From problem to solution in 24 hours

Perkins’ first hackathon challenges college students to invent new technology tools for people who are blind

Creating summer job opportunities for teenagers who are blind, pg. 4

Superintendent Ed Bosso: Families are our greatest resource, pg. 5
Letter from Perkins’ President and CEO

At Perkins School for the Blind, we believe there is no challenge too big, or too small, to tackle.

Societal bias, unemployment, inaccessible systems, global teaching shortages – these are large-scale issues affecting people with visual impairment and disability around the world.

But what about the smaller issues that people with visual impairment encounter every day, like finding a seat in a crowded cafeteria or filling out paper medical forms at the doctor’s office?

We think these are problems worth solving, too.

This spring, we held our first-ever hackathon, where we asked college students from across the country to design tech-based solutions to some persistent problems of blindness (page 2). Their dedication and creativity was truly an inspiration, and proved to me how important it is for us to create these opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

Of course, our work to reduce the unemployment rate among adults who are blind continues, including making sure our students have the skills and experience to find a job when they graduate. This summer, we’re holding our World of Work program, which pairs teenagers who are blind with summer job opportunities at organizations like Boston University and the Department of Conservation and Recreation (page 4). Let the resume-building begin!

None of our efforts would be possible without your support. Thank you for your partnership and helping us break down barriers – both big and small – for people who are blind everywhere.

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 CO-HOSTS INTERNATIONAL DEAFBLIND SYMPOSIUM
What does it mean to champion lifelong learning through partnerships? From April 15-18, more than 400 individuals from 23 countries across North, South and Central America gathered for the inaugural Network of the Americas Conference to discuss that complex topic. The networking and educational symposium, held in Hyannis, Massachusetts, and co-hosted by Perkins School for the Blind and Deafblind International, featured a keynote address by former UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake, as well as a variety of sessions led by leaders in the field of deafblindness.

MOCK ELECTION TESTS VOTING EQUIPMENT FOR ACCESSIBILITY
How do you know if a voting kiosk is accessible for people with disabilities? You ask them. This May, Perkins School for the Blind hosted a mock election on behalf of Clear Ballot—a election technology firm—designed to catch accessibility flaws in digital voting systems. Over the course of four days, more than 40 voters with visual impairment and other disabilities marked their ballots using touch screens, keypads and various screen display settings. Clear Ballot received a written report detailing the findings, which they can use to create more accessible products in the future. Learn more at Perkins.org/Access.

FESTIVAL BRINGS STUDENTS TOGETHER THROUGH MUSIC
More than 100 students from seven schools for the blind convened at Perkins in May for the 13th Music Festival—a weekend of socializing and learning through music. The festival culminated in a “Music Is Our Vision” concert, featuring performances by a handbell choir, choral and instrumental groups and a drum circle. “We understand the value of what our music program contributes to our students’ education,” said Ed Bosso, executive director of Educational Programs and superintendent at Perkins. “To have seven schools, all together, bringing all their talents and gifts here, it’s a rare opportunity.”

POSSIBILITIES GALA CELEBRATES THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY
At the 13th annual Perkins Possibilities Gala more than 500 guests enjoyed music performances, student skits and a live auction, while getting a window into the future of technology for people who are blind. Over the course of the evening, which raised $1 million to support educational services for students with visual impairment, attendees witnessed a live demonstration of Aira technology (a virtual assistant service) and video footage of excited Perkins students test-driving an autonomous vehicle. “Our biggest asset in the battle to make the world more accessible will be technology,” Perkins President and CEO Dave Power told the crowd. “We’re helping tech leaders to develop products and services that work for everyone.”

THANK YOU!
This spring, Board Chair Corinne Grousbeck offered supporters a chance to double their gifts to Perkins, helping twice as many children who are blind around the world. Thanks to you, our matching gift challenge raised $200,000 in just two months, which means $400,000 to give students like Cameron the education and support they need to thrive.
Perkins’ first hackathon challenges college students to invent new technology tools for people who are blind

BY ALIX HACKETT

The challenge was unlike anything they’d heard before: design software to make working out at the gym accessible for someone with a visual impairment.

Margarita Zias, a student at CUNY Queens College, turned to her teammates.

“Let’s close our eyes and picture we’re at the gym,” she said. “What would we need?”

At that moment, Zias was surrounded by more than 100 college students from schools across the country, all of whom had traveled to Perkins School for the Blind to attend PerkinsHacks, the organization’s first-ever hackathon, held April 13-14.

Armed with laptops and a willingness to forgo sleep in the name of accessibility, participants from schools like Boston College and Georgia Tech spent 24 hours trying to solve real-life challenges faced by people with visual impairment. The challenges ranged from filling out paper forms in a doctor’s office to navigating a crowded college cafeteria.

“These are important issues to solve if we’re going to narrow the gap between people who are sighted and people who are not,” Perkins President and CEO Dave Power told participants during the opening ceremony. “With your attendance, we’re halfway there.”

Each team worked closely with a challenge expert – someone with a visual impairment who had experienced the obstacle they were trying to solve. A team of students from Olin College of Engineering checked in frequently with Chris Nagle, a software engineer who has low vision, as they worked to build a tactile lever device that would allow him to quickly interpret large data sets.

“At most hackathons, you don’t get a chance to interact with users as you go,” said Olin student Kathryn Hite. “Getting Chris’ feedback along the way was so helpful.”

Students also had the opportunity to learn from industry experts, many of whom led workshops, served as mentors or judged their final designs. A total of 17 sponsors, including Microsoft, Google and athenahealth, provided volunteers, technical advisors and funding for the event.

“It was super inspiring to see college students designing with accessibility in mind,” said Google Software Engineer Tom Rudick, who served as a PerkinsHacks mentor. “There were so many great ideas throughout the weekend for how to make technology work for everyone.”

Saturday afternoon, hackers raced to complete prototypes of their designs before time ran out. During judging, Zias and her team presented a demo of their app “B-Fit,” which
allows a gym-goer with visual impairment to reserve a specific machine in advance, and request an optional “spotter” to help them use it.

Their Challenge Expert, JoAnn Becker, was ecstatic.

“I’m so excited by this,” she told the team. “Gyms could use this as a solution if their machines don’t have accessibility built in.”

For many hackers, the Perkins event was their introduction to the world of assistive technology and user-centered design. Keynote speaker Larry Skutchan, director of technology product research at the American Printing House for the Blind, emphasized the important role of technology as an equalizer in the lives of people with visual impairment.

“A blind person does not want sympathy, they do not want handouts,” he said. “What we want is equality. We want an equal chance to enjoy a rich life, just like you do.”

The message hit home for Emily Vogelsperger, an English and computer science double major at the College of the Holy Cross.

“This was so incredibly eye-opening,” she said. “It blew me away. I was texting my friends the whole time [saying] ‘This is what I want to do.’

**PROFILE**

**David and Mardi Durkin**  
**MEMBERS OF THE CORPORATION**

For David and Mardi Durkin, the work being done at Perkins School for the Blind is deeply personal.

**How did you first get involved with Perkins?**

Our twins were born very prematurely in July 2003, which led our son James to develop an extreme case of retinopathy of prematurity that ultimately left him blind. He had other cognitive development issues as well and today, at 14, he’s nonverbal. We learned about Perkins when he was only 1 after doing some online research and hearing about it through word of mouth. We attended Perkins’ Early Connections Conference and left immediately impressed by the knowledge, expertise and supportive community associated with the school.

**Why do you support Perkins now?**

We support Perkins because we have a very personal interest in the school and its programs. But we have also been inspired by the broader mission to help the blind and visually impaired nationally and internationally. Spreading the knowledge and expertise that is resident at Perkins on a global basis to improve outcomes and lives is very powerful. We are very thankful to be a part of it.

**What programs or initiatives at Perkins are especially important to you and why?**

As James has been a weekday boarding student for the last four years, we’re obviously focused on the on-campus educational and social programs, like the Expanded Core Curriculum. We’re also really impressed by, and proud to support, Perkins’ transition initiatives, like World of Work. We know how important all of these things are to students and their families because we know how important they are to our own family.
Welcome to the World of Work

Perkins’ summer vocational program puts students with visual impairment on the payroll at local workplaces

BY DAVID EISENBERG

For teenagers around the country, a summer job is a rite of passage on the way to adulthood. The same can be said for young people who are blind, but the barriers to landing those jobs are often much higher.

That’s why Perkins School for the Blind is hosting World of Work, a five-week vocational program in July that matches high school students with visual impairment with entry-level jobs in the Boston area. The program gives students the opportunity to build out their resumes with real experience while learning skills – such as interviewing, budgeting and networking – that will be critical to both their personal and professional success.

“Everybody needs a first job where they can make mistakes and learn what it’s like to work with a team,” said Karen McCormack, job developer at Perkins. “If you don’t have those experiences as a young person, you’re not in the game later in life.”

In previous summers, students have practiced customer service skills by greeting tourists and ferry passengers on Spectacle Island, gained hospitality experience stocking utensils and delivering food at Boston’s Faulkner Hospital and learned the ins and outs of mortgages while answering calls and scanning checks at Brookline Bank.

This year, they’ll commute from their Perkins dorms to jobs at organizations like Boston University, the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Mosesian Center for the Arts. In each setting, they’ll have a chance to sharpen their communication and social skills, practice advocating for accommodations and begin building their professional networks.

“One of the biggest benefits is developing relationships with employers that can serve as a reference and help them make connections later in life,” added McCormack.

World of Work also gives students a crash course in self-reliance. While living on campus, participants learn how to budget their income, take care of errands and housekeeping chores independently and manage their own social calendars. The goal is to prepare the teenagers for the juggle every working adult faces.

“Think about what it was like to leave home for the first time,” said McCormack. “All of a sudden you’re responsible for your job, how you’re going to get there and how to budget, all while trying to balance a fulfilling social life. We’re teaching all of it – because it’s all important.”

Learn more about inclusive workplaces and how Perkins is preparing students for careers:

Visit Perkins.org/Workplace

TASTE of Perkins

OCTOBER 4, 2018 | 6:30 – 9:00 PM

Put your taste buds to the test while supporting programs and services for children and adults who are blind. This unique multi-sensory event features musical performances by Perkins students, a silent auction and a blindfold taste-test featuring sweet and savory bites. Learn more about Taste of Perkins:

Visit Perkins.org/Taste

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For special educators, families are an essential resource

To achieve successful outcomes, educators must meaningfully engage the families of the children they serve

BY ED BOSSO

We know that positive student outcomes are inextricably connected to meaningful family engagement, a simple yet complex concept. And yes, there is simplicity on the other side of complexity if we embrace families as a resource and true partners.

Engaging parents and families must begin with a listening journey for professionals, one that will provide foundational information leading to strong and sustainable partnerships. As professionals, we must be ever cognizant of our assumptions and biases and understand how they inform our interactions with families.

I have found it useful to borrow from a language-learning framework developed by Dr. Richard Ruiz, the late University of Arizona professor who helped develop policies supporting bilingual education around the world. Language learning, Dr. Ruiz suggested, can be understood one of three ways: as a problem, as a right and as a resource.

Family engagement can perhaps be understood the same way. And to open that critical channel – thereby unlocking a student’s full potential and facilitating our own evolution as teachers – we must understand it as a resource.

When family engagement is viewed from a problem orientation, educators mistakenly believe they have all the answers and may see families as “enemies not allies.” Conversely, when viewed as a right, educators may tolerate rather than embrace family partnerships. In either instance, the educators cannot succeed in their work because they have treated family engagement as an obstacle, or otherwise committed to it in a cursory manner.

As our work is complex, so too are family dynamics and compositions. Furthermore, there are innumerable environmental factors outside of the classroom that can contribute to a child’s development. Understanding these factors is a necessity to understanding the child, and building that understanding requires a deep reliance on individual families and the information they are uniquely fit to bring to the table.

This is not easy work. Families very often don’t know what they should be contributing to the relationship. As a result, unearthing important information in their possession requires more than simple outreach by the educator.

Educators must approach families while cognizant of their own assumptions, aware of how their orientation has been shaped by their own personal experiences. Upon being invited in, they must commit to a listening journey, not as the professional in the room, but as a fellow human being with much to learn.

When we do this, we can begin to understand family engagement, not as a burden and not as an obligation, but as a resource, a critical piece in the puzzle of our work. And this is imperative because only when we sit together, educators and families, as equals, can we build relationships that foster success.

Ed Bosso is executive director of Educational Programs and superintendent at Perkins School for the Blind. This article was adapted from a presentation he delivered at the first-ever Network of the Americas Conference. Hosted by Perkins and Deafblind International in April, the event brought together leaders in the field from North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean.
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.