The future starts now

Perkins is launching new programs and services to help students and their families prepare for life after high school

Opportunities for global impact with Shark Tank, pg. 4

Expert Michael Delaney: Education is a human right, pg. 5
Welcome to our first issue of In Focus. There are so many exciting things happening right now at Perkins School for the Blind, and I’m thrilled to share them with you – our supporters and friends – in this publication. I hope you find the work of our educators, staff and students as inspiring as I do!

At Perkins, we know how challenging the transition to adulthood can be for individuals with visual impairment. So we’re building new facilities and designing new programs to better prepare our students for the future (page 2). These young adults are up against some formidable statistics, but I’m confident that with the right skills and preparation, they’ll be well on their way to achieving their goals.

This June marks one full year since we launched Perkins International Academy, a certified training program for special educators in developing countries. On page 5, you’ll hear from Perkins International Director Michael Delaney on the philosophy that guides this work, and how collaborations are key to our goal of ensuring that every child has access to a teacher who understands their needs.

None of these efforts would be possible without your support or the support of charitable foundations. Thank you for helping us provide life-changing programs and services for students who are blind - both here in Massachusetts and around the globe.

Warmly,

W. David Power
President and CEO

Established in 1829 as the nation’s first school for the blind, Perkins today impacts the lives of children and young adults who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired with additional disabilities, as well as educators, professionals and caregivers. Our reach extends across the nation and the world. The school is an accredited member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. It is licensed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and by the Department of Early Education and Care. Perkins does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, national or ethnic origin, disability, age or sexual orientation.
News briefs

PERKINS LIBRARY PILOTS NEW BRAILLE E-READER

Could an affordable refreshable braille display become the new Kindle for readers who are blind? The Perkins Library has launched an ambitious pilot program to find out, equipping more than 100 patrons with an Orbit Reader 20. The Orbit Reader allows users to download books directly to their devices and read them anywhere they please, without the inconvenience of carrying around heavy braille books. Unlike most refreshable braille devices, the Orbit is built to be affordable and could be lent to Library patrons free of charge, similar to a talking book player. The Orbit was developed through the efforts of the Transforming Braille Group, of which Perkins is a managing member.

CALLING ALL YOUNG PROFESSIONALS!

Do you know a young professional who might be interested in learning more about Perkins? Encourage them to join Perkins Young Professionals! It’s a dynamic group of young people who live and work in the greater Boston area who want to engage with Perkins’ mission to prepare the world for students who are blind. There’s no fee to join, and members will become part of the solution to ending the stigma around blindness while helping Perkins increase its impact locally and globally. Learn more at Perkins.org/PYP.

A LOVE NOTE TO PERKINS LIBRARY

This February, the Perkins Library was feeling the love as local patrons called and emailed with messages of appreciation for the many free services they receive. One woman wrote: “Listening to recorded books I’ve received from the Perkins Library is a lifeline for me. It allows me to be connected to the world, to learn, to be entertained, to feel companionship.” Another followed a more traditional Valentine format: “How do I love Perkins Library? Like the air. It’s kind of unobtrusive, but where would we be without it?”

BRINGING FAMILIES TOGETHER AT THE EARLY CONNECTIONS CONFERENCE

For 35 years, the Early Connections Conference at Perkins School for the Blind has brought families and professionals from across New England together for a day of networking and sharing ideas and strategies for helping young children with visual impairments. This year’s conference, scheduled for April 28, features expert-led sessions on the Expanded Core Curriculum, using iPads with switches for students with visual and multiple impairments, and the importance of accurate assessments for students with Cortical Visual Impairment. Learn more about the conference and register to attend at Perkins.org/EarlyCC.

MATCHING GIFT CHALLENGE

Every day with your help, Perkins is working to increase opportunities for children who are blind around the world. From now until May 31, your gift can go twice as far, thanks to Perkins Board Chair Corinne Grousbeck who is matching all gifts dollar-for-dollar, up to $150,000. If we reach our goal, that means $300,000 to give students like Cameron the education and support they need to thrive. Make a gift today at Perkins.org/Give.
Everywhere you look at Perkins School for the Blind, students are busy preparing for the future. Lessons in independent living cover practical tasks like cooking meals and doing laundry. Assistive technology classes teach students how to navigate the web and become effective communicators. Orientation and mobility sessions provide the navigation skills they need to travel safely in their communities.

But challenges after graduation persist. Even the most prepared student must enter a world where 60 percent of visually impaired young adults who enter college drop out, and only 42 percent of working-age individuals with a visual disability are employed.

To combat these statistics, Perkins is taking its transition programming to the next level, launching innovative new programs to prepare students for the challenges of adulthood, and partnering with foundations to create a state-of-the-art Transition Center to house them.

“We know that transition – whether you’re talking about college, a job or living independently – is one of the single biggest challenges for students who are visually impaired,” said Perkins President and CEO Dave Power. “It makes sense for Perkins to be leading the way in building programs and services that address this real need.”

The first, College Success @ Perkins, is a nine-month residential program designed to equip visually impaired high school graduates and current college students with the skills they need to earn a degree. Starting this fall, participants will be immersed in a higher education setting focused on assistive technology, orientation and mobility and independent living skills. Students will learn transition skills like financial planning from Perkins instructors while also enrolling in college courses at a local university.

With support from foundations, Perkins is launching new programs and services to help students and their families prepare for life after high school.
Dave Power, Perkins President and CEO, and Kate Katulak, assistant director of College Success, discuss plans for the new Transition Center.

“One of the strengths of this program is that it combines classroom learning with real experiences,” said program director Leslie Thatcher. “Students will have a chance to really challenge themselves and practice being independent, knowing that our staff is there to support them.”

Participants in College Success, which was developed with generous funding from the William M. Wood Foundation (Bank of America, N.A., Trustee), will also begin thinking about life after college. They’ll learn how to identify, apply and interview for jobs that interest them, while shadowing professionals to learn more about potential careers.

In February, Perkins broke ground on a major renovation to transform the historic Tompkins and Bridgman cottages into a multi-use Transition Center for College Success and other initiatives. By the end of this month, Tompkins Cottage will house a brand-new teaching kitchen, a technology center and fully accessible dorm-style bedrooms for College Success students to use.

The project was made possible with generous support from the Ruby W. and LaVon P. Linn Foundation and the A.W. Baldwin Charitable Foundation, Inc.

“The A.W. Baldwin Charitable Foundation is honored to be part of College Success,” said Treasurer and Trustee Lee Graham. “This gap year will prepare students for a safe and successful college experience. We are proud to provide capital funding to support this groundbreaking initiative as part of the Transition Center.”

When construction is completed in December, the Transition Center will become a vibrant hub for programs and services related to transition, including future job training and placement programs as well as classes and workshops for educators and parents.

“We’re seeking to make bold changes to the status quo when it comes to how individuals with visual impairment are represented in higher education and in the workplace,” said Power. “It all starts here.”

Learn more about College Success @ Perkins:
Visit Perkins.org/College

“Jerry Perl discovered Perkins by chance as a college student in Boston in the 1970s. In 2006, he sat on the committee for Perkins’ first-ever capital campaign.

How did you get involved with Perkins?
In 1973, I was at a friend’s place and across the yard were some kids playing basketball. I walked over, because I played and coached basketball, and I was stunned to see they were blind and pretty talented. I was so moved by it, I visited Perkins a day later and asked if they needed volunteers.

What inspires you to keep giving?
I just always had fun at Perkins. I volunteered there for about a year. I taught basketball, gave swimming lessons, read and took kids to hockey games. One of my favorite times ever was 36 years ago: I brought Ray Charles to Perkins to perform a concert. I was so amazed that these kids could do what they could do, so I’ve continued to stay in touch.

You’ve supported our transition programs. What draws you to those efforts?
These kids need a place to work like everyone else. I’ve hired people in the past who have multiple disabilities. If every employer just gave one person a chance the world would be a better place.

What are you looking forward to now?
I hope to retire soon, and hope to have more time to get further involved with Perkins. Time with the kids, that’s really the fun part.
Perkins School for the Blind is gearing up to host a third installment of its Shark Tank event, where a group of business leaders will have a unique opportunity to touch the lives of children with visual impairment around the world.

The event, scheduled for mid-May, gives international educators — all participants in Perkins International’s Educational Leadership Program (ELP) — a forum to share creative ideas with friends and benefactors of Perkins.

Unlike the hit television show for which the event is named, the educators won’t be approaching backers with commercial plans. Instead, they’ll be pitching ideas for programs and services that, if implemented, could vastly improve the lives of children who are blind or visually impaired in their home countries.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to really help advance the field in countries where there’s tremendous need,” said Marianne Riggio, director of the ELP. “Contributions made at this event have a huge impact.”

This year, attendees will hear from 13 educators-turned-entrepreneurs from nearly every continent, each with a different idea.

One participant wants to launch a technology center for people who are deafblind in Russia. Another wants to turn an orphanage in Indonesia into a model educational program. There are proposals for new assistive device centers, outreach and mentoring programs, early intervention initiatives and more.

“If they can dream it, they can do it,” said Riggio.

Perkins Shark Tank has already changed the lives of children across the globe. At the 2017 event, 20 supporters from the Boston area pledged their support to nine projects. Among them were a vocational training program to teach job skills to students with visual impairment in Uganda, an itinerant teacher program that works with neglected children in China and a mobile app that connects children with disabilities to medical services in Bangladesh.

For the educators, who will return to their home countries in June after living and working at Perkins for nine months, the Shark Tank funding allows them to put their training into action among the students who need them most.

“The program totally changes their outlook about what they can do back home,” said Riggio. “It helps them think that there’s possibilities out there that they can control.”

Learn more about the Educational Leadership Program and its participants:
Visit Perkins.org/ELP

Mark your calendars for an unforgettable evening of inspiration and entertainment. Join 600 community leaders on our historic Watertown campus as we celebrate yesterday’s accomplishments and tomorrow’s promise.

Learn more about the Perkins Possibilities Gala:
Visit Perkins.org/Gala
The right to learn

BY MICHAEL DELANEY

Education is a human right.

It’s a simple credo that has guided the work of Perkins International since its inception.

Everyone has the right to reap the life-changing benefits of education – including the estimated 6 million children and young adults around the world who are visually impaired with additional disabilities.

Tragically, however, far too many of our most vulnerable citizens have never set foot inside a classroom. In developing nations, where resources for special education are scarce and the stigma of disability remains strong, they are falling through the cracks.

In 2016, the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities specifically identified individuals with multiple disabilities and deafblindness among those “more at risk of exclusion” from high-quality, inclusive education services.

Our own expert special educators agree. While Perkins International has helped our partners in dozens of developing countries expand and improve their multiple disability programs, today the vast majority of this population remains out of school.

So what can be done to make the right to education a reality for all?

The onus lies on governments. They are the duty bearers charged with ensuring that individuals with disabilities are afforded basic human rights. And thankfully, with the worldwide adoption of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), chances are they’ve already signed up to be part of the solution.

Under the SDGs, global leaders have committed to providing a quality education for all children – including those with disabilities – by the year 2030. To achieve this ambitious milestone, the U.N. is calling for a substantial increase in the world’s supply of qualified teachers, among other strategies.

As a global leader in special education, Perkins International is eager to help achieve this goal. Last year, we launched Perkins International Academy in an effort to equip more teachers with the specialized knowledge and skills required to teach learners who are visually impaired with multiple disabilities, including deafblindness. Already we are seeing the fruits of this effort inside classrooms from El Salvador to Nigeria to Indonesia.

Achieving anything on the scale of the SDGs requires strategic partnership. Without the cooperation and commitment of our government partners, the first Perkins International Academy courses would have never been possible.

Helen Keller famously wrote, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” Together with the governments of the world, our collective goal is clear: to ensure the human right to education is realized by all learners, everywhere.

Michael Delaney is the executive director of Perkins International, which works with global partners to improve educational opportunities for an estimated 46 million children and young adults with visual impairment.

Learn more about Perkins International:
Visit Perkins.org/International

We’re working to end the global shortage of qualified special educators.
GIVE THE GIFT OF A BRIGHTER FUTURE

With the right education, tools and services, a person who is blind can do almost anything. But they can’t do it without your support. Give new hope to children and adults who are blind – donate today at Perkins.org/DonateNow.