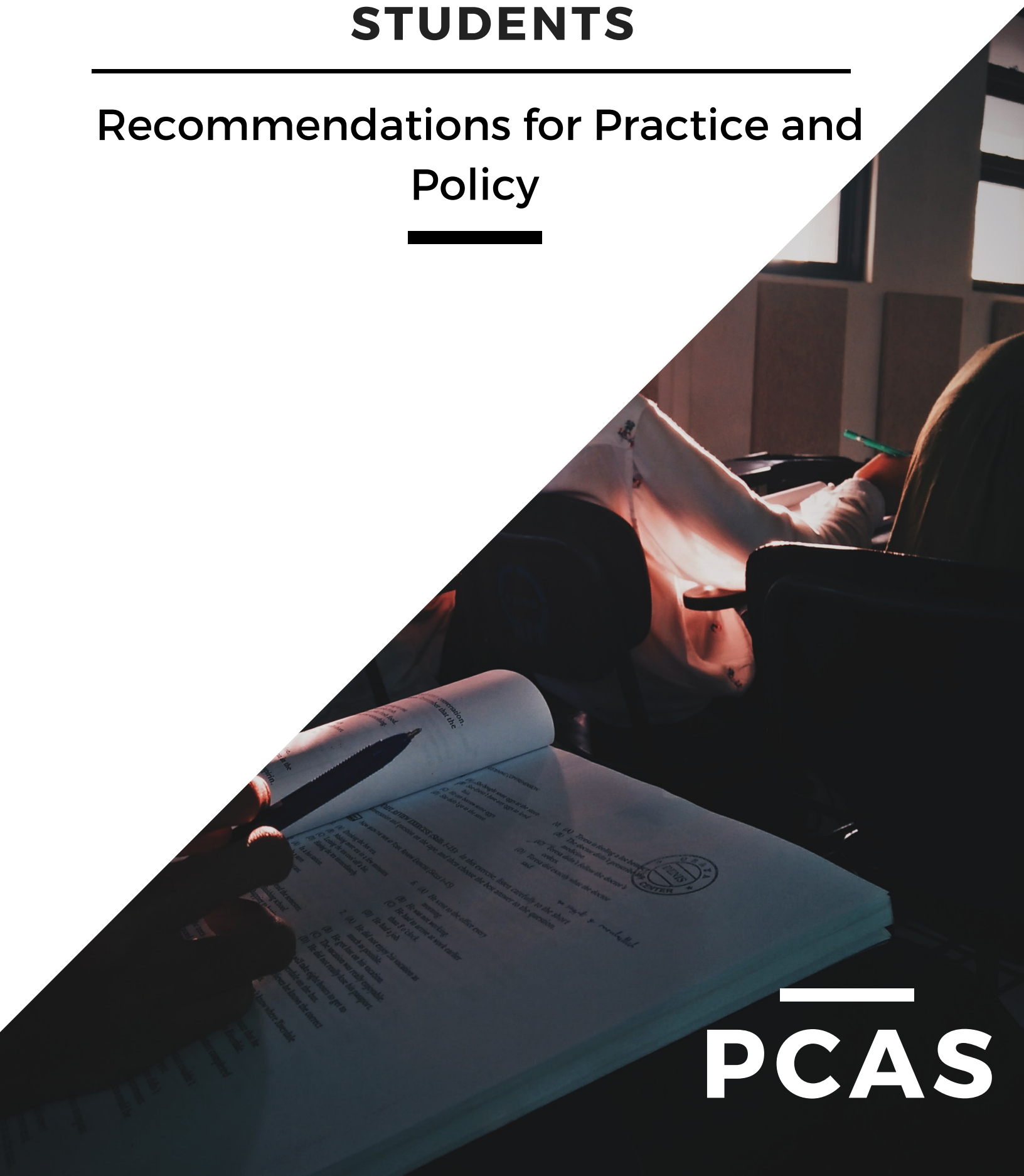


REDUCING THE BARRIERS FACED BY DEAFBLIND POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

Recommendations for Practice and Policy



PCAS

Recommendations to Improve the Equitable Inclusion of DeafBlind Post-Secondary Students in British Columbia

Introduction

Post-secondary campuses, services, and instruction in Canada are designed with specific assumptions of who their students are. Those who do not fit these assumptions face significantly more barriers to the equitable obtainment of their human right to education, no doubt decreasing the diversity of students on Canadian campuses (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2018). One such group that faces significant barriers to the equitable obtainment of their rights due to these assumptions, is DeafBlind students. In this paper, we outline and provide a rationale for recommendations for post-secondary institutions to decrease the barriers experienced by DeafBlind students.

The term DeafBlind as used in this paper is meant to connote individuals who have a combination of reduced hearing and vision, such that they face barriers to the equitable inclusion in society as a whole (adapted from Watters, Owen, & Munroe [2004]). This definition purposefully includes DeafBlind people who may have some vision or hearing. Similarly, it is important to note that DeafBlind post-secondary students are not just blind students who are deaf or deaf students who are blind, and face barriers both similar and unique from blind or deaf students (Arndt, 2011; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998). DeafBlind students are also an extremely diverse and varied group of students who use a wide variety of approaches to communication and navigation (Arndt, 2011; Chanock, 2010; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998).

Summary of Recommendations:

Effective implementation of the recommendations contained within this paper will require changes to some current post-secondary accommodation policy and processes. Therefore, this paper seeks to address and inform institutional, provincial, and national policymakers. Based on the available research and the author's 12 years of experience working alongside the DeafBlind community in British Columbia, the following recommendations are made and explored in this paper:

- 1. Each DeafBlind student is unique and the premier expert in their lived experience, and must be treated as such throughout their post-secondary education.**
- 2. An interprofessional approach to DeafBlind student accommodation should be adopted.**
- 3. Post-secondary institutions, organizations, and researchers should support and contribute to a pool of knowledge on reducing barriers faced by DeafBlind post-secondary students.**

Though there is a great deal of work to be done to reduce the barriers that DeafBlind post-secondary students face, the recommendations listed above will help institutions better identify and reduce barriers faced by this group of diverse learners. However, DeafBlind students are experts of the barriers they face, and as such their experience should be valued above the content of this paper. As Theresa Smith, an early DeafBlind researcher and educator, highlighted: “Deaf-Blind¹ people are competent to run their own lives ... help without understanding and involvement of Deaf-Blind people is just more oppression” (2002, p. 6).

Contextual Background:

In order to effectively collaborate with DeafBlind students, it is important to understand the lived context of most DeafBlind British Columbians. This knowledge alone may help post-secondary institutions to better refine their policies and approaches to reducing the barriers faced by DeafBlind students. Without some context of a community’s experience, it is hard to understand or work alongside them.

DeafBlind students in primary and secondary schools in British Columbia are typically provided with accommodations and services during the school year. These accommodations are often arranged in collaboration with the [Provincial Outreach Program for students with DeafBlindness](#). The services provided range significantly, but typically include intervention service². Transition services may also be provided to support students as they conclude their studies. However, a wide variety of services that are available during youth become unavailable once they transition to adulthood or graduate from secondary school.

Despite the recommendations of two national studies on the experiences of DeafBlind Canadians (Task Force on Services to DeafBlind Persons in Canada, 1984; Watters, Owen, & Munroe, 2004), there is no publicly funded intervention service available for DeafBlind adults in British Columbia (though some funded services are available in Manitoba and Ontario). Thus, many DeafBlind people have to rely on volunteers, friends, and family to act as interveners in order to navigate a largely inaccessible world (Watters, Owen, & Munroe, 2004). This often results in a lack of consistent access to this service and significant variation in the quality of the service that an individual is able to obtain. Finally, there is a highly limited pool of intervenors with only two education programs for DeafBlind intervenors in Canada: a limited 300-hour certificate program offered through [Provincial Outreach Program for students with DeafBlindness](#) and a [diploma program](#) offered through George Brown College in Ontario.

¹ This was previously a common way to spell the term DeafBlind. Though still used, it seems to have fallen out of favor in British Columbia.

² Intervention is a service, distinct from interpreting, where a professional acts as an impartial link between the aural-visual world and a DeafBlind person by communicating with a DeafBlind person in their preferred method of communication. Additionally, those that provide intervention services also provide guiding services. Thus, overall, the goal of intervention is to reduce the barriers DeafBlind people face to navigating and interacting with the world.

This general context should not be understood to be the de facto experience of all members of the DeafBlind community. Firstly, it fails to consider elements outside of service provision. Though access to intervention service may be a very important aspect of a DeafBlind person's life, their lives are rich and complex beyond this aspect. Similarly, the context outlined here assumes that the person was DeafBlind during primary and or secondary school, when in some cases, a student may become DeafBlind during university. Again, this serves to further emphasize the need to understand each DeafBlind student as both a unique learner and person.

Recommendation 1:

Each DeafBlind student is unique and the premier expert in their lived experience, and must be treated as such throughout their post-secondary education.

There is both significant diversity within the DeafBlind community and in the barriers each of these individuals face at post-secondary institutions (Arndt, 2011; Chanock, 2010; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998). Numerous factors influence DeafBlind post-secondary students' experiences of barriers, including: the age, and how, a person's hearing and vision decrease; the hearing and or vision they currently have; the services and technology they have used; their experiences with navigating physical environments in general; and finally, how they communicate (Arndt, 2011; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998; Wolsey, 2017). These factors then interact with a wide range of personal, systemic, and social factors that affect individual experiences of barriers in post-secondary institutions (Arndt, 2011; Stoffel, 2012; Wolsey, 2017). It is only by understanding the totality of the interaction of all of these complex systems and factors that barriers and potential remedies may become clear. Each DeafBlind person experiences and navigates the interactions of these complex systems and factors every day, giving them a lifetime of knowledge. Therefore, each DeafBlind post-secondary student is the premier expert on the barriers they face—and often on how to remedy them—as they are the only people who can observe and understand the totality of all these various factors and how they interact (Arndt, 2011; Chanock, 2010; Mason & Smith, 2007).

Various research studies, and several DeafBlind students themselves, have identified that a key aspect to equitable inclusion is respecting and treating each DeafBlind student as the central expert in the accommodation process (Arndt, 2011; Chanock, 2010; Mason & Smith, 2007; Stoffel, 2012). Moreover, many DeafBlind post-secondary students reported that, when their expertise was ignored or undermined, they faced a significant increase in barriers (Mason & Smith, 2007; Stoffel, 2012). However, when DeafBlind post-secondary students were collaborated with as experts, they reported increased accessibility and success (Chanock, Stevens, & Freeman, 2010; Mason & Smith, 2007; Stoffel, 2012). Specifically, developing successful accommodations seems to be related to DeafBlind people being listened to, respected, and collaborated with as the experts that they are.

Utilizing a DeafBlind student-centered approach no doubt creates its own challenges. First, it increases the time and work of student access professionals, as they need to spend more

time exploring the topic alongside each DeafBlind student. Heavy caseloads may make it extremely challenging for student access professionals to take the time to adopt such a student-centered process, and this may need to be addressed at a policy and funding level. Secondly, this approach increases the burden of responsibility for DeafBlind students. The next two recommendations may help to address, though not fully eliminate, both of these challenges.

Recommendation Two:

An interprofessional approach to DeafBlind student accommodation should be adopted.

DeafBlind students often face barriers to equitable access to several aspects of the post-secondary institution, not just the classroom environment (Arndt, 2011; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998; Vancouver Community College, 2014). These may include barriers to institutional services which are provided on- or off-campus; learning opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom; and the built environment of the campus, including access to emergency and safety-related information. It is unlikely that any one professional would be able to identify, analyze, and address all of these elements. Furthermore, while each DeafBlind student is an expert on the barriers they face, and the appropriateness of any attempts to reduce the barriers they face, it would be unfair to expect them to predict and solve all institutional barriers alone. Instead, in order to identify and address the various and unique barriers a DeafBlind student may face, it is recommended that an interprofessional working group is utilized.

An interprofessional working group is one in which various professionals, each with their own unique perspective and expertise, collaborate on an equal footing to address a complex problem (Canadian Interprofessional Health Collaborative, 2010). In the case of post-secondary systems, such groups may help to identify a more robust list of barriers and provide more relevant solutions. For example, an IT professional may be able to more easily identify and resolve barriers to computer or internet access. Various, a faculty member may be more able to easily identify and remedy barriers to coursework and instruction. The composition of these working groups will no doubt vary, but experts both internal and external to the institutional community should be considered for inclusion. Additionally, significant literature and guides to interprofessional collaboration exist and should be utilized to support effective collaboration.

Interprofessional working groups will no doubt take considerable effort and work, but it is expected that the reduction in ongoing barriers will ultimately reduce the institutional workload overall. Additionally, the group will help to reduce the burden of responsibility placed on DeafBlind students. The group is also likely to support the distribution of knowledge on how to work with DeafBlind students beyond specific faculty members and student access professionals, helping to make other areas of the campus more accessible to DeafBlind students. Similarly, it may help to reduce attitudinal barriers created by staff, which were reported to be a significant source of emotional and mental stress faced by several DeafBlind students (Mason &

Smith, 2007; Stoffel, 2012). Therefore, the use of interprofessional working groups to support the reduction of barriers faced by DeafBlind students is highly recommended by PCAS.

Recommendation Three:

Post-secondary institutions, organizations, and researchers should support and contribute to a pool of knowledge on reducing barriers faced by DeafBlind post-secondary students.

There is a distinct lack of research on the experiences of DeafBlind post-secondary students, both abroad and within Canada. At present, many post-secondary institutions and the professionals they employ may have no resources or information that they can access on this topic. This no doubt increases both the barriers experienced faced by DeafBlind students and their burden to educate various members of the institutions. While DeafBlind students themselves will always play a significant role in decreasing barriers at an institution, a foundation of resources and research would help student access professionals and other professionals to collaborate more effectively with DeafBlind students. Moreover, such resources and research would allow post-secondary institutions to do basic advance planning and policy review, decreasing key barriers in advance of DeafBlind student participation.

Diverse contributions to the topic of DeafBlind post-secondary student experiences in Canada are needed. Formal research on this topic is certainly required, but is not the only meaningful contribution that can be made. Practice briefs, for example Chanock, Stevens, & Freeman (2010); personal reflection papers, for example Mason and Smith (2007); transition-based resources, for example The Ohio Center for Deafblind Education (2017); personal stories from the community, for example Stoffel (2012); and, finally, institutional analysis and process improvement reports, for example Vancouver Community College (2014), have all contributed meaningfully to this complex topic. Therefore, whenever possible, practical, and ethical, members of the post-secondary community in Canada should consider supporting or contributing to the pool of knowledge on this topic. Moreover, formal research on this topic should be supported and funded when and where possible. This combined contribution will help to both decrease the barriers experienced by and the burden of responsibility felt by DeafBlind students, by allowing post-secondary staff to educate themselves on the general aspects of working with a DeafBlind student. This educational base will allow DeafBlind students to then provide feedback for revisions, rather than needing to build and educate from the ground up.

Implementation of Recommendations

The implementation of these recommendations need not start at the foundational level; rather, post-secondary institutions may build on the work of other countries, institutions, and communities. Specifically, the United States has several institutions that have more a more robust systems for the accommodation of DeafBlind students, for example, Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute of the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology. These more robust systems are worthwhile to explore, and where possible, replicate.

Interprofessional working groups may be a new addition to many post-secondary institutions. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to explore and develop guidelines for interprofessional working groups if these do not already exist. For practicality, it may be worthwhile to develop provincial-level guidelines, which can then be modified to fit each institutional system. Fortunately, significant literature on the topic of interprofessional groups exists in the healthcare system and may provide a worthwhile foundation for the development of post-secondary guidelines.

As emphasized in this paper, DeafBlind students and people are a highly diverse community. Therefore, it seems prudent for each province, and provincially-funded organization, to conduct a primary research project to explore the topic of DeafBlind post-secondary experiences. The results of each of these research projects can serve as the foundational guide to the ongoing work to decrease barriers these learners face. However, it will be vitally important to ensure that all research done with this community is culturally safe, sensitive and conducted in partnership with the community itself in order to ensure appropriate questions and understanding.

Conclusion

DeafBlind post-secondary students are an extremely diverse group of learners who face considerable barriers to equitable access to post-secondary education in Canada. It is our belief that the recommendations made above will help to reduce the barriers faced by DeafBlind post-secondary students. Implementation of these recommendations should be made in consultation, or alongside, DeafBlind students themselves as “help without understanding and involvement of Deaf-Blind people is just more oppression” (Smith, 2002, p. 6). Through these recommendations, post-secondary institutions can move Canada closer towards fulfilling our commitments outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006) and promote a more vibrant and diverse community of post-secondary learners.

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