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Supporting d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing College Students: Considerations for Student Affairs Practitioners

Erin K. Miller

As the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have continued to open doors to mainstreamed educational settings for d/Deaf and hard of hearing students, a growing number of such individuals make their way to American colleges and universities. College and university professionals at predominately hearing institutions are frequently un- or under-prepared to meet the needs of this diverse group of students. This paper serves as a primer for student affairs practitioners seeking to better understand the history, culture, and individual needs of d/Deaf and hard of hearing students, and highlights best practices within student affairs in regard to working with this population.

d/Deaf/Hard of Hearing Education 101: History and Terminology

According to the National Health Interview Survey, approximately two to four of every 1,000 people in the United States are considered functionally deaf (Mitchell, 2005). Only one out of every 1,000 babies is born deaf, and out of this small number, only one of ten is born to d/Deaf parents. Only about 200,000 people in the United States and Canada use American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary means of communication. Today, an estimated 2,309,000 people between the ages of 18 and 34 are considered hearing impaired, more than 25,000 of which are enrolled in higher education programs in the United States (Demographic Aspects of Hearing Impairment, 1994; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). With an increased understanding of the history, culture, and individual needs of d/Deaf and hard of hearing students, college and university faculty and staff have the ability to enhance dramatically the college experience for these students.

As this paper serves to address the needs of those students who identify culturally with the hearing world, as well as those who identify as culturally Deaf, the terms *hard of hearing*, *deaf*, and *Deaf*, will be used throughout as applicable to each population. When research or implications apply to all three groups, *d/Deaf/HH*

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will be used. In this case, the terms *hard of hearing* and *deaf* refer to individuals with a range of hearing loss, from low to severe. While most hard of hearing individuals have hearing losses that are less significant than those students who identify as deaf, these are not imposed categories and are instead the decision of each hearing-impaired individual. The term *Deaf* refers to those who identify as culturally Deaf, a phenomenon that will be explored in greater detail later in the paper, but which commonly is associated with the utilization of American Sign Language as one's primary method of communication.

The history of d/Deaf/HH education in the United States begins with Mason Cogswell, a philanthropist from Hartford, Connecticut. Cogswell's daughter lost her hearing at the age of two from scarlet fever, and although Cogswell employed a tutor in the years following her recovery, he found her educational progress to be slow. Cogswell's acquaintance Thomas Gallaudet made the trip to Europe in search of deaf pedagogical practices; after failing to gain access to Thomas Braidwood's school in Great Britain, he traveled to Paris where he observed the national school for the deaf under the direction of Abbé Sicard. Sicard, as well as former student Laurent Clerc, promoted the use of manual signs in education, and upon his return to the United States, Gallaudet introduced this method of communication to the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut which opened in 1817.

The success of the Hartford school paved the way for the opening of other schools for the deaf in the East, including New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, and Maryland. Eventually, nearly every state in the nation celebrated the opening of its own deaf institute. This phenomenon was due both to the increasing visibility of deaf/HH persons and to the nineteenth century obsession with categorizing and separating the afflicted from society at large (Padden & Humphries, 2005). While this separatism began with the creation of institutions—prisons, asylums, institutes for the blind and deaf—it later could be found within the institutions themselves as students were segregated by gender and race and in the second half of the 19th century, by method of instruction.

In the 1870s and 1880s, the oral movement of instruction in deaf schools gained both visibility and influence with the support of advocate Alexander Graham Bell. Bell, who had both a deaf mother and a deaf wife, argued that the manual approach was “backwards” and “primitive” (Padden & Humphries, 2005), only when deaf students could communicate via speech would they truly be free to move among a world of hearing people. In 1881, the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf began separating students according to method of instruction, and by the end of the century, the oral method dominated deaf education in the United States. Even today, the debate over preferred communication is at times accompanied by segregated educational systems, as children with cochlear implants maybe en-

couraged to avoid manual environments in the hopes that they will more quickly develop oral skills.

Deaf Community and Deaf Culture: Definitions

Basing her work off of sociologist George Hillery's research on communities, Carol Padden (1989) composed the following definition of Deaf community:

A deaf community is a group of people who live in a particular location, share the common goals of its members, and in various ways, work toward achieving these goals. A deaf community may include persons who are not themselves Deaf, but who actively support the goals of the community and work with Deaf people to achieve them. (p. 5)

Utilizing this definition, then, the U.S. Deaf community has three central components: a shared location, common goals, and a responsibility to work with others toward achieving these goals. Smaller sub-units of the Deaf community can be found across the United States (and the world), with larger cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles comprising larger and more active sub-communities. The goals of the Deaf community are intertwined with Deaf culture and include achieving public acceptance of deaf people as equals and promoting the use of signing as a means of communication. The use of Deaf with a capital D has been adopted by the deaf community to symbolize the equality of Deaf people with the hearing world. *Deafness* is something to be celebrated, while *deafness* most commonly is associated with a loss of hearing.

Deaf culture has developed over the years through the collective goals, actions, and values of Deaf community members; these goals and actions are also frequently referred to as the values of Deaf culture. Perhaps the most prominent of these values is a commitment to American Sign Language. While not all Deaf individuals have native competence in ASL (such as those who were raised by hearing parents), most respect and accept the language. As a minority group in the United States, Deaf community members also embrace opportunities to share social relations with other Deaf individuals. Not only are they able to be better understood when communicating with others who speak ASL (Kannapell, 1989), but they also benefit from the support of individuals who share their values and who take notice of their many talents and abilities and not their *disability*.

A Deaf Identity Development Model

An individual's cultural identity is a product of his or her socialization: via interactions at school, with social agencies, with one's peer group, with the mass media, and primarily with one's family (Sheetz, 2004). Deaf culture is transmitted primarily through interactions with one's Deaf family, and as 90% of d/Deaf/HH individuals are born to hearing parents, it is common for many d/Deaf/HH individuals

to live within the hearing world for a significant portion of their lives. In 1997, Robin Gordon utilized the Deaf Cultural Identity Scale (DCIS, as cited in Sheetz, 2004, p. 31) to survey male and female d/Deaf/HH adolescent students ranging in age from 14 to 21. The DCIS consisted of 40 items, and scores were used to assign participants to a progression of cultural identity types, *Hearing*, *Marginal*, *Immersion*, and finally, *Bicultural*.

Though most adolescents do not progress beyond living in a Hearing society, Gordon found that those who develop a Bicultural identity exhibit the following behaviors:

1. Evaluate themselves more positively and feel better about themselves than those Deaf adolescents whose scores reflect membership in the other cultural identity categories.
2. Rate their present lives more positively than other cultural identity groups.
3. View their activity in life as an integrated being of self that is inter-fused with external factors. (as cited in Sheetz, 2004, p. 32)

Student affairs practitioners may place Gordon's research within the context of other socio-cultural identity models. According to this view of identity development, students must come to recognize themselves as both individuals and members of a subordinate group, and find a way to balance their external and internal worlds.

Mainstreamed Versus Special Education: The d/Deaf/HH Education Debate

Those who identify with the term *bicultural*, and therefore live in both the Deaf and hearing worlds, know too well the tension that can result when the values of these cultures are in conflict. One area in which this tension can be seen is in the conversation over mainstreamed versus separate education for d/Deaf/HH students. Prior to 1950, residential schools were the predominant agents of Deaf socialization for students who were not born to d/Deaf/HH parents (Mowry, 1994). With the passage of the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), guaranteeing equal opportunities in education to d/Deaf/HH students, the majority of such students today attend public school where they are mainstreamed into predominately hearing classrooms. Oliva (2004) refers to such students as *solitaires*, reporting that in the 2001-2002 academic year there were 6,379 sole d/Deaf/HH students in hearing schools, with 10,965 d/Deaf/HH students in schools with five or fewer d/Deaf/HH children.

Oliva (2004), who describes her own childhood experiences in her memoir, *Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers Public School*, expresses the concern held by many Deaf individuals: by separating d/Deaf/HH children from Deaf

schools, hearing parents are often separating them from Deaf culture and from other individuals in whom they can see themselves. As Padden and Humphries (2005) explain, at a segregated school, d/Deaf/HH students can sign with everyone around them. Within a mainstreamed environment, such individuals may have only one or two companion(s) with whom they can sign: the interpreter(s). Crowe (2003) found that self-esteem scores among deaf college students were significantly higher among students who had at least one deaf parent who signed than among those who had hearing parents who could or could not sign. For offspring of Deaf parents, Deaf social and cultural support may be established early. But for deaf children of hearing adults, it may be more critical to find such support in a school or other social environment.

At the same time, access to mainstreamed educational environments may be perceived as a new opportunity for d/Deaf/HH students. According to Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, and Seewagen (2005), “previously, deaf individuals only infrequently attended a college program outside of those designed to serve deaf students, primarily the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), Gallaudet University, and California State University – Northridge,” (p. 38). Today, however, enhanced technology and innovative legislature combine to ensure that students can choose the institution that is right for them. During the decade from 1984 to 1994, the percentage of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing pre-college students reported to the Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children and Youth who attended special schools decreased from 38% to 28% (Allen, 1994). With nearly 75% of the d/Deaf/HH population currently receiving a K-12 education within mainstreamed environments, the expectation that colleges and universities will provide access continues to increase. Recognizing that institutions of higher education continue to be in need of technical and personnel assistance in supporting their d/Deaf /HH students, the Department of Education established the Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) in 1996, a national collaboration of four regional centers providing technical assistance and personal development activities for d/Deaf/HH students and their supporters in the workplace and in education. Currently, less than 3,000 of the 28,000-30,000 d/Deaf/HH students within higher education attend the two federally funded programs at Gallaudet and NTID.

Technology and d/Deafness: The Role of Cochlear Implants

Another topic that continues to divide the Deaf and hearing worlds relates to technological advances and the increasing ability to “treat” deafness. Recent developments such as cochlear implants and genetic testing are often cause for both fear and anger for members of the Deaf community. The documentary *Sound and Fury*, which aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 2001, shared the story of Peter and Nina Artinian and daughter Heather, a Deaf family living on

Long Island. Heather, as one of the only Deaf children in her neighborhood, asks her parents for a cochlear implant so that she can communicate better with her hearing friends. Her parents spend much of the documentary weighing the decision. Ultimately, Peter and Nina move their family to the Baltimore, Maryland, area, and enroll Heather in an all-Deaf school. During the course of the documentary, Peter's brother and sister-in-law give birth to twins, one of whom is deaf. Chris and Mari Artinian are hearing, and cannot imagine any other option than to give their son that ability. They pursue a cochlear implant for their toddler, Peter. By its end, *Sound and Fury* reveals both sides of the cochlear implant debate, portraying both Heather and Peter as thriving academically and socially in their respective worlds—for Heather, in a school for the Deaf, and for Peter, at home, speaking his first words to Mom.

On October 6, 2000, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) issued a position statement on the role of cochlear implants within the d/Deaf/HH community:

The NAD recognizes all technological advancements with the potential to foster, enhance, and improve the quality of life of all deaf and hard of hearing persons . . . Cochlear implantation is a technology that represents a tool to be used in some forms of communication, and not a cure for deafness . . . The NAD recognizes the rights of parents to make informed choices for their deaf and hard of hearing children, respects their choice to use cochlear implants and all other assistive devices, and strongly supports the development of the whole child and of language and literacy. (Cochlear Implants NAD Position Statement, 2000, para. 5-6)

The NAD's statement reflects a common belief amongst d/Deaf individuals: cochlear implants are merely one of many assistive devices available to the d/Deaf. However, some culturally Deaf individuals continue to fear that further technological developments may result in a decline in ASL use and a subsequent decay of Deaf culture. This debate is discussed in more depth in the following section.

Lost in Translation: Language as a Cultural Value

*They treated me differently, as a disabled person,
when in truth their behavior was "disabling" me. (Adams & Rohring, 2004, p. 31)*

The debates over educational method and cochlear implants have been commonly split along Deaf and hearing lines, as the social and cultural norms and values of each group defined for years their standpoint on these controversial topics. One area in which these values are clearly revealed is in regard to language acquisition. Hearing individuals may support methods such as mainstreaming or cochlear implants, believing that English is superior to ASL and that d/Deaf or hard of hearing individuals will be most successful if they are able to acquire written and spoken English skills. While Humphries, Martin, and Coye (1989) remind us that

ASL “has the capacity to transmit a culture, a way of life, and happiness” for some Deaf people, Padden and Humphries (2005) assert that the standards of what constitutes language have always been determined by those with the power to hear and speak (2005, p. 149). Therefore Deaf people, in stride with other oppressed groups in the United States, continue to battle against the dominance and control imposed upon them by those in the oppressor role. Hearing individuals may not be able to fathom the intense joy that some members of the Deaf community may feel when a child is born deaf, as many cannot look beyond their view of deafness as a disability. As Padden and Humphries write, “She realized that their view of her as handicapped could not be overcome; it was too deeply rooted in their culture” (p. 154).

Moving from Education to Action: Suggested Practices for Student Affairs

With a basic awareness of the history of Deaf culture and an understanding of the current issues facing the Deaf community, student affairs practitioners can begin to question their beliefs and assumptions regarding the needs of d/Deaf/HH students. In addition, there is much to be learned from current research on d/Deaf/HH student development, as well as from institutions that are engaging in exemplary student affairs practice.

At a Rochester Institute of Technology in-service training for faculty and staff, the differing needs of d/Deaf and hard of hearing students are discussed according to four categories: language, accommodations, support, and identity (ACCESS, 1999, p.10). It is important that all faculty and staff on college campuses have a clear understanding that those individuals who identify as culturally Deaf and those who identify as hard of hearing may have drastically different perceptions of the support needed from college administrators. A Deaf student uses ASL to communicate, while a deaf or hard of hearing student typically will communicate in English. A Deaf student commonly will require an interpreter in mainstreamed settings, while a deaf or hard of hearing student may ask for technological support, such as Computer-Assisted Realtime Transcription (CART), or an assistive listening device. No matter what services are provided, it is important for both faculty and staff members to be aware of the identity and individual needs of the person seeking support. Student affairs practitioners – particularly those in health centers and accommodation offices—can take the lead in spreading this message across campus by putting together presentations and educational materials for faculty and staff alike.

In 2004, Foster and MacLeod explored the role of mentoring in the career development of d/Deaf/HH alumni/ae of the NTID. Through their interviews with nine female and six male graduates of the institute, they determined that mentorship was a crucial component in the self-advocacy and self-esteem development

of these individuals. Mentors not only offered emotional support to students in their youth, teenage, and early adult years, but they also worked with students to set high educational goals in college and high career goals as new professionals. All participants in the study also mentioned that their mentors were individuals with whom they could communicate. Interestingly enough, this did not always mean that their mentors were skilled signers, but rather, the attempt to communicate and to truly listen to the needs of the student were highlighted as crucial to student development. As d/Deaf/HH students continue to struggle with a 25% graduation rate (Lang, 2002), the role of mentoring relationships must continue to be explored.

In 2005, Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, and Seewagen found that d/Deaf/HH students were not provided full access to classroom information, stating that interpreted information likely does not have the same educational impact as direct, face-to-face instruction. Lang (2002) encouraged further research on the effectiveness of interpreting, stating that interpreters on college campuses may struggle with conveying the specialized vocabulary and proper names associated with specific academic disciplines. Students who enter the university in need of academic assistance might therefore be further disadvantaged upon entering a mainstreamed college classroom. As more d/Deaf/HH students choose to attend predominately hearing institutions, colleges and universities can tend to this issue by expanding their academic support services, such as individual and group tutoring, to provide additional one-on-one and interactive educational opportunities for deaf students. Additionally, staff and faculty at institutions of higher education can build upon their current resource and knowledge base through the utilization of resources, such as PEPNet, which are continually updated with current information regarding the needs of d/Deaf/HH students. Through a commitment to self-education, faculty and staff will be better prepared to meet the varying needs of their students and more sensitive to issues such as technology, interpreters in the classroom, and common transition concerns experienced by d/Deaf/HH students entering college.

Although providing equal access to d/Deaf/HH students on college campuses is required by law, it is crucial that all student affairs practitioners look with a critical eye at the attitudes and behaviors of themselves and their colleagues when providing accommodation for these students. There is a large and visible gap between compliance with the law and a commitment to d/Deaf/HH issues (Porter, Camerlengo, DePuy, & Somer, 1999). A willingness to move the campus community closer to the commitment end of the spectrum can drastically alter the experiences of d/Deaf/HH students on campus. With this in mind, Porter et al. (1999) authored a list of recommended practices for eight areas within student affairs, including College Union facilities, Residence Life, Health services, and Judicial and Campus Safety. Suggestions included installing visual electronic boards for facility paging

systems, posting well-designed and easy-to-read signage, offering a d/Deaf and hard of hearing special interest floor, providing clearly written materials regarding receiving accommodations or making a health appointment, and providing a written version of student rights and responsibilities (pp. 12-14).

Finally, the recent upheaval at Gallaudet over the presidency of Jane Fernandes, resulting in a student takeover of the campus, is evidence of the great diversity and vast cultural differences within the d/Deaf/HH community (Kinzie & Ruane, 2006). As the board of trustees withdrew their support from Fernandes in October of 2006, the complexity of this case surrounding issues of race, gender, and cultural values within the community was far from resolved. In the years to come, colleges and universities across the nation will continue to have their eyes on Gallaudet, as it works to support its ever-changing and ever more diverse student population.

Student affairs professionals have historically been leaders on college and university campuses in reaching out to underserved and under-represented populations. As d/Deaf/HH students become more frequent members of predominately hearing campus populations, our role should be no different. Practitioners must recognize the uniqueness of each d/Deaf/HH student, both psycho-social support and appropriate accommodation. By educating our colleagues and ourselves and by posing solutions to the challenges students face, we can continue to act as leaders on the path toward academic growth and excellence for all students. As we move forward, we must continue to ask, what is the impact of the services we provide on student learning, for d/Deaf/HH students, and for the hearing population? How can we support d/Deaf/HH identity development? What characteristics of the university environment would not only make it more welcoming for d/Deaf/HH students, but would also enhance learning? When we have the answers to these questions, and have made the necessary changes on our campuses, we will truly be making a difference for d/Deaf and hard of hearing students.

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