

Recommendations for Educating Blind Students in Physical Education Teacher Education Programs

Compiled by Justin A. Haegele, Fabian Arroyo Rojas, & Lindsay E. Ball



[Note: Image above, and on the header, is the Center for Movement, Health, & Disability logo)

Background

In Spring 2024, our research team was asked to consult with a physical education teacher program to help develop recommendations for the faculty to help them to offer an appropriate educational learning environment and experience for a blind undergraduate student. To effectively construct recommendations, our research team engaged in a series of meetings and interviews with physical education teacher education faculty, education faculty, as well as the undergraduate physical education teacher education student, to understand their experiences and discuss potential solutions and their viability in this educational context. After completing interviews, all audio-recorded data were transcribed, and transcribed data and researcher notes were analyzed to explore common themes depicting faculty and student experiences. Recommendations were then constructed based on these collective experiences, as well as our pedagogical experience and expertise as research team members.

Here, we share those recommendations with readers in an effort to help future physical education teacher programs offer appropriate educational experiences for blind students. It is important, though, that readers do not assume that this is a universal plan that will ‘fix’ all physical education teacher education programs, and engaging in active discussions with faculty and students should be at the forefront for making any educational accommodations or decisions. Rather, this is more so a resource that can start conversations about how one may consider supporting a blind student within their program to help them to be successful.

Recommendations

In the proceeding sections, general recommendations for faculty and the department, and specific recommendations for before, during, and after classes, are presented.

General Recommendations for the Department

Recommendation 1: First and foremost, the faculty should maintain the same expectations for the student as they do any other students. This is not to say that the student must behave in the same exact manner as other students, but rather that the faculty cannot lower their expectations for performance because a student is blind or visually impaired. It is the responsibility of faculty to make activities and classes accessible, and provide the opportunity for the student to excel, but faculty should not lower their expectations for success because of an impairment.

Recommendation 2: We highly encourage faculty to proactively create a line of communication (e.g., emails, text messaging) among administration, faculty, and the student. With this, we find it important that administration informs both faculty and students about schedules, classes, and provides contact information prior to the start of the semester. This may facilitate faculty preparation as well as the student's expectation of the course. We also encourage an inter-department line of communication as many classes for students are navigated across departments and campuses.

Recommendation 3: If possible, the faculty would benefit from having a visual impairment/physical activity expert (e.g., orientation and mobility personnel) on retainer to be able to ask questions, in real time, about what to do in various scenarios. This may be a teacher for the visually impaired or an adapted physical activity professional with experience with blind or visually impaired people and sports.

Recommendation 4: Faculty working with the targeted student would benefit from regular meetings to discuss successes and challenges with teaching them within their classes. By working together and sharing successes and challenges, it is possible to begin to develop strategies to remediate some of these issues as a group.

Recommendation 5: The faculty should not expect to use a blind or visually impaired student as an educational tool for other students. That is, it is not reasonable to construct videos of blind or visually impaired students, or to expect blind or visually impaired students to speak with students, about their experiences for inspirational reasons. They must volunteer for such activities.

Recommendation 6: Faculty must be given at least one-month advanced notice that a blind or visually impaired student will be a student within their classes. This should allow for the appropriate amount of time for faculty to prepare for the student, and to work with the student to develop a plan for their success and accessibility within the course.

Recommendation 7: Department administration should work together ensuring that accessible documents are made available to blind and visually impaired students. This should not be the sole

responsibility of the faculty. This should include ensuring that the online platform used for classes (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, BrightSpace), has appropriate accessibility features (e.g., compatible with screen reading technology) and that digitized resources are being made available through the department.

The department may consider working with the university, at large, to explore options for producing accessible documents. There should be mechanisms in place where faculty or students can request accessible documents, when needed. Again, this should not be a sole responsibility of faculty.

Recommendation 8: Finally, faculty must provide reasonable accommodations for the blind and visually impaired students. While this is a general recommendation, we noticed quite a bit of hesitancy of faculty to sacrifice the ‘normality’ of activities for student’s needs. This is, in our view, unacceptable. Faculty must be willing to make reasonable changes to activities to ensure that all students within the class, including blind or visually impaired students, can be successful within the class.

In instances where faculty are unwilling to make accommodations, or believe that a blind student cannot be successful, the department is encouraged to make alterations to the instructor of the course. Students cannot be successful in instances where faculty have negative views toward their capability or abilities to be successful, and it is not reasonable for the students to need to navigate these negative or ableist beliefs.

Recommendations Before and After Class

Recommendation 1: Department faculty should meet with the blind or visually impaired student before each term to discuss a plan for the course, including what exam formats will be used, what expectations there will be, and whether it is a dynamic or lecture course. Department faculty must be open-minded to helping the student to access materials, without lowering expectations for their success. We encourage and support these conversations throughout the semester to either maintain effective mechanisms or to modify when necessary.

Recommendation 2: Prior to classes beginning, we encourage faculty to work with blind or visually impaired students to explore the students’ interests, motivation, preferable learning styles, and career goals. These should each be taken into consideration throughout the course. Developing a sound and positive rapport, at this stage, should allow students the comfort with each instructor for them to express their needs and preferences.

It should not be expected for students to express needs or preferences without a positive relationship with instructors being built first.

Recommendation 3: Communication should be discussed with students prior to each and every course. This should include the best and most appropriate way to establish communication between instructor and blind or visually impaired students. We encourage and support these conversations throughout the semester to either maintain effective mechanisms or to modify when necessary.

Recommendation 4: When an abundance of materials will be shared during a class session, instructors are encouraged to share the materials with blind and visually impaired students at least 24 hours before the class meeting. This can allow them time to review the materials, so that they are able to keep up with conversations and lectures during class.

Recommendation 5: All exams should be given in an accessible form. This may be by providing oral exams, or by using electronic surveys for exams.

Recommendations During Class

Recommendation 1: Blind or visually impaired students must be asked if they would like support from the instructors or peers before support is provided. When support is provided without consent, it creates a de-humanizing effect for them. Instructors are encouraged to check-in when offering support and communicate actively when thinking about how to support their students.

Recommendation 2: The classmates of blind or visually impaired students should not be expected to volunteer to work with them. They must make that decision without pressure from the blind or visually impaired student or the instructor. Having peers being forced to work with them can create social challenges for blind or visually impaired students.

Recommendation 3: Course instructors should feel comfortable with not staying within close proximity to blind students at all times. Being close throughout the class can be detrimental to the student, as well as classmates who do not receive the attention they need and deserve.

Recommendation 4: When possible, faculty should attempt to slow the pace of activities down for the entire class, not just the blind or visually impaired student, so that all students can be successful within activities.

Alternatively, faculty can provide multiple options for participation at different paces and allow students to select their preferred pace.

Recommendation 5: A variety of sport-related implements that have audio capabilities should be made available to course instructors for blind or visually impaired students within classes. These might include beeping balls or those with bells built within them. These are available at a variety of outlets.

Recommendation 6: If possible, faculty would be encouraged to sit with blind students during classes to help explain visual concepts to them. This should be discussed with the student prior to class.

Recommendation 7: Expressions that appear to use words related to vision, such as “look over here” or other seemingly vision-centric verbiage, should be acknowledged as common language and it is acceptable to be used in lectures. Faculty should realize, though, that the language will not be helpful for someone who does not have vision to direct their attention to a specific place.

Recommendation 8: Rich verbal descriptions of visual elements displayed in class should be provided, when needed. This is considered to be a useful practice that can enhance learning for other students in class—not only blind or visually impaired students. Providing auditory feedback for those that might not capture full details by simply looking at different discipline related objects (e.g., ball size and texture, hurdles) is critical. As progress is made throughout the semester, the amount and frequency of descriptions should be consulted with the blind and visually impaired student.

Recommendation 9: Do not assume that blindfolding a peer will provide a blind student with another student who understands visual impairment or blindness. Blindness is a permanent condition that cannot be taken off or put back on at the will of students, and research has problematized the use of simulations for reasons like this. Rather than blindfolding peers, it is more reasonable to discuss and educate peers on what visual impairment and blindness is and can be like.

Contact Information for Authors

Dr. Justin A. Haegele, PhD

Professor – Department of Human Movement Sciences

Director - Center for Movement, Health, & Disability

Old Dominion University

Jhaegele@odu.edu

Dr. Fabian Arroyo Rojas, PhD

Post-Doctoral Scholar – Department of Kinesiology

East Carolina University

Arroyorojasf23@ecu.edu

Ms. Lindsay E. Ball, MSed

Doctoral Scholar – Department of Human Movement Sciences

Old Dominion University

Lball006@odu.edu