

# BLIND STUDENTS

## find support in A&M programs

**"My darkness has been filled with the light of intelligence, and behold, the outer day-lit world was stumbling and groping in social blindness."**

— HELEN KELLER

By BRANDI BALLARD  
Staff writer

Blindness is something people are aware of, yet it only affects a small portion of the student body at Texas A&M. In addition, some A&M students suffer from other visual impairments besides legal blindness.

David Sweeney, the coordinator for Adaptive Technology Service, said the real problem lies with those who have low vision, a visual acuity problem or a field of vision deficiency.

Low vision is typical poor eyesight from which many people suffer. Visual acuity is a person's ability to see clearly. And field of vision is the extent of someone's peripheral vision.

Most people define blindness as the complete inability to see. But someone who can see light but not objects may be considered blind.

Legal Blindness is defined as vision not greater than 20/200 in the better eye with correction, or a field not subtending an angle greater than 20 degrees.

Gia Alexander, a technical editor in the department of nuclear engineering, said

two people with the same visual acuity can have different eye conditions and see things differently.

"I am nearsighted, but I can maintain doing very close work for a longer period of time than someone with 20/20 vision," Alexander said. "They experience eye fatigue a lot sooner than I do."

Ann Reeber, the interim coordinator for the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), said it is difficult to determine the percentage of students at Texas A&M who have visual disabilities.

"Since we are a voluntary service, students with troubles that can function on their own do not come in to see us," Reeber said.

Last spring, 16 students at Texas A&M asked for assistance from the SSD. This year, there is only one legally blind student.

"These are students who come to us for help," Sweeney said. "Some of them have a problem with seeing clearly or do not have a good field division."

There are many causes for different eye problems. People with multiple sclerosis lose their peripheral or central vision. Glaucoma, a condition that causes a fluid buildup in the eye, places higher pressure

inside the eyeball.

Traumatic injuries can also affect vision. "You don't necessarily have to be hit in the eye for it to affect your vision," Sweeney said. "A blow to the head or a concussion can damage your sight."

Besides low vision, acuity and field of vision, there are many more vision problems. Erlen's Syndrome affects the way in which the eye receives color.

To remedy this, students are given colored glasses or film to place over their reading materials.

Macular degeneration occurs when the retina and optic nerve tears. This usually leads to permanent sight loss.

Besides the Handicap Services can help a student, they first must decide if the student has a defined disability.

"Whether or not it qualifies as a disability depends on if it hinders their learning," Sweeney said.

Some cases are accommodated by placing the student near the front of the class or getting copies of the lecture outlines and notes.

Other cases require a little more work to be done.

The University offers a variety of services

to help students with vision problems

"Technology has been the great equalizer for those of us with sight problems," Alexander said.

The University has screen enlargers and closed-circuit television (CCTV).

"We can magnify books for students with our technology," Sweeney said.

He said quite a few students use text-to-speech software. Their books are put on tape and then played to the visually impaired.

There is also a Braille printer that uses Mylar raised line paper to accommodate those with vision problems. It prints Braille and raises line graphics.

Last semester, over 120 books were scanned or imprinted.

When it comes to tests, students are sometimes given extended time.

Other times, the font size is increased or printed in Braille. Readers are available to read the test aloud to students and write down their answers, but Sweeney said this is rare. Professors sometimes elect to give verbal tests.

The accommodations do not enhance or change the course curriculum in any way.

"Our accommodations give equal access to the courses," Sweeney said.

### HEARING

Continued from Page 2

"They're very in tune with facial expression and body language," Reber said. "It's just as communicative to them as tone of voice is for us."

More often than not, their disability does not keep them from doing anything that others do. Both Getten and Maki played musical instruments in school and function well in a college classroom setting.

"I don't feel like I'm prevented from doing anything," Getten said. "For example, if it came to fighting for my country I would gladly do that. I might be do-

ing something else, but there's nothing I feel I can't do."

Texas A&M offers help to hearing impaired students on a case-by-case basis. Translators, technology and housing with specialized features are all offered as ways to make life easier.

A&M offers a technological option for hearing impaired students called the Comtec system. It is a microphone worn by the professor that amplifies his lecture into an earpiece worn by the student.

Just like any personality quirk or physical feature, sometimes hearing impaired students can have an unexpected dose of humor pop into their lives.

"You know how you can make a microphone squeal

sometimes?" Getten said. "Sometimes my hearing aid would do that and it would be too high for me to hear, but it was loud. I don't know if that had any effect on me, but oh well."

Maki likes to play a practical joke on guys who try to pick her up when she is with friends. In the joke, she plays a European whose father came to America and invented the futon.

"My roommate can't be in the same room as me playing this joke," Maki said. "She can't keep from laughing."

"I keep it up until they start asking me for my phone number. Then I know the charade is up and it's time to leave."

Reber, Getten and Maki agree that being hearing impaired should not be considered a disability, but just another aspect of life.

"I see it as just being another facet of who I am," Maki said. "It's not a handicap."

Getten shares her sentiment and sheds a positive light on his hearing impairment.

"Actually, I think it's been better for me. I just feel that because of my hearing I'm more complete as a person. Because I just can't hear all of what somebody's telling me, I have to think more. I think that translates to other things like friendships; I think about them more and don't just accept things at face value."

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