

## Hiring Lab Assistants for Students with Disabilities

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One of the accommodations for students with disabilities in science programs can be a lab assistant, field work assistant, or other type of scientific academic assistant. An assistant may be required to pour or carry chemicals from one place to another, handle equipment, help navigate through the laboratory, describe material, etc.

Often, making arrangements for this type of accommodations is a new experience for the student, faculty, and disability services staff. According to Ontario disability service providers, the majority of lab assistants are volunteers who have some background in the sciences or a peer already in the class. For example, students often work in pairs in the laboratory, so it may be appropriate for the lab supervisor to assign to the student with a disability a partner to assist with specified tasks. Disclosure of one's disability to the partner may not always be necessary. In some cases, a lab supervisor may assign tasks to pairs, keeping in mind the needs of a student with a disability.

If a peer-helper serves as the assistant, his/her needs must also be considered. The helper's learning should not be compromised. One of the drawbacks of this arrangement is that the peer may not always attend class. Discussing this scenario in advance with all students who are in pairs may address the issue of reliability. At times, it may be appropriate to hire a lab assistant, especially if the level of assistance required is significant (for example, 5 hours a day, full days for graduate students) or where the learning of the peer may be compromised. In some cases, disability service providers also reported that lab supervisors had served as such supports for students.

This tip sheet is intended to offer some suggestions and best practices that may help with this type of accommodation, especially if an assistant must be hired.

Following this tip sheet is a brief case study based on hiring a field work assistant for a student who is blind. The case study provides examples of a job posting and interview questions.

### Defining the Role

- The requirements/responsibilities of the assistant should be defined in consultation with the student, the course instructor or faculty program coordinator, and the disability services staff.
  - Clarify the learning objectives of the course/program and what assistance the student will require to meet the learning objectives.
  - Clearly outline the role for the position of the assistant.

- Clarify boundaries (discuss the integrity of output; what the student must be able to do independently).
- The student with a disability must also understand the expectations and his/her role. The student will direct his/her own activities with the support of the lab assistant.

## **Job Posting**

- Create a job posting (sample attached) and include a description of the duties, the type of assistance required, the working environment and, with the permission of the student, reference the student's type of disability (for example, a student who is deaf, has mobility disability, is blind).
- Include any required skills, technical expertise, knowledge, or personality traits that are desirable for the position (such as demonstrates great patience, and presents innovative ideas to ensure inclusiveness of activities).
- The student with the disability should help prepare the job posting.
- The job posting can be distributed to the faculty member's and institution's networks, other schools with similar programs, organizations in the field of study, and disability-related networks.

## **Interviews**

- Ideally, the student should help conduct the interviews and should have some input into the final selection.
- Develop a list of interview questions (sample attached) that will specifically help to determine the appropriateness of each candidate for the position.
- It is best for the student to briefly speak about his/her disability at the beginning of the interview, and to explain how their disability relates to the role of the assistant. For example, "I am blind but when I was younger I had a little vision and I could see colours; when you are describing things to me, telling me the colours is very helpful."
- It is preferable that the interview process include a test to help determine which candidates will best fit the position. In the case study below, a university is looking for an assistant to work with a student who is blind. The interview process includes requests that candidates verbally describe an image/graph to the student. Candidates are also given the opportunity to take part in a sighted guide demonstration.
- If the student will be working with the assistant in-person, the interviews should be conducted in-person so that the student can best determine which candidate will best fit the position.
- Following the interviews, the student, faculty member and disability services staff (if appropriate) should narrow the list of candidates, conduct reference checks and then proceed with making a decision.

## **Training**

- Training should be provided to help the assistant better understand his/her role; it should also include disability awareness training that is applicable for the role. For example, in the case study of the student who is blind, the assistant was provided with sighted guide training and information about working with someone who is blind.
- Training regarding safety in the laboratory may also need to be arranged.

## **Evaluation**

- Faculty should check in at the beginning, middle, and end of the assistant's work term (these checks should be done annually or semi-annually if the assistant is working long-term for a graduate student), so that the student can provide feedback and also receive feedback from the assistant. This process will help to establish a working relationship that fosters open and honest communication, where both the student and the assistant feel comfortable discussing what is working, what is not working, and what should be done differently.

## **Payment**

- The funding source (for example, the department, Provost's office, partnership with disability services office) and rate of pay (such as casual rates or TA wages) for the assistant should be determined well in advance.

## **General Tips / Considerations**

- Although the student may prefer to work with one lab assistant or one field work assistant throughout his/her entire academic career, the student will likely need to work with a variety of assistants employed on short-term contracts.
- It is a best practice to retain the resumes of the top candidates in case you may need to contact them as back-up assistants or to replace an assistant who has moved on.
- Ensure the course instructor/faculty member is aware of the assistant's role and that the assistant does not affect communication between the student and instructor.
- Consider whether there is a preference for female or male assistants. In the case study below, gender was not an important factor. However, it might be a more significant consideration for some circumstances and some students.

## Case Study

This case study is based on a student who was totally blind, and who was pursuing her master's in forest conservation. Because her program required field work in the forest, both the disability services office and faculty agreed that hiring an assistant would be the most appropriate accommodation. The disability services office covered the cost of the assistant through its budget, and the assistant typically received \$25 per hour in compensation [it should be noted that this is not always feasible and other sources of funding may need to be investigated]. It was determined that the academic assistant should receive close to the same compensation as a teaching assistant.

A male undergraduate student was hired from the undergraduate forestry program to be the student's assistant for an eight-day field trip. The female master's student was comfortable working with either male or female assistants, so gender was not a consideration during the hiring process. The field trip was an intensive course and the assistant did very well.

The qualities of the assistant that proved most important were maturity, initiative, sensitivity to disability-related needs, and overall friendliness with the student and the class at large. In this particular case, hiring a student who was close in age to the rest of the master's cohort was beneficial because it assisted with the social integration of the student with the disability.

Following the eight-day field trip, it was determined that other academic assistants would need to be hired for the remaining field work that semester. The master's student decided to use these opportunities to get to know and "test out" other academic assistants because she was hoping to find an assistant who could commit to some of the more demanding field work in the second year of her program.

The student who is blind was a mature student, and she had several years of work experience. She developed the interview questions, conducted the interviews, completed the reference checks, selected the candidate, and arranged for training. Throughout the process, the student communicated and sought feedback from her disability service counsellor and her faculty program coordinator. She was very comfortable openly discussing her disability and her disability-related accommodation needs.

## SAMPLE JOB POSTING

**Opportunity:** Academic Assistant /Guide

**Duration:** September 5 to September 12, with possibility for additional dates

**Form of payment:** stipend

Do you have an interest in forest ecology and an interest in working with a person with a disability? If so, this is a perfect opportunity for you.

A student in the Master of Forest Conservation program at X University requires an academic assistant/guide to accompany her to the forest field camp for a period of 8 days, Thursday, September 5, to Thursday, September 12. There will be additional field trips throughout the academic year that will offer further opportunities to work together.

Your role will be to assist a student who is blind to attend and participate in the field camp at the Haliburton Forest (<http://www.haliburtonforest.com>).

Duties may include but are not limited to:

- Describing visual information
- Assisting with making learning activities accessible (hands-on)
- Facilitating activities requiring vision (measuring, marking, etc.)
- Providing sighted guide assistance (training will be provided)

The student requiring assistance is academically motivated, easy going, and has a good sense of humour. During the interview process you will meet the student and hear more information about this opportunity.

You will receive a stipend, free accommodations, and compensation for related expenses.

### **More about the field camp:**

You will support the student with activities such as:

- Ecology / forest tours
- Forest vegetation (plant ID and data compilation)
- Invertebrates (collection, ID and data compilation)
- Fungi (ID and data compilation)

If you are interested in this opportunity, please email your resume to [insert contact information here] no later than August 20<sup>th</sup> with the subject line "Field Camp Guide."

## SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROCESS

### Introduction:

- Provide an overview of the role of the academic assistant / guide.
- Provide an overview of [the student's] disability / technology / adaptations as it relates to the role of the academic assistant / guide (this must be based on the student's level of comfort with disclosure).
  - Example: I was born with an eye condition (macular dystrophy). When I was a child, I could read large print, distinguish colours and ride my bike independently. In my teens I developed a second eye condition (retinitis pigmentosa), which caused me to lose my remaining vision. As a result, when describing information to me, colours are very meaningful and helpful details. For technology, I use screen-reading software (describe how that works with computer applications). I also use Braille and take Braille notes for myself.
- Ask the candidate if he/she has any questions.
- With these interview questions, there are no wrong or right answers; I'm just interested in getting to know you and your background.

### Questions:

1. What are your three main strengths that others say they appreciate about you?
2. Why is this opportunity of interest to you?
3. Please tell me about a time when you faced a conflict at work or in a volunteer situation. What was the situation, the steps you took and the outcome? What did you learn from the situation, and what would you do differently next time?
4. Please describe a time when you demonstrated creative/innovative problem-solving. What was the situation, the steps you took, and the outcome?
5. Please tell me about a time when you helped to make a process or situation more inclusive for an individual or group. What was the situation, the steps you took, and the outcome?

### Test:

6. Please verbally describe the picture provided to the best of your ability.
7. I am interested in mutually supporting your learning goals/interests; based on what you know so far, what would you like to gain from this opportunity?
8. Do you have any previous experience working with people with disabilities? If so, please describe it.
9. Do you have any questions?

Wrap-up with an overview of sighted guide's duties, and explain that the selected candidate will receive training from an orientation and mobility instructor.