

establishing independence and growth. Navigators are also invited to share experiences and tell stories – get to know the learner better -- and vice versa.

Training, professional development, feedback, and resources are provided to the staff/faculty taking part in the program. They are encouraged to meet with their student a couple times per month and also take part in campus events/workshops together. Learning opportunities include leadership workshops, academic success seminars, and campus events like Job Fairs and the annual Community + Volunteer Fair.

The pilot is an excellent opportunity for students to be more aware of campus resources and student engagement opportunities. Employees taking part can participate in workshops and seminars that are usually available only to learners. Topics in the LEAD (Leadership Experience and Development) and Student Success Workshops include:

- What is my learning style?
- Reading comprehension
- Test preparation
- Stress management and anxiety
- Time management
- Organizational strategies
- Secrets to success in school and the workplace
- Being a successful student and parent
- Volunteerism and community engagement

Workshops offered by the Library & Learning Commons and Career Services are also promoted throughout the semester the Learning Navigator participants.

Employees and students are assessed before and after the program to measure the effectiveness and impact on participants. Areas assessed include knowledge of campus services and supports, knowledge of the student experience, level of engagement, and confidence in providing guidance to other students.

Since the commencement of the program, only weeks ago, Learning Navigators and student participants have already provided positive feedback about the benefits of the program.

We look forward to learning the outcomes of the pilot from our Learning Navigators and students at the end of the Fall semester. The Learning Navigator pilot is part of our commitment to student success and engaging learners from Orientation to graduation and beyond.

For more information go to www.bowvalleycollege.ca/learningnavigator.

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Navigating the University Campus

Considering the Accessibility Needs of Blind and Low Vision Students

NATALIE MARTINIELLO

The Campus

The college or university campus is a daunting place to any first-year student. For students with disabilities, however, such spaces raise a number of accessibility barriers, though many of these barriers can be addressed through simple guidelines and an awareness of universal design. A recent study conducted by the Adaptech Research Network in 2010-2011 examined the factors that contribute to the success of students with disabilities at the post-secondary level. This study focused on three groups of participants: current students (students currently enrolled in a program of study), graduates (students who have completed a program of study in the past two years and were no longer in school) and leavers (students who left before completing a program of study) (Martiniello, Barile, Budd, Nguyen, & Fichten, 2012).

The results indicate that access to the environment ranks as one of the top four barriers, with more than a fifth of the 96 blind and low vision respondents citing this as a factor. The study further indicates that employment prospects after graduation continue to be a serious concern for students with visual impairments (Martiniello, Tibbs, Barile, Budd, Nguyen, & Fichten, 2012), but it is also evident that students with disabilities who are able to obtain a postsecondary degree, including those with visual impairments, are far more likely to find gainful employment than those without a diploma or degree. Though students with visual impairments constitute a small number of the overall student population, it is essential to eliminate those barriers that impede their ability to obtain a post-secondary education, and to understand their accessibility needs as various misconceptions about visual impairment persist.

What Does It Mean To Be Blind?

“Legal blindness” is descriptive of a visual acuity (with the best correction possible) of 20/200 or less, or a visual field of 20 degrees or less, in the better eye (Access Economics, 2009). This means that many legally blind individuals have some degree of usable vision. Students with a visual impairment can range from those who can read most print

materials and navigate without the assistance of a white cane, to those with no usable vision at all. For this reason, it's best to ask a person with a visual impairment if they need your assistance (rather than simply assuming that they do) and to ask how you might best help them.

How Can I Help a Traveller With a Visual Impairment?

A standardized technique (referred to as ‘sighted guide’) is often used to lead a person who is blind. The individual with a visual impairment holds onto their guide’s arm just below the elbow. The sighted guide walks slightly ahead of the person they are guiding, and pauses for any changes in elevation (such as steps) or narrow spaces (such as door entrances). When providing directions to a person who is blind, it is most helpful to use concrete words such as “to your right” or “five steps ahead” rather than vague, visual statements such as “over there” or by merely pointing. As noted above, however, it is easiest to first ask how you can best help if assistance is requested.

How Do Individuals With Visual Impairments Get Around On Campus?

Travel techniques that are efficient for one person may not be ideal for others, and there is by no means a “one-size-fits-all” answer to this question. Persons who require the assistance of a travel aid may use a white cane or guide dog. White canes are used for identification purposes (to alert drivers, for instance, that a pedestrian is blind) and as a useful travel tool. A cane user can, for example, follow along the base of a wall to maintain a point of direction, and a cane will also alert someone about oncoming obstacles (such as poles) or changes in elevation (such as steps). Canes are not infallible, however: water fountains or other structures protruding from the wall may not be detected by a cane user and can pose a safety hazard.

How Does a Person Who Is Blind Cross Streets?

People who cannot see use the sound of traffic to

help them determine when it is their turn to cross. The sound of parallel traffic typically indicates both that it is time to cross and provides someone who is blind with a sound to maintain a straight line while crossing. Orientation and Mobility instructors are professionals who are trained to teach persons with visual impairments how to travel safely and independently. Consider contacting a rehabilitation center in your community to learn more about such travel techniques for students who are blind. More importantly, be sure that your own students are aware of these services if they are available and if requested.

If you are driving, resist the urge to flash your lights, wave your hands, or honk in an attempt to alert someone who is blind that it is safe to cross, as there is no way for them to perceive that communication or know with certainty what you are trying to communicate: you could, for example, just as easily be honking to tell them that it is unsafe to cross (Geruschat & Hassan, 2005). The recent proliferation of hybrid cars and electric vehicles (which can be virtually or entirely silent at slow speeds) poses a special problem to many who are unable to hear their approach, and some blindness groups are lobbying to address this concern by insisting that these cars sound an alert for blind travellers. Indeed, such a sound would also be helpful to people on bikes and to pedestrians, particularly in parking lots (Tibbs, Rae, Kilpatrick, & Martiniello, 2008).

What About Guide Dogs?

Some blind travellers choose to use a guide dog. Guide dogs are trained by a variety of organizations. Though not always the case, several of these organizations require applicants to be at least 16 years of age, so it is likely that guide dogs will be found primarily at the post-secondary level and beyond. Choosing a guide dog school is much like choosing a university: every organization differs in terms of their training philosophy and the services they provide. These dogs are trained to navigate in a straight line and to move

around any obstacles in a blind person's path. They are also taught "intelligent disobedience," which means that they should disobey their handler's command to move forward if it is unsafe to do so. Despite widespread misconceptions, guide dog users must still know where it is they would like to go, so that they can communicate directional commands to their dog. The guide dog team works in unison, with the guide dog user issuing commands and the dog responsible for the team's safety.

How Can I Assist a Guide Dog User?

If assisting a guide dog user, remember to avoid grabbing a guide dog's harness, as this can severely confuse a guide dog and distract them from their work. Instead, simply ask how you can best assist, and avoid feeding, petting or otherwise distracting a working dog. Though guide dogs are well trained, they too, like humans, can make mistakes if they are distracted.

Recommendations

The physical environment is an important consideration when it comes to accessibility for students who are blind or have low vision. Here are some points to consider in your own environment:

- Are there large print and Braille to identify elevator buttons, building floors, mens' and womens' rest rooms, and classroom locations?
- Are there tactile strips and easily distinguishable colours (such as yellow) to alert individuals about oncoming changes in elevation (such as steps)?
- Are there obstacles placed in the path where students and staff must walk (such as poster boards and billboards)? Where else can these items be placed, so as to remain visible, yet out of harm's way?
- Does your campus receive adequate snow removal during the winter? Snowfall can make travelling difficult and confusing, requiring individuals to follow a different (and unfamiliar) path.



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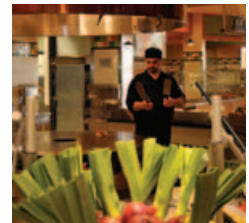


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- Are there ample and accessible areas for guide dog handlers to relieve their dogs? Some guide dog handlers relieve their dogs on grass, while others on concrete, depending upon the dog, but having ample and safe spaces is important.
- Does your institution provide an accessible guide or map, which includes information about where key services can be found?
- Are all new staff members provided disability awareness education, both to address common misconceptions and how to assist a student or a colleague with a disability if needed? Whenever possible, remember to include interested students with disabilities in these dialogues, as their first-hand accounts are invaluable.
- Do on-campus cafes and restaurants provide an accessible copy of their menus for those who are unable to see what is available? Is this information provided on the college or university website in an easily accessible location?
- Are especially flat curbs on campus easily distinguishable by a tactile indicator, to alert someone who is blind that they are approaching a street?
- If your campus provides student residences, you may want to consider the best ways to ensure that living spaces are accessible to students who are blind or have low vision. Though this topic is beyond the scope of this article, large print and tactile markings on stoves, microwaves and laundry facilities may ensure a more inclusive and safe living environment for particular students.

Universal Design

Universal design is a philosophy that advocates for attitudes and environments that benefit both people with and without disabilities. Information related to universal design for college and universities are available from many sites; the best known of these is DO-IT (2012). Many of these guidelines will not only assist those who are blind or have low vision, but may lead to a more positive

campus experience for all. If an environment is designed to be universally accessible from the start, it is less costly and benefits the most number of people. In this way, the need for “accommodations” (which necessarily set apart people with disabilities) is diminished. Together, we can educate others and ensure that campuses are safe, inclusive spaces for everyone – both in attitudes and in the environment itself.

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