On Saturday, November 4th CDBS held their 6th Annual Deafblindness Symposium at San Francisco State University. This annual autumn event serves as both a reunion and an opportunity for ongoing professional development training for current students and past graduates of the San Francisco State University Specialization Program in Deafblindness program. This collaborative personnel preparation project between Moderate-Severe Disabilities Program at San Francisco State University and CDBS provides additional specialized training in the education of students with deafblindness to student teachers working towards their moderate-severe teaching credential. Through this partnership close to 50 student teachers have graduated with additional specialized competencies to assess, teach and support students who are deafblind, with eight more graduates expected next summer.

In its reunion function, our annual symposium gives graduates a chance to reconnect and provides current students the opportunity to meet these fabulous former graduates who are now teaching in the field. It’s become a tradition to invite a former graduate to welcome the new cohort to the small, but mighty, field of deafblindness. This year Edith Arias, a special education teacher supporting transition-aged youth in San Francisco Unified School District and a parent of a young man with significant support needs, provided the official welcome to the eight students in our current 8th cohort in the Specialization in Deafblindness program and shared some of her special memories and important takeaways from her experiences in the specialization program.

Based on feedback gained from past symposiums, the topics selected for this year’s symposium were customized employment and self-advocacy. Ellen Condon from the University of Montana Rural Institute and Marc Gold & Associates, as well as coordinator of the Montana Deaf-Blind Project, was all set to provide the first presentation, Competitive, Integrated Employment for ALL: Strategies that will help us get there, when an unexpected snowstorm grounded her at home in Montana. Yikes!
We needed to quickly think outside the box and to get creative this year with distance technology, which thankfully worked out without a hitch. Ellen provided a wonderful presentation and compelling examples of customized employment, which can be described as “competitive integrated employment, for an individual with a significant disability, that is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the individual with a significant disability, is designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and the business needs of the employer” (Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center, 2017).

In particular her presentation focused on using a “process of discovery” to determine an individual’s strengths, needs, and interests and motivation towards work based on in-depth, qualitative, ecologically-based assessment approaches. We were really intrigued by Ellen's presentation and the positive perspective she offered about this process to determine and negotiate individualized, integrated job opportunities for individuals with significant support needs in which the interests, goals, and support needs of the job seeker and the benefits for the employer are equally considered. This process is very much aligned with the familiar “follow the child” assessment and person-centered planning approaches. It’s encouraging to learn of this unique approach to finding meaningful employment opportunities for individuals who have been excluded from interesting employment because they are not well matched to the competitive job market. To learn more about the essential elements of customized employment, here is a helpful article: http://bit.ly/WINTAC_Cust_Employ

After connecting and catching up over lunch, our second presenter, Mussie Gebre, the president of Deafblind Citizens in Action (DBCA), as well as a fellow SFSU student, shared some stories of his journey through the local public school system and what he learned about essential supports and accommodations for students
who are deafblind. Mussie emphasized the importance of providing assistive technology and appropriate related service providers in order to meet the unique needs of individual students who are deafblind. In Mussie’s case, this meant the services of tactile interpreters and opportunities to try many different braille devices, which could provide fuller access to the school curriculum and environment. Mussie shared that as he gained more knowledge of availability of assistive technology devices and the services of tactile interpreters he began to feel more empowered to advocate that he had an educational right to these supports and services. Since high school he has continued to advocate for himself and other individuals who are deafblind or blind and their access rights and needs in schools, workplaces, and all parts of the community. He pursues this advocacy through his work as an assistive technology consultant and as a contractor for the National DeafBlind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP), and a leading member of Deafblind Citizens in Action. Mussie shared Deafblind Citizens in Action’s current goals and work and encouraged us to continue to reach out and learn about lives, goals, contributions, and unique support needs of individuals who are deafblind. Each us learned so much from hearing the story Mussie’s journey of empowerment and goals for the future. To learn more about Deafblind Citizens in Action and Mussie Gebre and the other members and activities, check out their website www.dbcitizens.org.