

## The Visually Impaired Reader in the Academic Library

*Visually impaired students at the Ohio State University were queried by telephone interview regarding their need for specialized library services and for optical or reading aids. Notable interest in special services was indicated, but the students did not express substantial need for or interest in a large and varied collection of specialized reading aids in the university library.*

A VISUALLY IMPAIRED READER is one who cannot use conventional print material without adaptation. Within the population of visually impaired readers, there are two groups—those who are totally blind and those who are partially sighted. Blind readers must use media involving audio or tactile perceptions for reading. Examples of these media are tape recordings or braille literature. Partially sighted readers frequently can use printed reading material with the help of optical aids, such as magnifiers.<sup>1</sup>

Although the size of the visually impaired population in the United States is not known, the Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped at the Library of Congress estimates that there are two blind persons and three partially sighted per thousand total population.<sup>2</sup> A disproportionate number of the partially sighted are elderly and, thus, outside the college age population. However, in view of the ratios stated by the Library of Congress, there must be a substantial number of college students in the United States who are visually impaired.

Despite the apparent large numbers of visually impaired college students, the literature of academic librarianship contains little previous research on the topic of service to those patrons. The academic librarian

who wishes to initiate such a program must rely on the somewhat larger body of literature from public librarianship for information on possible programs. The present study analyzes the components of one program—that of the Ohio State University Libraries—in order to reach conclusions concerning the types of services that are most effective in serving the visually impaired student at an academic library.

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The official position of the American Library Association has been stated in *Standards for Library Service for the Blind and Visually Handicapped*.<sup>3</sup> In this document, the local unit of service was defined as the "community library" and included "academic libraries which receive subsidy for provision of community library service."<sup>4</sup> The emphasis was on public, rather than academic, libraries. Nonetheless, the *Standards* do provide some guides to academic library service.

Basic services include: files of information concerning library services that are available to visually impaired readers from state and federal agencies; catalogs of books in alternative media available from the Library of Congress; and register of local persons available for reading and transcribing. It was also suggested that larger libraries offer the following additional services: reference materials in braille or other media that can be used by the visually impaired; a browsing collection; a study area to use with a reader; optical aids; and equipment for tape recording.<sup>5</sup>

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Prentiss, in his 1973 report to the New York State Education Department, discussed the local library's role in providing service to the visually impaired.<sup>6</sup> Again, the academic library was considered only incidentally. Activities or services prescribed by Prentiss include: acquainting visually impaired readers with the services available to them; maintaining a rotating collection of materials and equipment borrowed from state or regional agencies; acquiring minimal collections of reference materials; keeping extensive collections of bibliographic tools to be used to locate materials that are already available in selective media format; and arranging for access to transcribing services for materials not already available. In addition, listening rooms and special reading aids should be "given consideration."<sup>7</sup>

Parkin, in his 1974 study, alluded to the "scarcity of published material specifically discussing the academic library serving the blind."<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to alleviate this situation, Parkin polled academic libraries in the seven-state intermountain West to learn what types of programs these libraries had instituted. He also surveyed the visually impaired students at Brigham Young University to determine their personal assessments of the adequacy of the BYU program as it was then constituted.

Parkin based his survey of academic libraries on the recommended services and equipment that are outlined in the *ALA Standards*. In reference to the *Standards*, the most commonly offered services and equipment and the percent of libraries offering them were as follows:<sup>9</sup>

Listening rooms	66%
Tape recorders	50%
Private study areas	47%

The second phase of the Parkin study dealt with a survey of the attitudes and assessments of the visually impaired students at Brigham Young University regarding the quality and usefulness of the program offered by their library. The visually impaired student population at BYU at the time of the study numbered thirty, but only eleven of the students could be reached. Although the response rate (37 percent) was low and students at only one school were polled, the study deserves notice because it represents an attempt to get "feedback" from the actual user population.

The Parkin poll of BYU students yielded quite scattered results. However, Parkin gleaned several recommendations from the students:<sup>10</sup>

1. Develop a catalog file of services and books available.
2. Offer orientation sessions to new blind students.
3. Provide more listening rooms.
4. Furnish a braille map of the library.

#### SERVICES AND EQUIPMENT

Vision impairment among college students precludes their use of the conventional reading materials found in most academic libraries. Specialized services and adaptive equipment have been developed to aid impaired students in making use of written material. The most common services and equipment will be described below.

1. Catalogs of material available in braille, recorded, or large-print form. Visually impaired students rely heavily on several national agencies for copies of required reading, particularly textbooks. This category includes catalogs listing materials available from the Library of Congress Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Catalogs are produced in print and in nonprint formats that are suitable for use by visually impaired patrons.

2. Information concerning services made available to the visually impaired by local and state agencies.

3. Reading and listening rooms. Students need areas where they can meet readers or listen to materials previously recorded for their use.

4. Recreational reading. Popular books and magazines are available in braille, recorded, or large-print form, often as a rotating collection on loan from a state agency or a regional center of the Library of Congress Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

5. Reference materials. Minimums usually stated are a braille encyclopedia, a dictionary, and an atlas. Occasionally, a large-print dictionary is also mentioned. Note: the most recent braille encyclopedia is a 1959 edition of *World Book*.

6. Register of local readers and transcribers. The visually impaired make extensive use of volunteer readers and braille transcribers.

7. Optical or reading aids. The category refers to any adaptive devices used by either the blind or partially sighted to aid in reading and studying. The following reading aids are of potential use in libraries.

a) *Braille Writer*. A portable keyboard instrument that people use to produce braille copy. Students use braille writers for taking notes while studying.

b) *Magnifiers*. Several forms are available, including hand-held, illuminated, and a magnifier that uses a television screen and offers variable size and contrast. Used by partially sighted patrons.

c) *Optacon*. Device that converts print into tactile impressions. Used by blind readers.

d) *Talking book machine*. Machine on which to play books and magazines recorded on unbreakable long-playing records. The program that supplies talking book machines is administered by the Library of Congress in cooperation with regional libraries. Machines and recordings customarily are lent to visually impaired persons by the regional centers of the Library of Congress Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

e) *Tape recorders*. Cassette and open reel players are used by students for note-taking, preserving lectures, and in using readers. Also, much reading material is available in taped form. A variable speed player is an adapted tape recorder, which allows readers to listen to material



The Ohio State University

Above: the optacon in use. Below: use of a television magnifier.



The Ohio State University

read faster than normal speed without distortion (compressed speech).

f) *Typewriters*. Braille and large-type machines are available, as well as standard type.

#### STUDY OF THE OSU LIBRARY FOR THE BLIND

##### *Background*

In July 1975, the Ohio State University Libraries opened a library for the blind located within an undergraduate library. The establishment of this reading room was promoted by the university's Office of Disability Services. Funding for the library was supplied by a gift from the senior class of 1973 at OSU and from a grant from the Ohio Rehabilitation Commission.

At the time of the present study (spring quarter 1976), the library for the blind had been staffed and was in operation. The staffing consisted of one full-time clerical employee and two student assistants who worked a total of thirty-four hours per week. The hours of operation for the library were as follows:

Monday–Thursday	8 a.m.–11 p.m.
Friday	8 a.m.– 5 p.m.
Saturday	10 a.m.– 4 p.m.
Sunday	2 p.m.–10 p.m.

The library for the blind housed a large collection of reading aids and some reference materials, which had been funded by the above-mentioned grant. The following list represents the equipment that was available for public service:

EQUIPMENT	QUANTITY
Braille writers	5
Magnifiers	
hand	1
television-type	2
Optacons	5
Reference materials	
braille dictionary	1
braille encyclopedia	1
Tape recorders	
cassette	5
compressed speech	3
reel-to-reel	5
Typewriters	
braille	1
large type	1
standard type	2

There were thirty-eight students to be served by this library during the spring of 1976.

##### *Purposes of Study*

The author was head of undergraduate libraries at OSU at the time of the study and was responsible for the operation of the library for the blind. Therefore, she was interested in learning how well the library was meeting the needs of the students it had been established to serve. With that in mind, she undertook to interview as many of the visually impaired students enrolled at OSU as possible to learn their opinions of the usefulness of the services offered and to determine which types of equipment were being used and how often. It was also hoped that useful information would be obtained that would assist other academic librarians.

##### *Methodology*

Information was gathered by administering a ten-item questionnaire to each student in a telephone interview. Often the questions merely acted as an initial point of inquiry, and students freely digressed to amplify their responses. Although there were thirty-eight visually impaired students on campus during spring quarter 1976, it was possible to reach only twenty-six of them, but all who were contacted cooperated with the study.

The twenty-six students included six totally blind and twenty partially sighted individuals. There were five freshmen, four sophomores, seven juniors, eight seniors, and two graduate students. They were enrolled in fourteen major areas of study in nine colleges of the university, with fourteen in social and behavioral science.

##### *Interview Results*

Since the degree of need for library services is a function of type of class assignment, students were asked about their reading requirements. Twenty-five answered that they had assignments in textbooks, and fourteen also stated they had reserve reading assignments, optional readings, and reading related to research papers.

Asked about their interest in various services and equipment available to them, described above in the section on services and



equipment, at least half the students, both blind and partially sighted, stated they were interested in each of the items.

Responses did vary between the blind and partially sighted students. Blind students were more receptive to such services as catalogs of available material, recreational reading material, reference material, and register of local readers and transcribers. Partially sighted students were more responsive to optical aids designed to assist them in reading. Both blind and partially sighted students were interested in information on local and state services and in special reading and listening rooms in the library.

Next the students were asked what kinds of equipment would be useful to them and to which they would need access. Four of the six blind students stated their need for a braille writer. One blind student expressed a need for the Optacon. (During the year of the study, 1975-76, one student only had been trained in the use of this specialized piece of equipment. Subsequently, a training program was instituted to introduce other blind students to the Optacon.)

Four of the partially sighted students stated their need for the television type magnifier, and three expressed a need for hand magnifiers. The piece of equipment most heavily requested both by blind and partially sighted students was the tape recorder—by four of the blind students and twelve of the partially sighted. Seven of the partially sighted students stated they needed none of the equipment.

Finally, the students were requested to list the equipment in the library for the blind they had actually used. Nine of the partially sighted students and one of the blind students reported having used none of the equipment, and no piece of equipment was used by a majority of either group. Again the pieces of equipment receiving the most use were tape recorders, braille writers, and television type magnifiers.

The preceding summary suggests a certain indifference on the part of the visually impaired students toward the optical aids available. This apparent lack of interest was further borne out in the use statistics kept in the library for the blind for nine months at the time of the study.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LIBRARY FOR THE BLIND AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Shortly after the opening of the library for the blind at Ohio State, an advisory committee was formed. Membership included visually impaired students, faculty, and staff, as well as persons involved professionally in work with the visually impaired. The OSU libraries staff responsible for the library for the blind and the advisory committee for the library for the blind together evaluated the results of the study and the use pattern of the library's first year of existence. In view of the strong potential support that specialized library services elicited, the advisory committee stated the service policy for the library for the blind as follows:

The Library for the Blind assembles and maintains files of catalogs to be used by students to obtain reading materials in braille, taped, or large print form.

The Library for the Blind actively collects, assembles, and updates information concerning the services which are available to visually impaired citizens from local, state, and federal agencies.

The Library for the Blind maintains a collection of recreational reading material, both books and recently published popular magazines, on loan from the regional center of the Library of Congress Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

The Library for the Blind maintains a current file of names of people available locally as readers or braille transcribers.

At the outset of each quarter, the Library for the Blind will send every new visually impaired student a copy of "Introduction to OSU Libraries for Visually Impaired Students" and "Library for the Blind." At that time, also, a session for students will be offered for the purpose of explaining individual pieces of equipment and their uses.<sup>11</sup>

Of the services described above, the first and second services receive the first priority attention. A collection of braille and large-print reference materials will not be considered at this time. However, the braille reference tools already owned will be kept. Because support for an extensive collection of equipment was not demonstrated in the study nor by use statistics, the advisory committee stated

No additional optical or reading aids will be acquired in the near future. Purchases may be considered at some future time if patrons express

considerable need and if existing equipment enjoys substantial use.<sup>12</sup>

Several items of equipment had duplicates in the library for the blind, and usage did not warrant duplicates in a single location. Thus, the advisory committee recommended that

Consideration should be given, either immediately or in the future, to dispersing throughout OSU Libraries some of the equipment owned. Space should be found in the Main Library and in the West Campus Learning Resources Center for:

- a braille writer
- a compressed speech tape player
- a reel-to-reel tape recorder and earphones
- a television type magnifier<sup>13</sup>

As of February 1978 the recommendation to disperse the equipment throughout the libraries was being implemented.

Although evaluation of the physical facilities was not an objective of the study, two needs became known through the interviews. Soundproof booths are needed for recording and for students to meet readers. The room occupied by the library for the blind has windows on two sides and, thus, has too much glare for some patrons to use it comfortably. The recommendation of the advisory committee follows:

Funding is needed immediately to install blinds for the windows of the Library for the Blind. This is a critical need and should receive high priority attention. Also, funding should be sought to acquire soundproof booths for recording and for patrons to meet readers.<sup>14</sup>

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to guide academic libraries in establishing specialized library service to visually impaired students. They reflect initial steps only and are offered on the basis of the survey reported above, guidance from an advisory committee, and one and one-half years' experience with an established facility.

1. Blind readers and partially sighted readers as groups have different needs for both services and equipment. Composition of the visually impaired patron group must be known and understood at the outset.

2. Basic or most useful equipment may be a braille writer, a tape recorder, and a television type magnifier. However, know-

ledge of the patron group to be served may suggest alternatives to this basic list. A large collection of reading aids with duplicates of many pieces is questionable without demonstrated need.

3. Primary services are: (a) Assembling and maintaining files of catalogs to be used by students to obtain reading materials in braille, taped, or large-print form. (b) Actively collecting, assembling, and updating information concerning the services available to visually impaired citizens from local, state, and federal agencies. Other previously mentioned services may be established in time.

4. Allocated space should include reading rooms for patrons and their readers.

5. A program of service to visually impaired students requires a work assignment to a full-time staff member. However, the program outlined above does not constitute a full-time job in itself.

#### REFERENCES

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6. Prentiss, *Improving Library Services to the Blind*, p.31-33.
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9. *Ibid.*, p.34-48.
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12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*