

Using a Self-Directed Guide for Students who are Deaf-Blind Considering College

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Students who receive a postsecondary education who have both a vision and hearing loss are a relatively small population. However, their support needs can be many and are as varied as the individuals themselves.

Often deaf-blind students who are considering college have never considered their learning style or the accommodations that best meet their needs. In high school, accommodations are usually made by teachers with little involvement from the student. Once in college, the student must learn to advocate for necessary supports. It is essential to the student's success at the college level. However, deaf-blind students need a way to gain these skills.

Many times, college staff including Disabled Student Services, have not had experience serving deaf-blind students in the past and are not familiar with many of the accommodations that could be afforded to deaf-blind students. Does the student need braille transcribed textbooks, access to a closed circuit television (CCTV), or a tactile sign language interpreter? To answer these and many other questions, college staff need a guide or tool that would help determine how best to meet the needs of deaf-blind students.

Description of *The Guide*

In response to these gaps, *The Guide for Students who are Deaf-Blind Considering College* was developed. It is a tool to assist students to identify their own personal learning style and to identify and evaluate college programs and support services,

which enables them to select a college that best meets their individual needs. It is a useful tool for high school graduates as well as adults seeking additional education after time spent in the workforce. *The Guide* is divided into four sections, which can be used individually or collectively. The following is a description of each section:

The "Personal Learning Profile Checklist" surveys a student's preferences (communication modes, use of ALDs, teacher positioning), environmental concerns (lighting sources, use of audio/visual equipment), and other accommodation considerations (print or alternate media, test accommodations) in a yes/no checklist format. Once completed, a compilation of the "yes" answers will reveal the student's personal learning style.

"Searching for College Programs: Getting Started" includes a questionnaire about the student's high school experiences, interests, and relationship with his/her vocational rehabilitation counselor. The section concludes with a checklist of initial questions to consider for colleges of interest to the student, e.g. size, entrance exams, academic calendar system, etc.

The third section titled, "Campus Characteristics," asks the student questions about classrooms, e.g., size, seating arrangements, travel on campus, and the dormitories (lighting, events/activities, and safety issues). Students complete this checklist for each college being considered.

The last section of *The Guide* is the "Support Services Checklist." Questions regarding fourteen support services that may be requested by students who have vision and hearing loss are included to help stimulate discussion with college staff and

additional questions by students, and to identify support services available on the prospective campuses. These fourteen support services include: interpreter services, notetakers, readers, tutors, volunteers, large print materials, braille materials, taped textbooks, alternate test-taking methods, reading machines, orientation and mobility (O&M) services, transportation services, counseling and support services, and additional services.

Postsecondary Education: A Personal Perspective

I am Heidi Aulenbach, a social work student at Metropolitan State College of Denver. I will discuss my own personal experiences as a college student who happens to be deaf-blind and my encounters with other deaf-blind college students on the campus that I now attend.

I was born deaf and blind as a result of maternal Rubella. I do have distance vision problems in my left eye, but it is usable. Through the right eye, I can see colors and shades of light and dark, but it is out of focus.

I am profoundly deaf in both ears. However I do have residual hearing that allows me to compensate for my lack in the ability to lipread others or things I do miss in my limited field of vision. I had years of speech therapy which enabled me to use my hearing and speech to converse with hearing people. My preferred method is sign language, which I use fluently in addition to my speech skills.

My experiences as a deaf-blind college student began fifteen years ago when I attended Gallaudet College in Washington, DC just after I completed high school. At that time, I considered myself a very independent adult, able to get around on my own, just as I still do today. Still, my first college experience did offer new experiences for me in handling my affairs and taking responsibility for myself. I learned these skills gradually over the next several years. While at Gallaudet, I had some denial regarding my deaf-blindness and thus, I did not take advantage of the services that were offered for the deaf-blind students there.

At that time, services for deaf-blind students at Gallaudet included note taking, tactile interpreting, and tutoring. There was even a support group for deaf-blind students. I didn't think to

use those services in the classrooms as I could see the teachers signing the lectures. Thinking back now, I do admit that I had trouble seeing the blackboard and did not take good notes.

After two years, I decided to leave Gallaudet and return to California, where I attended a community college. The student services were excellent. I did well in most of my classes. There was only one other student at that community college who had similar vision/hearing problems as a result of Rubella.

In 1993, I relocated to Colorado. After living in Denver for a while, I realized that there was a serious need for better deaf-blind services in Denver. Three years later, I went back to college for a degree in social work from Metropolitan State College. The college offered good support services for disabled students, including deaf students. I accessed support services needed for my classes, including note taking and interpreter services. I was later asked by the coordinator of Disability Services at the community college to teach the deaf-blind students some tactile sign language in an effort to enhance their communication with others.

There are three colleges on this campus: Community College of Denver (CCD), Metropolitan State College of Denver (MSCD) and University of Colorado at Denver (UCD). Of the three, Community College at Denver has the largest number of deaf-blind students. At present, there are six students who are deaf-blind, including myself on Aurora campus. One woman takes classes at CCD and MSCD at the same time. Each student has varying needs according to their degree of hearing and sight. I will describe each of these students to demonstrate that deaf-blind persons are unique in their needs with regard to their college education.

Terry is a 40-year old woman and is gradually losing her hearing and sight. This deterioration began about six years ago. She had vision problems in the past but is now coping with her hearing/vision loss. She now attends classes both at Metro and CCD. Since her hearing and her vision have changed, her learning methods have been modified. For example, with the aid of her math tutor, they devised ways to do graphs. Terry also uses a hearing aid and an FM system, and that allows her to communicate with others and on the telephone. She used to use the closed circuit television (CCTV) but now is finding it diffi-

cult to use. She can read large print in addition to braille. At home, she has a computer system, but it took quite a while to get it set up so that she could use it efficiently. She is also learning tactile sign language. Also, she now has a leader dog to guide her around campus and Denver.

Melissa, a 21-year old student at CCD, is a fairly recent high school graduate and communicates orally. She can see light and dark and, due to her residual hearing, she converses orally with hearing people. However, she has to learn tactile sign. She can read braille, move around well with a cane, and is a quick learner.

Charlotte, a woman in her 50s, goes to CCD to improve her skills in English. She is partially blind and uses a cane. She uses a CCTV in order to read print materials. Due to her deafness, she has excellent tactile sign language skills and has no usable speech.

Diana is another deaf-blind woman in her 20s who attends CCD. She is blind in both eyes and has hearing loss in both of her ears. She can converse very well with others in person or on the telephone using the relay service. She can sign very well.

There are two additional deaf-blind students, Maurice and Amanda. They attend CCD. Both of them can speak and hear using hearing aids with or without FM. Maurice knows very little sign language but, on the other hand, Amanda is fairly good with sign language.

As you read about each person, look at their individual needs that require accommodations in order to be successful in a postsecondary environment. At present, there are plenty of interpreters, but it is hard to find qualified people who would be willing to take up the challenge of working with deaf-blind students. There is always a risk that the deaf-blind person will become overly dependent on that person working with them. Some assistance will vary; for example in my case, my needs are minimal as I require notetakers, interpreters and sometimes large print materials. Others need additional assistance such as using tactile sign language, braille, CCTVs, etc.

I again emphasize that each deaf-blind individual has unique needs. By working with support service staff on campus to develop and imple-

ment a workable plan for support, deaf-blind individuals can succeed in a college setting.

The Guide for Students who are Deaf-Blind Considering College is an excellent resource and will be extremely helpful for those who work with prospective deaf-blind students, such as school counselors, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and parents. It would help the deaf-blind student view the college experience as a whole in a realistic and thoughtful way.

Summary

While all students who attend college feel that the burden of success or failure rests solely on their shoulders, most students will admit that it can truly be a team approach. Students without vision and hearing loss rely on their family members, friends, classmates, and instructors to succeed. Students who have vision and hearing loss often have a few more members on their team, including disabled student services staff, vocational rehabilitation counselor, readers, O and M instructor, interpreters, and notetakers. In order to self-direct this large team of support, it is necessary to have a handle on one's own needs and accommodations. By using *The Guide*, the student can serve as captain of his/her own team and increase the chances of success at the postsecondary level.

References

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