Mobilizing resources for ESL international students with visual impairments

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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.

**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
- Orientation and Mobility
- Students’ instructors
- CELCIS staff
- Classmates
- ISORP staff
- Blindness and Low Vision Department
- 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