**Students with Visual Impairments**

There is a wide spectrum of functional abilities among persons known to have a visual impairment. Some students may be experiencing a progressive loss of vision. Some students might experience a medical condition affecting vision in an unpredictable manner. Others may have a visual impairment that has stabilized and is corrected but still substantially hinders their ability to see near and/or far. Some students experience the inability to use peripheral vision; others, central vision. Some students will have no visual response to color but for others with limited sight, color may be an aid. Some students are blind either from birth or an early age or later in life.

Persons with visual impairments can present themselves with identifying symbols: a white cane used in mobility, a guide dog, and electronic notebooks offering voice output or Braille support, and glasses. Others do not. The absence of physical supports should not indicate more or less capability. It simply indicates the individuality of each person with a visual impairment.

Students with visual impairments are often challenged by the regular methodologies and demands of academic life that are highly visual. Modern technology allows access to print and electronic material within certain limits. Copy machines have the capacity to enlarge print.

* A growing library of audio books is offered through public and private services.
* Text files (originally generated or scanned materials) and Internet use is supported by specialized technology added to personal computers with the capacities to enlarge or present materials verbally.
* Closed circuit TVs (CCTV’s) produce magnification of print information.
* ODS can offer support for braille material creation, but prior notice for this need is critical in order to provide the student their material in a timely manner. Please note, not all students who are blind will rely on, or have been educated in braille reading.

While use of these technologies is enabling, it does not promise equal access to all sight dependent media. The use of any of these technologies can also require more time and unintentional delays. Technology does not support all visual requirements in and out of the classroom. Charts and graphic displays are often not supported well. Video multimedia presentations lacking visual description may be useless to a student with a visual impairment. These products enable access to vast amounts of information required in the academic setting. How individual students use this technology can vary, and our responsibility as an institution remains to provide access to individuals with sight and other impairments.

Instructors can provide necessary supports for their students with visual impairments in the following ways:

* When approaching a student known to have a visual impairment in or out of the classroom, **introduce yourself**. It will help a person know who you are without guessing by the sound of your voice. If you are leaving a group conversation, let the student know.
* If a student with a visual impairment is alone and needs to walk or sit, you can **offer assistance verbally**, but don’t just reach out and grab them; wait for a response. If the student declines the offer, do nothing. If the student accepts, extend your right or left arm bent at the elbow (depending on how you are situated), in reach of the student’s extended hand. You can then say something like “I’ve got my arm out when you’re ready”. If walking through a maze of obstacles, talk about the need to move right, left or up/down stairs as required. Pause for only a second if going up/down stairs and inform the student of stairs and the approximate number before reaching a flat surface. To assist and direct the student to a seat in an office or meeting room, extend your arm, elbow bent to reach the student’s extended hand for direction. When approaching a chair, place the student’s hand on the back or arm of the seat. In an office visit or classroom, pay attention to unexpected barriers in doorways and paths of access and changes in regular seating arrangements within the classroom used. If there is an unanticipated room change, arrange for someone to wait for the student and act as an escort to the new location.
* **Invite the student privately to talk about their needs in the classroom**. Ask about how he or she is handling the reading and writing assignments. This information can help understand what supports the student is using and how he or she is managing the supports. It can be informative to decide on processes and arrangements for the course requirements.
* **Provide the reading list or syllabi in advance**. Posting this information on line in an accessible format (text based) allows students with special technology to access it and reference it equal to other students. If enlarged print is needed, develop text files in 18 point. Use copy machines to enlarge 150%.
* In the classroom, **read any information that is presented visually** in overheads, LCD screen display or on the board. Avoid using “this and that, here and there” phrases, such as the “the sum of this equals that” or “the battle site was located here and the artillery was positioned there.”
* **Movies and videos** shown in class, where the visual component is important, should include a descriptive audio track.
* **In a group discussion**, acknowledging the name of the speaker will allow a student with a visual impairment to know who is participating.
* Do not apologize for or purposely avoid using common expressions that refer to sight, such as “I’ll see you later.”
* **Class notes** can be supported in a number of ways. Some students will bring their own portable equipment, such as a Braille notetaker or portable computer. Students may rely on a note taker paid for by ODS. Sometimes instructor’s notes are made available and reproduced in the media usable by the student. Students may request the instructor’s permission to tape record class lectures.
* **Test taking** can be accomplished in several ways. Tests can be administered orally or with a scribe who reads questions and writes the student’s responses. Essay exam questions can be pre-recorded on tape and student responses typed or in some circumstances, the student will be capable of and prefer handwriting the responses. The exam may be enlarged on a copier or sent electronically to a host computer equipped with speech output or magnification support. There can be test arrangements that only require extended time, i.e. breaks for a student to relax their visual attention for a period of time. Any one of these solutions is uniquely considered for the student’s ability.
* **Field trips** and out-of-class locations should be discussed with the student. The student may require assistance from a “sighted guide,” and discuss transportation requirements, if any.
* We will continually find unique academic requirements that can present a penalty or unprecedented challenge to students and faculty members. The search for reasonable solutions is a shared partnership between the faculty member, student and the Office of Disability Service.