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Mobilizing resources for ESL international students with visual impairments

Christie Gates, Center for English Language and Culture for International Students

GRAB THE REINS.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the Center for English Language and Culture for International Students (CELCIS) has received an increased number of international students who have had visual impairments. Some have come independently, some from partner universities overseas, and others have been sponsored by government or nonprofit programs.

These students have varied in their level of independence, language proficiency, adaptive technology experience, expectations and knowledge of the resources available on campus. WMU offers a wide variety of support services to students, but this particular population requires additional programming considerations.

Challenges for students with visual impairments:

- Navigating campus
- Access to print course materials
- Obtaining Orientation and Mobility training
- Inaccessible forms or documents

Additional challenges for ESL students:

- Do not qualify for orientation and mobility services provided by the State of Michigan
- Not familiar with accommodations and resources in the U.S.
- Lack of a family support network in the area
- May lack the language skills to advocate for themselves
- Adaptive technology may not be supported at WMU
- May come from a country where the culture of disability is much different (assumed dependency, fewer or different resources, differing expectations, discrimination, etc.)
- Experiencing symptoms of culture shock

Experiences with past students have illuminated a few service gaps at WMU. Traditional orientation programming developed to meet the needs of CELCIS and other international students does not fully address the unique needs of this population. Likewise, Disability Services for Students (DSS) typically caters to students who are largely independent, have access to orientation and mobility training, and have had experience navigating resources.

To address this gap in service, CELCIS joined together with various people on campus to mobilize resources, increase awareness, and prepare for future CELCIS/WMU applicants with visual impairments.



HOW CAN WE MEET THE NEEDS OF THESE STUDENTS?

Start with a “yes” attitude!



The TEAM

Thomas Marks, Director, CELCIS
Christie Gates, Assistant Director, CELCIS
Jim Leja, Chair, Blindness and Low Vision Studies
Jayne Fraley-Burgett, Director, Disability Services for Students

But that's not all....

The students	International Admissions
Students' instructors	Orientation and Mobility
CELCIS staff	Housing staff
Classmates	WMU Bookstore
ISORP staff	Sindecuse Health Center
Blindness and Low Vision Department	Community organizations
Immigration Services	

The Evolving Plan

- **Encourage disclosure at time of application**
- **Educate and manage student expectations (ability to get around campus without assistance of CELCIS staff)**
- **Communicate with students about their needs, preferences**
- **Develop a plan/schedule for their orientation**
- **Establish lines of communication prior to departure (cell phone numbers and email)**
- **Arrange for students to meet with disability services within the first week of arrival**
- **Prepare students for the unexpected (getting lost on campus, feeling symptoms of culture shock, snow storm, power outage, campus closure)**
- **Arrange for ESL placement testing with accommodations**
- **Educate and communicate with staff and faculty**
- **Collaborate with Blindness and Low Vision Studies program**
- **Advocate on campus for increased accessibility and inclusion for international students with disabilities (PAT)**
- **Utilize existing resources on and off campus**
- **Obtain feedback from students**

OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Students who arrive and do not have any vision or independent mobility need the following assistance upon arrival:

- pick up from the airport, transportation to dorm
- checking into dorm (getting keys, walking to their room, etc.)
- getting to/from the cafeteria and getting meals
- getting to/from orientation sessions during the first week
- grocery shopping or shopping for other personal needs
- getting to/from bookstore to purchase textbooks
- getting to/from classes
- getting to/from medical or other appointments
- getting meals during holidays, weekends, dining hall closures
- professional orientation and mobility training to get around campus and to/from classrooms on their own

Neither CELCIS nor DSS have the financial resources to provide these additional services to students...

Solutions

Utilize students from Blindness and Low Vision Studies program to provide orientation and mobility training

Benefit:

- BLS students are able to acquire training hours needed for their degree program
- No cost to the student or university

Challenges:

- BLS students are not always available or on campus when we need them. This leaves a gap in time between arrival and when students are able to get training.

Utilize student volunteers to provide personal assistance

Benefit:

- Opportunity for students to meet new friends on campus
- No cost to student or university

Challenges:

- Difficult to find volunteers on holidays, weekends, semester breaks
- Coordinating volunteers is labor intensive
- Not sustainable

Utilize WMU staff provide personal assistance

Benefit:

- Students receive the necessary support they need to have their basic needs met

Challenges:

- Substantial staff time is taken away from other critical job duties
- Assistance is needed outside regular work hours
- Cost to the university is high
- Not sustainable long term

Request funding from student or sponsor (In progress Fall '14)

Benefits:

- Students can receive appropriate level of support that they need upon arrival
- Student is taking responsibility for their own needs
- Staff time can be used for regularly assigned duties

Challenges:

- CELCIS/WMU may not know that the student has a disability prior to arrival in order to communicate this additional expense.
- If the student arrives in the country, they will need these services regardless of whether we have made arrangements or been paid.

“I dare say, it was the best time of my life when I was studying in WMU.”

(Former CELCIS student, South Korea)



Future Considerations

- Create a timeline for the planning team
- Report our experiences to Chung Foundation be able to request additional funding
- Create a written agreement with student's sponsors
- Identify a project manager
- Maintain communication with all involved parties
- Target students with disabilities in recruitment efforts
- Distribute a feedback questionnaire to students
- Adapt for other special populations

Contact Information

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