Tips for Working with Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired

Visual impairments are disorders in the function of the eye as manifested by at least one of the following: (1) visual acuity of 20/70 or less in the better eye after the best possible correction, (2) a peripheral field so constricted that it affects one’s ability to function in an educational setting, (3) a progressive loss of vision which may affect one’s ability to function in an educational setting.

Visual disabilities are so varied that it is often difficult to detect such a student in the classroom or on the campus. The student may appear to get around without assistance, read texts, and/or even take notes from the board. However, in most cases some form of assistance is needed.

A "legally blind" person is one whose vision, while wearing corrective lenses, does not exceed 20/200 in the better eye, or whose visual field is less than an angle of 20 degrees. Ninety percent of individuals who are identified as legally blind have some useful vision or light perception. Total darkness is rare.

Some students use aids such as service animals, predominantly dogs. These dogs are trained to move at the direction of their masters and are well-disciplined to function in group settings. It is important to note that service dogs are not to be petted, fed, or distracted in any way while they are on duty. Service animals are allowed by law in all college buildings, including laboratories, food services areas, classrooms and administrative offices.

Other students may use white canes, and a few use special electronic sensing devices to enhance mobility. Special considerations may be needed for these students when a class is moved to a new location, when a group goes on a field trip, or when the furnishings in a room are moved for a special program.

Additional tips and information:

- Some students may have service animals (dogs) in class. Please be aware that other students who are fearful of dogs may need to be relocated within the classroom.
- If you are unsure of how you should assist a student simply ask.
- Some students may need alternate formats for materials distributed in class. Alternative formats may include, large print, Braille, the electronic version of documents, etc. ARS can source Brailled documents and create large print when needed. Typically, students will tell
you what they need.

- Please read out loud what you’re writing on the board, on overheads or are referring to on handouts.
- If you use PowerPoint, it may be helpful for a student to receive an electronic copy prior to class. This will help the student to follow along.
- When giving directions, please be specific—left?, right?, step up? or step down?
- When guiding a student (into your office, for example), offer your arm or elbow.
- Be aware that if you are referring to a specific handout or page in the textbook, it may take students longer to find the information.
- Identify yourself orally when entering a room or approaching a student. Use the student’s name if you are directing conversation toward him or her.
- Students with disabilities should be allowed the same anonymity as other students in the classroom.
- At times it may be appropriate for a sighted volunteer to be paired with a student who is blind or visually impaired for in-class work.

*Information was adapted from the following resources:

- San Francisco State University - The Disability Programs and Resources [1]
- Central Piedmont Community College - Visual Disabilities [2]

Source URL: https://ars.unc.edu/faculty-staff/tips-working-students

Links