

ISSUES OF ACCESS AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Established in 1924 as part of a nationwide campaign for women empowerment, Indraprastha College for Women (IP College), is the oldest women's college of the University of Delhi and one of the oldest women colleges in the country. Over the years, the College has come to be recognized for its excellence in teaching, research and extracurricular activities. What sets IP College apart from similar institutions is the uncompromising emphasis it places on women with special needs. The policy decisions made by the College administration in this regard and the concrete results they have produced are significant. Young women with disabilities who join the College always pass out with their aspirations fulfilled, their special needs met and their educational goals achieved. The College has instituted awards in seven categories to encourage differently-abled students. A very special moment came in the year 2013 when the two top awards of the College, the Outstanding Student Award and the one for All -Round Excellence, went to visually-challenged students competing with all students outside the category of disability. One of them went on to receive the Dr.Shankar Dayal Sharma Award for All-round Excellence from the University of Delhi, again competing with all students. The other cleared her NET exam, while still a student of the M.A. Previous year!

In December 2009 with the College theme set as "Inclusion", the institution defined disability and access as a core part of its vision and a thrust area of its development and growth. Over the last six years the College has consciously worked on design and physical accessibility and raised awareness and sensitized the community about disability. It has focused on the creation of an environment where the differently-abled are brought into the mainstream of institutional life, sourcing enabling technologies and learning aids, ensuring a safe environment by residential and transport facilities including easy evacuation in case of disaster, giving full financial waivers to pursue academics, supplementing academics with training in the use of available aids and technologies for skill development and employability and by proactively participating in all affirmative action and enabling provision envisaged by the Government of India.

Students and employees with disability have benefited from all these. The fact that the College chose "Visibility of Disability: Issues of Access" as its annual theme for the academic year 2014-15 reveals

the institutional commitment to accessibility and universal design and its continual efforts to keep the agenda of empowerment alive in its vision and mission tasks.

The College has a record of admitting students with disabilities much before the reservation policy for persons with disabilities in higher education institutions came into effect in the year 1996. The total number of students with disabilities enrolled in various courses offered by the College with residential facility surpasses the 3% quota prescribed in Section 39 of Persons with Disabilities (Equal opportunities, Protection of rights and Full-participation) Act 1995. Out of the total of 161 employees, 5 are persons with disability, 2 of them faculty in the College and 3 administrative staff - a number exceeding the mandated 3%.

Not only has the course content of various programmes of study in the College been made available in various alternative formats, but also the curriculum of the courses, in so far as the College enjoys the autonomy to design it, reflects the core vision of the institution. B.A.(Hons) in Multi-Media and Mass Communication — an undergraduate course run by exclusively by the College has, for example, incorporated Communication for Special Needs as one of the core components of the academic curriculum, which among other topics will teach Sign language and the use of technologies and languages of communication with the visually disabled to all students enrolled in it.

The College has a record of spending over and above the total budget allocation made, for the procurement of aids and appliances for students with disabilities. The College also adopts a proactive policy of mobilizing financial resources for the purpose.

The College also takes active part in the advocacy initiatives for persons with disabilities. The differently abled students of the College participated in Raahgiri conducted on 1st February 2015 by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. A 3-member team consisting of the Principal, the Coordinator, Equal Opportunities Cell, and the Coordinator, Enabling Unit took part in the one-day National Conference on the occasion of launching the National Action

Plan for Persons with Disabilities on 21st March 2015, organised by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship along with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.

Barrier-free Design

The College adheres to the norms of universal design that is effortlessly accessible and barrier free for all. While a wheel chair user can access any part of the College through well laid ramps, a visually-challenged can move freely using the tactile pathways and other terrain markers. Special stalls in toilets have been built for basic needs. The College Library installed with an elevator in 2010 is fully accessible, and that access path has been incorporated into new centres of learning resources. A closed-circuit teleconferencing facility has been added to a seminar room inaccessible by a lift, to enable wheelchair users to interact from the ground floor with their peers above. Laboratories have been shifted to the ground floor since 2009 in those areas.

Information and Communication Technology and related Aids and Appliances

IP College has in recent years invested a considerable amount of financial resources in procuring modern aids and appliances that can have a direct bearing on the performance of persons with disabilities, like Personal Computers, both Laptops and Desktops, fully equipped with special Softwares, OCR Scanners, more than 70 Angel Pocket Readers, a Braille Printer and a Lex Air Camera.

Under the scheme of Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) sponsored by the University Grants Commission (UGC), the College has set up the Enabling Unit to provide students with disabilities wide-ranging services in the areas of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Assistive Devices, modern Aids and Appliances, etc. A differently abled faculty is made the Coordinator to have a general supervision over the ICT services and other activities undertaken by the unit.

The Enabling Unit of the College runs a full-fledged ICT Centre equipped with the Desktop Computers with special Screen-reading and OCR Software's installed for the use of visually-challenged students and faculty. The Computers in the unit are connected to the College internet facility, thereby enabling the differently abled users to access information on the web on par with their non-disabled counterparts.

Besides the common ICT facility run by the Enabling Unit, each differently abled student is also provided with a Notebook/Laptop. The College conducts periodic workshops and training programmes on the effective use of Information and Communication Technologies for educational purposes. It always takes the first lead in making the best use of various schemes and programmes sponsored by the University of Delhi and other Government agencies for the empowerment of persons with disabilities. IP College has been the first to fully implement the Inclusive Print Project of the University of Delhi. The College facilitated the installation of Lex scanning/reading software, Hindi Optical Character Recognition (OCR Professional) and Braille Face, the NVDA (licensed version) and organised a Hands-on Workshop on the effective usage of NVDA and a day-long seminar, "Reading without Seeing".

In compliance with the National Policy on Electronics and W3C Guidelines, the College Website is made accessible to the Screen-

reader users to the extent possible. The Online-Attendance Package run for both the students and faculty of the College is not only accessible to the Screen-Reader users, but has also become an empowering tool for them as it now allows them to manage attendance and evaluation records online which is far easier than to manage the same on paper.

Transport

The College has purchased a 26 seater bus to cater to the needs of students, with use prioritized for students with disabilities. The College also has an enabling provision for arranging the transportation facility to the students with disabilities during the winter semester exams to ensure that these young girls reach home safely when it is dark. The College also has a car to cater to staff needs with usage similarly prioritized.

Services

Indraprastha College for Women is known for the distinct services it offers to its differently abled stakeholders: the students, the faculty and the administrative staff. Among the major services offered by the College, are the following:

1.Mobility Services:A mobility instructor is called for a tenured appointment in the beginning of academic session every year, to provide basic mobility orientation to the visually-challenged students.

2.Computer Training: The College appoints a computer instructor well-versed in Screen-reading and other special Softwares. Available from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM on all working days, the computer instructor trains students in Computer basics, advanced computing skills,etc., and offers other technology consultancy services.

3.Scribe Services:The College arranges scribes for the visually-challenged students to assist them in writing and reading during the examinations. A pool of volunteers from the NSS wing of the College also extend their services to the differently abled students, and the College administration facilitates the process and encourages this volunteer work.

4.Financial Assistance: The College provides all students with disabilities full exemption from the payment of joining and semester registration fees. In addition, the College collects no fee from disabled hostel residents.

5.Hostel Accommodation:Despite limited space in, and the high demand for the hostel on the College campus, the administration has a proactive policy of accommodating maximum number of disabled students every year.

6.Library Services:The College Library has a separate unit to assist students with disabilities in accessing library resources,and it periodically arranges the reading material in such accessible formats as: Braille, DAISY and Audio. The Library now has 483 Braille books, and this number goes up as the new texts are added every year. The newly installed lift and other customization features introduced in the Library are proving to be a great help for the orthopedically-

challenged students to freely move around and make use of the library resources on par with their non-disabled counterparts.

7.Consultancy and Information Sharing Services:The Coordinator, Enabling Unit meets students with disabilities on weekly basis, wherein the latter are encouraged to freely share their grievances and other difficulties they face in the course of their studies. The Coordinator, Enabling Unit then examines all concerns on case-to-case basis and reports them to the College administration for appropriate resolution as and when required. These weekly meetings are also used to share important information related to employment opportunities, scholarship announcements, Government schemes and private initiatives towards the empowerment of the disabled.

8.Sports and Extracurricular Services:The College takes special interest in the promotion of sports and other extracurricular activities among students with disabilities. In this connection, the College annually organizes an inter-college sports meet and 'Samarthya' (an inter-college cultural fest) – both meant exclusively for students with disabilities studying in various institutions affiliated to the University of Delhi.

9.Priority:The College has directed that the administration serve persons with disability on priority basis in the Office and Accounts section of the College and has a well-organised volunteer system to assist during the process of admissions.

10. Administrative Setup: Various services outlined above are made possible by the well-structured machinery of the Enabling Unit and the Equal Opportunity Cell, planned and supported by the College Administration. A Committee consisting of members belonging to both these bodies meet on a regular basis and supervise the activities undertaken for the empowerment of persons with disabilities.