

Blindness

DESCRIPTION AND FACTS:

Only a small minority of persons who are visually impaired are actually totally blind and the term “blindness” should be reserved for complete loss of functional sight. The major challenge facing students who are blind in college is the large mass of printed material they encounter: textbooks, class outlines, schedules, tests, films, videotapes, etc. By the time a student who is blind reaches college (unless newly blinded), they have probably developed various methods for dealing with the volume of visual materials. It is helpful for the instructor and student to meet to review the student’s methods. Instructors are often quite surprised with the degree of independence many students who are blind exhibit.

POSSIBLE BARRIERS:

- Decreased awareness of visual cues (i.e., facial expressions, gestures, etc.) in communication
- Print materials that have not been converted to alternative formats

INTERACTION WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS BLIND:

1. If a person who is blind seems to need assistance, identify yourself and offer your services.
2. If you are walking with a person who is blind, let him or her take your arm just above the elbow and walk in a relaxed manner. The person can usually follow the motion of your body. This technique is called “sighted guide.”
3. When giving directions, use descriptive words such as straight, forward, left. Be specific in directions and avoid use of vague terms such as “over there.”
4. When you are with a person who is blind and leave the area, be sure to let the person know you are leaving.
5. Guide dogs are working animals. It can be hazardous for the person using the animal if the dog is distracted. Do not pet or touch the dog without permission.
6. Feel free to use words like “see” or “look” when speaking with a person who is blind.
7. Do not assume the student who is blind will recognize you by your voice even though you have met before. Identify yourself by name.
8. It is helpful to speak directly to the person and to maintain eye contact.

TEACHING A STUDENT WHO IS BLIND:

1. **Notetaking:** Students use a variety of methods for taking notes. It should be noted that only a small percentage (10%) know Braille. Blind students who use Braille prefer to take their own notes using a slate and stylus or a portable Braille. Please be understanding of the slight noise made by the equipment.
2. **Visual Lecture intake:** Remember, words like “this and that” or phrases like “the sum of this plus that equals this” or “the lungs are located here and the diaphragm here” are basically meaningless to a blind student. The instructor should say, “The sum of 4 plus 7 equals 11.” In the second example, the professor can “personalize” the locations of the

lungs and diaphragm by asking class members to locate them by touch on their own bodies. Examples of this type will not always be possible. However, if the faculty member is sensitive not to use strictly visual examples, the student who is blind and probably the rest of the class will benefit.

- Students who are blind may miss all nonverbal cues unless they are explained.
 - By spelling out new or technical vocabulary you help the student who is blind as well as your other students.
 - Give verbal notice of room changes, special meetings or assignments. Students who are blind or partially-sighted are likely to miss a notice written on a chalkboard or in a syllabus. If class is cancelled, the student who is blind will not be able to read the posted notice. If possible, please ask someone to meet the student and deliver the information regarding class cancellation.
 - Consider making copies of overhead material presented in class for the student who is blind. The student can go over the description with his or her reader prior to or immediately after the lecture. If you are using powerpoint, please e-mail the outline format directly to the student prior to class. They will be able to download it and use a screen reader on their laptop to follow along in class.
 - Another student in the classroom may be able to describe visual displays or the student's personal reader could do this between classes.
 - Visual aids need not be deleted. Use the chalkboard, graphs and slides but try to provide more oral description. Verbalize as you go.
- 2. Tests:** It is the student's responsibility to discuss alternative test-taking methods with the instructor. Again, if it is a test on the computer, a screen reader will provide the accommodation and the independence for the student. Do not give the student who is blind "different" tests because it creates segregation and makes it difficult to compare test results. Please refer to the *Authorized Accommodation Memo*.
- 3.**
- 4. Mobility Guides:** Some students use the assistance of trained guide dogs to increase their mobility. These dogs are trained to move at the command of their owners and are well disciplined. Their presence in the classroom should not cause a disruption. Other students may use white canes. Special consideration may be needed if a class is moved to a new location, if an exam is scheduled for a different classroom or if the furnishings in the room are moved around for a special project.

