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From apprehension to confidence

High school graduates come to Perkins to learn life skills before college.

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Ibrahim Khalil carefully stepped into the Tassinari Academic Center at Newbury College. He knew his class was in the basement. So, using his white cane, he navigated to the elevator. Once inside, he felt for the bottom button in the third column. That would take him to the correct floor.

“When the elevator doors open, I know to go to the end of the hallway,” the 22-year-old said. “My classroom’s on the left.”

Khalil, who is blind, has been a part-time student at the Brookline, Mass.-based college since January 2013. However, when he graduated from high school in spring of 2012, the thought of attending college in a strange new place was overwhelming. He just wasn't ready.

So he began taking classes that emphasize the skills needed for independent living at Perkins School for the Blind.

In [Perkins' Secondary Program](#), Khalil practiced working with a white cane and navigating to unfamiliar locations. He took computer classes on accessible software that allow him to create word processing documents, send emails and visit websites. He improved his essay-writing skills and hosted a show at [Radio Perkins](#). After 11 months, he said, his apprehension was replaced by confidence.

"I want people to know that if they send a kid to Perkins, it's a great experience to get ready for college," said Khalil, who was born in Saudi Arabia but now lives in Brookline, Mass. "It's not the only option, but it is the best, in my opinion."

For a student who is blind—who has not had the opportunity to learn basic skills through visual observation and subtle social cues—that transition to college life can be especially overwhelming, said Pat McCall, Secondary Program education director.

"Ibi is a bright young man with the intellectual ability to pass the MCAS and earn his high school diploma," said McCall. "But that gets you only so far. Separating from mom and dad can be so much more challenging when you have a disability."

Having achieved the majority of his academic requirements at Brookline High School, Khalil enrolled at Perkins in March 2012 with the specific goal of learning independent living skills. He took several courses that are part of the expanded core curriculum—topics such as orientation and mobility to help him better navigate his surroundings, budgeting so he could keep track of his finances, and home management for cooking and cleaning skills. He started his classes at Perkins as a day student, but eventually moved into the Keller Sullivan student residence on campus where he lived and learned alongside peers.

"He learned to prepare a healthy meal, which also means figuring out how to use a taxi to get to the supermarket independently," said McCall. "It's also learning how to estimate how much money you'll need to purchase food. And when you pay, if you can't see the bills, how do you know if you got the right change? These are things most people with sight would learn by going shopping with their parents and watching them."

Perkins' orientation and mobility training allowed Khalil to mentally map his new college campus. He and his teacher would travel to the school and practice routes to Newbury's central office or similar locations that Khalil would likely need to locate on his own, said McCall. While getting to know the lay of the land, he also introduced himself to future professors. And he tapped into the experience of Perkins teacher Jeff Migliozi, a college graduate who is blind and knew firsthand the challenges Khalil faced.

"One thing I tried to impress upon him is that, once you turn 18, there are many supports available to you (as an individual with a disability), but you have to advocate for yourself," said Migliozi, who spent

lots of time with Khalil working on SAT preparations, study skills and writing. “Some colleges are very good at providing those supports, and others are just going through the motions. You need to say: ‘I’m here, I’m blind and I need this accommodation.’ You need to be proactive.”

Migliozzi also coached Khalil on classroom strategies. Khalil initially imagined himself typing notes during college lectures with the help of an audio screen-reading software called JAWS.

“We simulated that in class, and he realized it’s very hard to do,” said Migliozzi. “You really have to develop the ability to process audio input from several different directions.” Instead, Migliozzi suggested, Khalil could approach fellow students and ask them to share their lecture notes—and give back by sharing his personal takeaways in study groups.

“It’s a little awkward,” acknowledged Migliozzi, who graduated from Upsala College in East Orange, New Jersey, and eventually earned masters degrees from Boston University and Boston College. “But you have to do that. It’s not always going to be easy.”

Khalil took the advice to heart and reached out to professors ahead of time. Would his textbooks be available on Audible.com, one of the top content providers of audio books? Would he be allowed to record lectures on his digital notetaker?

“So far, all of my professors have been very helpful,” Khalil said. “They’ve been emailing me homework and giving me extra time to turn in assignments.”

His time at Perkins even helped Khalil choose his college major. Working at Radio Perkins, where he used broadcasting hardware specially designed for people who are blind, was so enjoyable that he decided to major in communications.

As a former Perkins student, Khalil is now eligible to host his own alumni show at Radio Perkins. He’s planning to continue his hands-on broadcast training at Perkins while attending Newbury College. He’s also thinking about how he can apply his unique skills to create opportunities for other students who are blind.

“When I go to another radio station, I can show them how to make it more accessible so that others like me can become broadcasters,” he said. “I’ll bring a whole new game to them.”

Khalil’s potential for a successful future is largely due to the hard work he put in at Perkins, and his willingness to tackle his challenges head-on while advocating for himself, McCall added.

“He knew his time to learn these skills was short,” he said. “He was really motivated. We all rely on people to some degree, but everyone needs the chance to learn when and how to count on yourself.”

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