluation (tests and assignments), and instructor behaviors and attitudes. A vast majority of the students felt that

instructors need to speak more slowly and clearly, and present a well-organized lecture. Students suggested it would be helpful to have handouts and outlines available online so that the lectures are easier to follow. Additional ideas included using visual and aural aids, such as digital slides, and recording or podcasting lectures.

Respondents also suggested methods for improving how instructors evaluate student progress. Recommendations to improve test taking include providing study guides and more thorough reviews for exams, allowing more time for tests, providing an auditory version of the test, and making the tests clearer. In additions, respondents recommended that instructors be more open to students rescheduling tests because of their disability. For other assignments, students suggested decreasing the amount of written work, writing down all instructions for assignments, assigning less out-of-class group work, and providing more time to complete assignments.

The final area that students suggested improvement was in instructors' attitudes and behaviors. Students suggested that instructors respect students' confidentiality when discussing a disability. For example, students should not be asked in front of the class whether they will be requiring extra time for exams. Students also suggested that the instructors be more aware of the students' needs and not demean students with disabilities in front of the class. Several students requested that instructors be more available and approachable for questions outside of class. One student was concerned about guests and substitute lecturers understanding and accommodating students with disabilities.

## Experiences with the Disability Resource Center

Similar to the 1994 survey, DRC received fairly high marks, with students reporting that services are beneficial to them ( $\bar{x}=4.0$  with 78% agreeing or strongly agreeing) contacts with DRC are positive ( $\bar{x}=4.1$  with 73% agreeing or strongly agreeing). Table 3 summarizes perceptions of the DRC from the 1994 and 2007 surveys.

TABLE 3  
**Perceptions of the Disability Resource Center**  
*Scale: Strongly agree = 5 Strongly disagree = 1*

	1994	2007
The services DRC provides are beneficial to me	4.3	4.0
My contacts with DRC have been positive	4.2	4.1

***How DRC has helped.*** Respondents stated that DRC has helped in many ways, primarily with testing accommodations for instructors' exams, priority registration, notetaking, and parking. Many students listed various technological tools, such as books on CD and computers that speak and can type what the user says, and the Adaptive Technology Center in the King Library. In addition, DRC has provided valuable counseling services, references to other resources, help with course registration, and help communicating with instructors.

***Suggestions for DRC improvement.*** As we found in the 1994 survey, suggested improvement focused on "more": more front desk staff, more counselors, more office hours, more services for evening students, more drop in appointments, more tutors, more follow-up, more help with

professors, and more training of professors regarding services for students with disabilities. In addition, students would like front desk staff to demonstrate greater sensitivity, increased knowledge about disabilities, and more familiarity with available services. Another suggestion was to consider web-based accommodation requests to speed up the process and reduce workload for DRC staff.

Many of the respondents' suggestions require additional funding, which respondents acknowledged. However, one student proposed a volunteer program of retired instructors, SJSU students with disabilities who have graduated, and others who could serve as tutors and mentors for current students with disabilities, relieving some of the burden for the DRC staff.

## **Communication with Others at SJSU**

Respondents generally viewed their communication with instructors as positive ( $x=3.9$ ), with only 10% of respondents reporting negative experiences, almost exactly the same as the 1994 survey. Discrimination by instructors was fairly infrequent, with 52% of respondents reporting they had never been discriminated against by their instructors, 39% reporting that discrimination has happened infrequently or sometimes, and 9% reporting that discrimination by instructors has happened often ( $x=1.9$ ).

Communication with students with disabilities and students without disabilities was also described as generally positive ( $x=3.9$  and  $3.8$  respectively). Half (50%) of those who answered the survey had never been discriminated against by students without disabilities, 38% experienced discrimination by students without disabilities infrequently or sometimes, and 12% experienced discrimination by students without disabilities often or always ( $x=2.0$ ). Discrimination by students with disabilities was rare, with 75% reporting that it never happened, 23% reporting that it happened infrequently or sometimes, and 2% reporting it occurred often or always ( $x=1.4$ ).

Students reported they have adjusted relatively well to SJSU ( $x=3.7$ ), feel fairly comfortable interacting with students without disabilities ( $x=3.9$ ), and are generally happy with the way they communicate with others without disabilities ( $x=3.7$ ).

The greatest difference between the two surveys was in experiences communicating with individuals without disabilities. In 1994, students reported more positive (84%) experiences than in 2007 (62%) when communicating with students without disabilities. In addition, students completing the 2007 survey reported more instances of discrimination by students without disabilities (12% indicating often/always in 2007 and 2% indicating often/always in 1994). Also, in the 1994 survey, 73% of respondents indicated "I am happy with the way I communicate with individuals without disabilities at SJSU" as very much or mostly like them, while in 2007 that number dropped to 55%. Tables 4, 5, and 6 summarize these aspects of communicating with others at SJSU in 1994 and 2007.

**TABLE 4**  
**Evaluation of Communication with others at SJSU**  
*Scale: Very positive = 5 Very negative = 1*

	1994	2007
Experiences communicating with instructors	3.9	3.9
Experiences communicating with students without disabilities	4.1	3.8
Experiences communicating with students with disabilities	4.0	3.9

**TABLE 5**  
**Frequency of Discrimination at SJSU**  
*Scale: Always = 5 Never = 1*

	1994	2007
Discriminated against by instructors	2.0	1.9
Discriminated against by students without disabilities	1.8	2.0
Discriminated against by students with disabilities	1.2	1.4

**TABLE 6**  
**Overall Communication at SJSU**  
*Scale: Very Much Like Me = 5 Not At All Like Me = 1*

	1994	2007
Comfortable talking with students without disabilities	4.1	3.9
Have adjusted well to SJSU	3.8	3.7
Happy with communication with others without disabilities at SJSU	3.9	3.7

### **Advice for Students with Disabilities Planning to Attend SJSU**

Two open-ended questions asked respondents to give advice on the problems that students should be prepared for at SJSU and what they can do to make their experiences as positive and beneficial as possible. The majority of problems that students with disabilities are most likely to encounter at SJSU, according to respondents, are those associated with faculty, the Disability Resource Center (DRC), and facility access. To assist students with disabilities in making their experiences at SJSU as positive and beneficial as possible, respondents emphasized keeping communication channels open with professors and the DRC, as well as being resourceful and keeping a positive attitude.

**Potential problems at SJSU.** Respondents reported that some SJSU faculty appeared unaware of the needs of students with disabilities. Additionally, faculty were perceived as lacking the know-how in dealing with students' disabilities. For example, faculty seem to lack information available from the DRC. Moreover, some faculty do not seem to fully understand the State's mandated requirements. Problems encountered by respondents also included instructors refusing to allow for accommodations, changing or altering accommodations, and instructors' apparent frustrations with understanding or having to deal with accommodations for students with disabilities. Respondents to the 1994 survey listed identical issues, highlighting instructors' lack of understanding, cooperation, flexibility, and responsiveness to students with disabilities.

Several respondents (14%) indicated that the DRC was understaffed in some manner, making it difficult for students to achieve their individual educational goals. Although respondents in the 1994 alluded to this issue, none directly addressed it. In the present study, some respondents noted that DRC drop-in hours were a waste of time, as it could take hours before receiving assistance. They also expressed frustration concerning the inability to secure services when needed and stressed the need for incoming students to register very early with DRC, as not doing so would result in long waits in receiving services (e.g., counselor appointment, note taker, translator). Also, DRC's bureaucratic hurdles could make it difficult for students to acquire priority registration and receive counselors' assistance with establishing educational programs. Although the bureaucratic hurdles were not specifically identified, they speak to larger issues with the structure of the Center and the University.

Similar to the 1994 study, respondents in the present study identified facility access as a key problem for students with disabilities at SJSU. There are issues with physical access to buildings (automatic doors), restrooms, elevators, and parking structures. The expanse of the SJSU campus and its physical layout were also considered an issue in relation to parking structures and classroom locations.

In general, in both 2007 and 1994, respondents advised students with disabilities to be prepared to face issues such as large volumes of reading and homework, balancing the demands of school and work, the fast pace of classes, and varying levels of frustration. However, these general issues were off-set by respondents' advice on how to make the experiences of students with disabilities at SJSU as positive and beneficial as possible. This advice has not changed notably since the 1994 survey results were released.

***Making experiences positive and beneficial.*** Respondents emphatically stated that students should first make an appointment with the DRC well in advance of the start of classes. Students should also learn about the resources available to them through the DRC. The resources listed by respondents included counseling services, writing center, testing and course work accommodations, note takers, interpreters, and priority registration. Respondents also suggested that students stay in contact with their DRC advisor.

Communication with instructors and keeping those communication channels open were considered extremely beneficial for students. Respondents stressed the importance of students making instructors aware of accommodation needs, problems understanding class materials, and other class-related issues.

Being resourceful and keeping a positive attitude were also considered integral to a positive and beneficial experience at SJSU. Respondents suggested that students get involved with student organizations, network, find a mentor, participate in activities, and befriend other students. Respondents also stressed using one's time wisely, showing initiative, studying hard, not giving up, and maintaining a strong support system as positive and beneficial to their success at SJSU.

## Communication Skills

Respondents indicated that their skills in speaking English were well above average ( $x=4.3$ ), reading English above average ( $x=4.0$ ) and writing English as close to above average ( $x=3.8$ ). Respondents also measured their skills in talking with instructors ( $x=3.9$ ), other students with disabilities ( $x=3.9$ ) and students without disabilities ( $x=3.9$ ) as almost above average. The 2007 responses were in line with those from the earlier study, with the exception of skills in communicating with students without disabilities, which dropped from 4.3 in 1994 to 3.9 in 2007. Table 7 summarizes these results.

TABLE 7  
**Respondents' Communication Skills**  
*Scale: Excellent = 5 Poor = 1*

	1994	2007
Speaking English	4.4	4.3
Reading English	4.1	4.0
Writing English	3.8	3.8
Talking with instructors	3.9	3.9
Talking with students without disabilities	4.3	3.9
Talking with students with disabilities	4.1	3.9

## Improving Life for Students with Disabilities at SJSU

Near the end of the survey we asked, "If you were hired by the University to improve life for students with disabilities who attend SJSU, what changes would you make?" In line with the responses from the 1994 survey, students felt that instructors should go through mandatory sensitivity training in order to learn how to better deal with students with disabilities. They also suggested better communication between the instructors and the DRC, and more activities outside of class for students with disabilities. Some students mentioned the need for greater understanding and sensitivity on the part of the DRC staff. Improvements to campus accessibility and better maintenance of all buildings would make it easier for students with disabilities to move about the campus. Additionally, respondents suggested making the mySJSU interface easier to navigate, providing an orientation for all students with disabilities who are new to the campus, giving better incentives to notetakers, and generally improving campus communication. Finally, the idea of a peer mentor program was proposed, pairing current SJSU students with disabilities with incoming students with disabilities to help them adjust to life at SJSU and develop their self-advocacy skills.

Study participants also suggested periodically repeating the survey to longitudinally track the communication experiences of SJSU students with disabilities over time. Future research teams will want to develop strategies to increase survey participation.

## Summary

The results from the two studies were positive for the most part, with only a few key differences between the 2007 and 1994 findings. With 17 years to implement the provisions in the

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and 9 years since the passing of the Workforce Investment Act (which expands the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to make all workplace information accessible), we expected even more positive results from the 2007 survey. Moreover, the CSU's administration has given increased attention to disability issues, as with the Chancellor's Executive Order 926 (January 2005), which reads in part: "The policy of the CSU is to make its programs, services, and activities accessible to students, faculty, staff, and the general public who visit or attend a campus-sponsored event, with disabilities."

We're not sure why the results from the two surveys were essentially the same. One reason could be that the ADA and other legal initiatives have raised awareness of disability issues and made clearer for students with disabilities the accommodations they should rightfully expect. Respondents may also feel more comfortable speaking out about changes that need to be implemented. In addition, the response rate for the survey was quite low, although not much different from the 1994 survey and common in mail and online surveys. We might have gotten a different picture if more students had responded.

Still, the results from the 1994 survey were generally positive and that trend generally continued for the 2007 survey. For example, most respondents in the 2007 survey reported little discrimination against them by instructors and students. The majority of respondents are comfortable interacting with all members of the SJSU community and feel they've adjusted well to SJSU. Finally, the Disability Resource Center received solid marks for its services and interactions with respondents.

## **Closing Comments**

Persons without disabilities—those who are temporarily able-bodied (TABs)—often think that disability issues don't apply to them. But universal design—making all aspects of individuals' daily environments accessible to everyone—benefits every member of a community. Podcasting a lecture, for instance, enhances the experiences of all students—who can't benefit from reviewing a lecture? Automatic doors and ramps in place of stairs help professors, students, and staff as they trundle around campus loaded down with books, laptops, and papers.

Our hope, of course, is that the results of this study lead to the implementation of programs that further support the educational goals of SJSU students with disabilities. To put into practice what we've learned from our research, Dr. Coopman applied for and was awarded a second Student Success Grant for Spring 2008 to work with students in developing workshops for the SJSU campus community that focus on disability and communication.

Finally, several respondents thanked the research team for making the survey available. We thank the students who responded to the survey and those who participated in the online discussion of the results. Without the insight of these students, this study would not have been possible.



## Appendix

### SJSU STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES COMMUNICATION SURVEY

As you read in the consent form on the previous screen, our goal is to find out about the communication experiences of disabled students at SJSU. There are no right or wrong answers. We want to learn about your experiences communicating with others at SJSU.

***First, we'd like to know about you.***

1. How many semesters have you attended SJSU? \_\_\_\_\_ semesters
2. My class standing is: (please check)  
\_\_\_\_\_ freshman \_\_\_\_\_ sophomore \_\_\_\_\_ junior \_\_\_\_\_ senior \_\_\_\_\_ graduate \_\_\_\_\_ other
3. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ years
4. I am: (please check) \_\_\_\_\_ female \_\_\_\_\_ male
5. My disability is: (please check)  
\_\_\_\_\_ physically visible \_\_\_\_\_ not physically visible
6. Please describe your disability.

***Second, we'd like to know about your experiences on this campus.***

(1 = Strongly Disagree 5=Strongly Agree Qs. 7-10)

7. In general, I believe individuals without disabilities at SJSU are friendly to me.
8. I enjoy working in small groups in my classes.
9. I feel comfortable participating in class discussions.
10. It is often difficult for me to follow instructors' lectures.
11. What do you think your instructors could do to help you succeed in their classes?

***Third, we're interested in your experiences with SJSU's Disability Resource Center (DRC).***

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement below (Qs. 12 & 13)

(1 = Strongly Disagree 5=Strongly Agree)

12. The services DRC provides are beneficial to me.
13. My contacts with DRC have been positive.
14. In what ways has SJSU's Disability Resource Center helped you?
15. What else could the DRC do to better help disabled students?

***Fourth, please tell us about your communication with others at SJSU.***

(1 = Very Negative 5=Very Positive Qs. 16, 18, 20)

(1 = Never 5=Always Qs. 17, 19, 21)

16. Overall, how would you evaluate your experiences communicating with **your instructors**?
17. Have you ever been discriminated against by **your instructors**?
18. Overall, how would you evaluate your experiences communicating with **students without disabilities**?
19. Have you ever been discriminated against by **students without disabilities**?
20. Overall, how would you evaluate your experiences communicating with **students with disabilities**?
21. Have you ever been discriminated against by other **students with disabilities**?

***Next, please tell us how much each of the following statements describes you.***

(1 = Not at all like me 5=Very much like me)

22. I feel comfortable talking with students without disabilities.
23. Overall, I think I have adjusted well to SJSU.

24. In general, I am happy with the way I communicate with individuals without disabilities at SJSU.

***For the next two questions suppose you were asked to speak to students with disabilities who were planning to attend SJSU.***

25. What problems should they be prepared for?

26. What can they do to make their experiences as positive and beneficial as possible?

***How would you describe your communication skills in each area listed below?***

(1 = Poor 5=Excellent)

- 27. Speaking English
- 28. Reading English
- 29. Writing English
- 30. Talking with instructors
- 31. Talking with students without disabilities
- 32. Talking with other students with disabilities

***Finally, we'd like to ask you one last question.***

33. If you were hired by the University to improve life for students with disabilities who attend SJSU, what changes would you make?

***Thank you for your help in this study. If you have any questions or additional comments, please type them in the box below.***