All about the tech

On and off campus, Perkins School for the Blind is harnessing new tools to address today’s challenges

Reaching students wherever they are, pg. 4

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Letter from Perkins’ President and CEO

Perkins School for the Blind has always embraced technology: not just for its immediate, real-world benefits for our students and the blind community, but for the potential it has to revolutionize the way people who are blind interact with the world.

That’s what this issue is about: technology, and the power it holds for our community.

On page 2, you’ll read about some of the most exciting technological advances that Perkins uses both on and off campus. Dedicated resources like refreshable braille displays pair with everyday devices like Alexa to make powerful learning tools.

On page 4, we discuss our work in public schools in the Northeast and beyond, especially by training and assisting teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs). Perkins is committed to reaching children with blindness not only on our campus, but throughout the United States. We can assist at any point in the educational journey, working with any and all tech available in schools to bring resources to students who are blind or visually impaired.

Finally, on page 5, you’ll hear from Martha Majors, who’s using Total Communication in our Deafblind program to break down barriers to understanding. From basic switches to advanced assistive devices, Martha and her highly trained staff are using every piece of technology at their disposal to help our students learn and self-advocate.

This work will only expand as technology continues to advance. With your continued support, we’ll stay at the cutting edge of accessible technology. We’re solving old problems with new solutions—together.

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.
PERKINS INTERNATIONAL COMMITS TO INDIA

In India, Perkins’ research estimates 1.1 million children live with visual impairment and multiple disabilities, but only a fraction receive the care and education they deserve. To help improve this, Perkins International (PI) is building on its 30 years of experience in the world’s second most populous country. Following an October visit, PI has resolved to train more teachers, establish new educational programs and connect more families with key resources. Says Dave Power, president, “The demand is clear. And Perkins has the expertise to meet it.”

A NEW SIDE OF HELEN KELLER

The Perkins Archives recently acquired a new collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, books and other artifacts connected to Helen Keller. Gifted by a generous donor, the collection features correspondences between Keller and friends and shines a candid and informal light on the deafblind icon’s personal life (one note even reveals the jealous personality of her pet monkey). Learn more at Perkins.org/FlickrHK.

WORK AND PLAY AT COLLEGE SUCCESS

The inaugural class of College Success@Perkins, a nine-month residential program designed to prepare students for the transition to college and dorm life, has had a jam-packed first semester. The students are taking classes, sharpening their orientation and mobility skills and getting trained on important technological tools. But they’re having fun, too: going rock-climbing, visiting a local school and otherwise just hanging out as college kids do. All eight students have been working hard to grow in independence, confidence and understanding of college rigor, so they can take their skills out in the world.

TRANSFORMING SIMPLE MATERIALS INTO ASSISTIVE TOOLS

It’s been a busy few months for the Assistive Device Center (ADC). Staff spent the fall making adaptations for Perkins students to sit functionally, move around safely and better use everyday tools like hole punches and toothpaste dispensers. The ADC also hosted its ever popular Cardboard Carpentry workshop this January. The class drew professionals all the way from Oklahoma to learn how to make cardboard furniture for students in their local schools, which will improve their classroom experience and physical comfort.
On and off campus, Perkins School for the Blind is harnessing new tools to address today’s challenges.

BY DAVID EISENBERG

Perkins School for the Blind has long embraced contemporary technology. The Howe Printing Press brought accessible literature to the blind community in the 1880s. The 1950s saw the arrival of the Perkins Brailler, which is still the world’s most popular braile typewriter. In 1983, the school acquired an early Apple computer.

Technology today is more central than ever to Perkins’ mission, both on and off campus. And the reason is simple: used creatively, it holds great potential to tear away at long-standing accessibility barriers everywhere they exist.

“Technology can provide access to leisure and recreation, to communication and education, to navigation. It’s everything,” says Wendy Buckley, a teacher in the Deafblind Program and an assistive technology specialist. “It empowers users and gives them control over things they may not typically have control over.”

Across campus every day, students employ screen readers and text magnification software to use computers, braille printers to emboss raised dots on paper and electronic video magnifiers to enlarge items beneath a camera. The assistive benefits of technology, however, can get much more intricate and individualized.

Students like Noa, 13, with limited communication skills, may utilize refreshable braille displays. Noa writes and connects the device via Bluetooth to an iPad to use its built-in voiceover software and read the writing aloud. Using the brailler, Noa could even command an iPad to ask something of a nearby virtual assistant like Amazon’s Alexa.

Then there are the downright futuristic technologies—like Eyegaze, which enable students with some vision but limited mobility to maneuver the web using just their eyes. Teachers, too, are able to employ Eyegaze to track students’ eye movements and cull valuable data that help them better understand their students and create stronger lesson plans.

“We have people here who are really leaders in the field,” adds Jean Petrone, a Perkins computer teacher and technology specialist. “We work with students and can carefully choose the best type or types of technology for them, based on their needs.”

These technological endeavors on campus are mirrored in Perkins’ many off-campus initiatives as well, perhaps most notably in the Perkins Library. The library has long disseminated talking books to people who need them, reaching more than 25,000 adults and children every year. But it’s also been expanding its offerings in recent years to embrace new and emerging literary tools.

In partnership with the Library of Congress, the Perkins Library launched the Braille and Audio Reading Download.
(BARD) a few years ago. An app for smartphones or tablets, BARD enables users to download accessible books from the comfort of their own homes.

More recently, the Perkins Library conducted a yearlong pilot through which it lent nearly 100 Orbit Readers. These refreshable braille devices akin to Kindle or other reading tablets can, when used with a memory card, hold hundreds of books. As part of the pilot, the library also had borrowers answer questions about the Orbit Readers’ usability in hopes of establishing a permanent national lending program.

“It’s so important to stay abreast of and pay attention to emerging technologies,” says Kim Charlson, executive director of the Perkins Library. “We’re always looking at new ways to increase access.”

If there’s one thing these initiatives have in common, it’s that they’ve been made possible through generous support of friends of Perkins: the 2018 Possibilities Gala alone raised more than $1 million, including $131,000 earmarked specifically for assistive technology. And staff are excited for the future because of the opportunities this support provides.

“We’re not intimidated by technology,” adds Petrone. “We’re all in.”

See a short video highlighting how Perkins uses tech in the classroom at Perkins.org/TechInFocus.

PROFILE
Abbie and Tim Dutterer

Abbie and Tim are members of the Corporation and have been involved with Perkins since 2004.

Why do you support Perkins?

Tim: The organization has always been incredibly strategic and pragmatic. It’s figured out how to serve local and international populations simultaneously, it has multiple objectives and it pursues both short and long-term goals. You run into a lot of organizations dedicated to one objective. Perkins gets the right resources to the right places at the right times to a number of different populations.

What Perkins programs are of particular importance to you and why?

Abbie: For me, it’s always been about transition and, lately, how technology is used in that transition. How can we help equip young people to go out into the world with the most up-to-date, useful technology? How can we make transitions a little easier, a little kinder, a little less stressful? That’s what we’ve really focused on in the last few years.

What excites you about the future of Perkins?

Tim: There’s more we can do. Perkins has a tremendous platform to launch to the next level, to coordinate with the community and to be the nexus for programming and innovation going forward.

Abbie: Perkins is constantly thinking, “How do we pivot the organization so the biggest needs are being met?” There’s a nimbleness in positioning the organization and a pragmatism that you can’t cling to the past—you have to look where things are moving. Perkins is going to move, shift and lead to meet those changing needs. I have a lot of faith in that.
More and more, Community Programs serve the growing blind population.

BY KATHERINE J. IGOE

Perkins School for the Blind doesn’t limit its work to the students on campus. Every year, the Community Program serves six times that many public school students throughout New England and beyond. And given the need, its reach is only growing.

“Many teachers [who are not trained to teach the visually impaired] are intimidated and end up over-helping or setting lower expectations,” says Teri Turgeon, Director of Community Programs. “We help them set the tone, enable them to work with the student most effectively and act in service of the classroom itself.”

To do that, Perkins provides access to highly qualified educators, its assistive device workshop, its library and training center. It also provides hardware and software assistance, connection to vendors and access to various outreach programs. Most importantly, though, it provides support at every stage of the educational process.

The Educational Partnerships program benefits students between ages four and 22 and empowers traveling, or itinerant, teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs) to partner with entire school systems—and all available technology—to ensure children have the needed accommodations.

Perkins’ Outreach programs allow students to come to campus for Short Courses, where they meet other children their age who also have a vision impairment. These events provide a platform for encouraging self-determination and making friends and connections.

But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Perkins also trains and certifies TVIs, leverages some of the technology it uses on campus to empower public school students and much more. This spring, Community Programs will even pilot a program to test the efficacy of telepractice—serving children and families by phone or online communication in addition to in person.

“We need a reliable and professional organization that can meet the needs of our students,” says Melissa Maguire, director of Student Services at the Monomoy Regional School District in Massachusetts, which has worked with Perkins. “The benefit is the level of expertise and services available for our students with visual impairment. The experience with Perkins, as always, has been fantastic.”

Ultimately, Turgeon says, these efforts serve to strengthen the relationship between the student and the system.

“As far as we’re concerned, a school district is our partner,” she says. “Their student is in good hands with us.”

JOIN US THIS SPRING

Mark your calendars for these three uniquely Perkins events. Be inspired by our students while supporting them in realizing their full potential.

Free Spring Concert, on campus
Tuesday, April 9, 7:00 PM

2019 Perkins Possibilities Gala, on campus
Thursday, May 2, 5:30 - 9:30 PM

5th Annual Perkins Golf Tournament
at the Charles River Country Club, Newton, MA
Monday, June 24, All day
Total Communication: helping students find their voice

This guiding philosophy of the Deafblind Program breaks down barriers so students can communicate and self-advocate.

BY MARTHA MAJORS

I’m often asked, “How do you communicate with someone who’s deafblind?” I always respond, “With trust and respect.” As education director of Perkins’ Deafblind Program, I’d say our Total Communication approach isn’t just a way of teaching: it’s the philosophy permeating our work.

Imagine you’ve lost the ability to speak—there are devices and applications to help you. But our students don’t know the fundamentals of communication yet. So, our work breaks down barriers, and teaches them necessary tools to learn how to express their thoughts and needs.

Total communication means we use any and all means—technological, physical, tactile and so on—to achieve this.

Just like you or me, children who are deafblind deserve to have their specific communication needs met effectively. Some like physical contact, some don’t. Some have partial vision, some don’t. We learn these preferences and needs first.

Then, we build respect through interactions. Take a student who has no vision or hearing. I might start with a shoulder tap (to alert the student to my presence), then follow gently down the arm and end at their hand.

Each of our teachers has an identifier—I have a bracelet—as a way to say hello and “introduce” ourselves. Then, as I repeat these interactions, consistency helps the student understand who I am and what I’m trying to do.

From there, the relationship through touch grows. I may use hand movements or teach a meaningful gesture, like “stand.” I then integrate objects. A cup could represent “drink,” and we use different cups to show how different objects convey the same concept.

Simple sign language, either gestured or hand under hand, can connect objects to words. Pictures, visual systems and print can link physical items to ideas. Students who vocalize can be taught words or sentences.

Our students use assistive technology, both low- and high-tech. Low-tech might look like a simple switch that the student flips to indicate hello or goodbye. Students who can’t make signs or don’t have fine motor skills but have good communication might use a high-tech device, like a voice output system, to articulate ideas.

Now, the communication builds. If a student prefers pictures to signs, we deepen and broaden understanding through images. We teach students to communicate using the modes that work for them—and thus to self-advocate. This is how they grow.

Students flourish with Total Communication because of its inclusive approach. It thrives because of our trained staff and materials we customize for each student. With your help, we can continue to support the deafblind community.

As Education Director of the Deafblind Program, Martha Majors has served the Perkins community for 46 years. If you would like to support Perkins or get involved, call (617) 972-7328 or email SupportPerkins@Perkins.org.
LET THEM BE YOUR LEGACY

Support future generations of children and young adults who are blind by making a gift in your will, trust or by beneficiary designation to Perkins School for the Blind. Learn more at Perkins.org/Legacy.