

Teaching Students with Visual Disabilities

Visual impairment varies greatly. Persons are considered legally blind when visual acuity is 20/70 or less in the better eye with the use of corrective lenses. Most persons who are legally blind have some vision. Others who have low vision may rely on residual vision with use of adaptive equipment. Persons who are totally blind may have visual memory, the utility of which varies depending on the age when vision was lost.

Whatever the degree of impairment, students who are visually impaired should be expected to participate fully in classroom activities, such as discussions and group work. To record notes, some students will use laptop computers or computerized Brailers. Students who are visually impaired may encounter difficulties in laboratory classes, field trips, and internships. With planning and adaptive equipment, these difficulties can be minimized.

Before or Early in the Semester

Instructors can accommodate for students with visual impairment before or early in the semester by:

- Providing reading lists or syllabi in advance to allow time for arrangements to be made (e.g., the taping or Brailing of texts).
- With cooperation from Disabled Student Services (DSS), assist the student in finding readers, notetakers, or tutors, or teaming the student with a sighted classmate or laboratory assistant.
- Reserving front row seats for low-vision students; making sure seats are not near windows (glare can make it hard for a student to see the instructor or the board). If a guide dog is used, the dog will be highly disciplined and require little space.
- Verbalizing the content printed on transparencies or chalkboard notations.

During the Semester

During the semester instructors can accommodate for students with visual impairment by:

- Facing the class when speaking.
- Conveying in spoken words whatever is put on the chalkboard and whatever other visual cues or graphic materials used.
- Providing copies of all materials or requesting another student to write everything down for later transfer to tape or Braille.

- Permitting lectures to be taped and/or providing copies of lecture notes.
- Providing large-print copies of classroom materials by enlarging them on a photocopier, or print in at least 18 point using high-contrast, non-encumbered fonts.
- Being flexible with assignment deadlines.
- Planning field trips and special projects (e.g., internships) well in advance and alerting field supervisors to whatever adaptations may be needed.
- Considering an alternative assignment if a specific task is impossible for the student to carry out.

Examinations and Evaluations

Students should not be exempt from examinations or be expected to master less content or achieve lower level of scholastic skill because of visual impairment. Alternative means of assessing understanding of the material may be necessary, however. The students themselves, because of their experience in previous learning situations, and DSS may offer suggestions on testing and evaluation strategies. The most expedient devices are alternative examinations (e.g., oral, large-print, Braille or taped), time extensions for exams, and the use of such aids as print enlargers, specialized computer programs, or tape recorders. The DSS is available to assist with the administration of classroom exams.

Other adaptations suited to specific situations, such as tactile materials in presenting diagrams or illustrations in certain subjects, may be helpful.