Understanding Minority-Serving Institutions

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CHAPTER 5

Arguing For A Different View

Deaf-Serving Institutions as Minority-Serving

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We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

—United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)

No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States—shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any program of activity receiving federal financial assistance.

—Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Institutions such as Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute for Technology (Rochester, NY), California State University at Northridge, and St. Paul Technical College in Minnesota, all of which serve the deaf and hard of hearing, are excluded from the definition of an MSI. While these postsecondary institutions do not primarily serve a racial or ethnic minority in the United States, they serve a portion of the population that historically has been marginalized within society, treated unequally, and has shared similar struggles for fair employment and admission to higher education.

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Opponents of HBCUs believe that access to traditionally White institutions (TWIs) makes the purpose of Minority-Serving Institutions less vital (Jencks & Riesman, 1968; Gasman, 2006). Similarly, some scholars argue that access to traditional colleges nullifies the importance of deaf-serving institutions. While the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 93–11) and subsequent federal acts require all institutions to provide interpreters or note-takers and other needed facilities for deaf students, researchers debate the true extent and extent of hearing students have to postsecondary education (Fleischer, 1975; Jacobs, 1977; Livingston, Singer, & Abramson, 1994; Schick, Williams, & Bolster, 1999; Marschark, Sapiro, Convertino, & Seewagen, 2005). Furthermore, one can ask, are deaf-serving institutions, which are primarily funded by the federal government, a good use of funds (Drezner, 2005)? The projected federal expenditure for fiscal year 2006 on deaf-serving institutions is $160 million; this is broken down as $103 million for Gallaudet and $55 million for NTID (Office of Management and Budget, 2005). When looked at per capita, this is a federal subvention of $64,000 per student. Throughout this chapter, I will argue that not only are these institutions necessary and a fair federal expense, but also that Gallaudet, NTID, and other deaf-serving institutions should be viewed as Minority-Serving Institutions, and therefore be moved from the Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services to a separate “initiative” office much like those offices that serve HBCUs, HSIs, and Tribal colleges and universities. At the end of this chapter, I propose a definition of the deaf-serving institution classification.

To understand the argument of deaf higher education as minority-serving rather than a form of special education or rehabilitation one must have an appreciation for Gallaudet, NTID, and the other deaf-serving institutions and the services they provide to their constituents. Higher education for the deaf in the United States is very similar to that of historically Black colleges and universities in its success graduating well-educated and productive citizens. After understanding the similarities to HBCUs, other Minority-Serving Institutions, and some learning differences within the Deaf community, the argument for the need of deaf-education will become apparent.

THE INSTITUTIONS

Gallaudet University, chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1864 as Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and reauthorized by the Education of the Deaf Act of 1986 (EDA), is a private university that provides primary (Kendall Demonstration Elementary School), secondary (Model Secondary School for the Deaf), postsecondary, and continuing education programs for the deaf and hard of hearing. Gallaudet’s undergraduate students, who are all deaf, receive a traditional liberal arts education. Additionally, the university has graduate programs for both deaf and hearing students in deaf-related disciplines (www.ed.gov).

Congress created NTID in 1965 to provide technical and professional education to deaf students. Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) hosts NTID as one of its colleges. Through this relationship NTID students have access to more facilities, institutional, and career services then if NTID were its own institution. NTID confers various degrees (certificate, diploma, associate, and bachelor) in business, engineering, science, visual communications, and interpreting. Additionally, NTID began a master’s degree in 1996 for secondary education of the deaf (www.ed.gov). Besides educating deaf students, Gallaudet and NTID faculty and researchers provide a majority of research related to deafness in the United States.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DEAF-SERVING AND MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

In Gasman’s (2007) history of the United Negro College Fund, she quotes E. D. Patterson, the founder of the United Negro College Fund, stating what Black colleges provide: “(a) congenial social atmosphere, (b) lower costs, (c) greater concern for [the] limitations of [the] academic background of Negro youth, and (d) participation in extra-curricular activities” (Patterson, 1952, p. 368). If I were to replace “Negro” with “deaf,” Patterson’s quote about historically Black colleges would perfectly describe the benefits of deaf-serving institutions to their underrepresented students.

When looking at the history of deaf education in the United States, it is hard not to see the parallels to Black education. While the segregation of deaf students was never legally binding—as it was with Black colleges in the Jim Crow South—it was not until 1973, nearly two decades after Brown v. Board (347 U.S. 483), that the federal government recognized the unique needs and issues that deaf and handicapped students had with regard to access to education. Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 93–11), which included a short yet powerful paragraph, §504, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter. This, like Brown for African Americans, was the first time that those with differing abilities were accorded civil rights with respect to education.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act mandated that any program receiving federal funds, including educational institutions, could not discriminate
against handicapped persons. In other words, handicapped students could no longer be discriminated against in college admissions based on the lack of physical access to the campus. Furthermore, §504 required institutions to supply “auxiliary aids” for these students so that they could participate within the classroom and extracurricular activities. The rights afforded by §504 were delineated in more depth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (Public Law 101–17) and increased by the passage, seventeen years ago, of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) (Public Law 101–336). The ADA required that all institutions become accessible, not only those receiving federal funding.

The similarities between historically Black colleges and universities and deaf-serving institutions go beyond their origin and to educate a marginalized portion of the U.S. population. Just as members of the White majority opened many of the Black colleges to “uplift” Blacks and school them in vocational skills, Gallaudet and NTID were started by an outside majority—the hearing majority. Black colleges were often lead by White presidents and administrators until the 1940s (Anderson, 1988; Cross Brazzell, 1992). Similarly, not until students, faculty, alumni, and other deaf individuals around the world protested in the 1988 “Deaf President Now” movement, did Gallaudet install its first non-hearing executive, Dr. L. King Jordan. Those involved believed that a deaf president could be the only effective leader of an academic institution whose mission is to serve the Deaf community. Interestingly, Dr. Jordan was born hearing. An automobile accident, at age 21, left him profoundly deaf.

WHO IS ATTENDING?

Just as with African Americans in the two decades after Brown there was a “great migration” of deaf students after the opening of traditional education, both K–12 and postsecondary, through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. According to Department of Education statistics, more than 80 percent of deaf children in the 1950s and 1960s attended residential or other special schools and programs, while today the same percentage attend local public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a; Lewis, Farris, & Greene, 1999). Higher education has seen a similarly dramatic influx of deaf students in “mainstream” institutions. Prior to 1973, very few deaf students attended colleges other than NTID, Gallaudet University, or California State University, Northridge. Bigman (1961) calculated that no more than 65 deaf students were in traditional schools in 1955. However, today nearly 89 percent of deaf and hard of hearing college students are attending traditional institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002b).

The most current demographic information about deaf and hard of hearing students in postsecondary institutions is from a report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Lewis, Farris, & Greene, 1999). This investigation was conducted over the 1996–98 academic years and reports numbers of students who identified themselves as deaf or hard of hearing. This report only looked at students at mainstream institutions and therefore did not include the enrollment at Gallaudet and NTID. Lewis, Farris, and Greene (1999) estimated 23,860 deaf and hard of hearing students. By adding in the enrollments at Gallaudet (1,400) and NTID (1,100) one finds approximately 26,360 deaf or hard-of-hearing students in college. Stuckless, Ashmore, Schroedel, and Simon (1997) found that nearly half of the students are deaf and the other half are classified as hard of hearing.

The estimates for the hard of hearing students are probably unreliable and low. This can be attributed to the fact that hard of hearing students are reluctant to self-identify to their institution. A 1989–90 National Postsecondary Student Aid study asked 70,000 college students if they had a hearing impairment. The respondents did not share their status with their institutions. Based on the self-reports, the U.S. Department of Education estimated more than 250,000 college students were hearing impaired (Lewis, Farris, & Greene, 1999).

Interpreting

The origins of sign language interpreting in college hail from the 1960s. Before the introduction of interpreting, few deaf students had access to traditional colleges. Gallaudet College, at the time, was the only institution in which deaf students could access lectures, unless they were able to lip-read at other colleges. This meant that few deaf students attended college at all. Interpreting, outside of academe, was not widespread until the 1960s as well. Hearing individuals, who were related to or worked with deaf people, such as family members, teachers, or clergy, offered nearly all of the interpreting. Additionally, interpreting was done on a voluntary basis. The establishment of the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in 1964 helped interpreting emerge as a profession (Sanderson, Siple, & Lyons, 1997). The increased numbers of professional interpreters, combined with the federal laws requiring postsecondary institutions to provide “auxiliary aids,” including interpreting, for their deaf students led to the dramatic increase in deaf students at traditional colleges.

Access to interpreting services was a great victory in the battle to increase access for deaf and hard of hearing students to higher education. However, we must be cautious when thinking that the battle is over. Countless researchers over the past nearly 30 years show that interpreting does not give deaf students “full access” to the classroom and the information that is being
disseminated, no matter how experienced the interpreter or his or her knowledge of the student’s needs (Caccamise, Blaisdell, & Meath-Lang, 1977; Cokely, 1990; Harrington, 2000; Jacobs, 1977; Karchmer & Mitchell, 2003; Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, & Seewagen, 2005a; Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, & Seewagen, 2005b; Redden, Davis, & Brown, 1978; Stewart & Kluwin, 1996; Stinson & Kluwin, 2003; Winston, 1994; Winston, 2003).

WHY WE NEED DEAF-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

Graduation and Retention Concerns

With estimates of 26,000 to a quarter million deaf and hard of hearing students in traditional colleges, and the two federally sponsored institutions for the deaf having a combined enrollment of only 2,500 students—or merely 1 to 10 percent of the total—why should deaf-serving institutions exist? One answer is simple: They are more successful than mainstream institutions at educating deaf postsecondary students.

Even with support services at traditional institutions providing access for deaf students to attend, persistence and eventual graduation is a concern. The average graduation rate for deaf and hard of hearing students at these institutions is 25 percent (Stinson & Walter, 1997; Walter, Foster, & Elliot, 1987). However, at deaf-serving institutions, the average graduation rate is higher: 41 percent at Gallaudet, and 61 percent at NTID and rising (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Some research identifies academic unpreparedness as the main reason for such low degree attainment for deaf students (Foster & Elliot, 1986; Franklin, 1988). Others found that students left college after having trouble deciding on a major (Scherer & Walter, 1988). However, using Vincent Tinto’s (1987) work on student attrition as a conceptual frame, other researchers have attributed the college environment as having a major role in persistence, at least as important as academic integration (Stinson & Walter, 1997). Tinto (1987) cautioned:

Rather than mirroring academic difficulties, they [students departing] reflect the character of the individual’s social and intellectual experiences within the institution following entry. Specifically, they mirror the degree to which those experiences serve to integrate individuals into the social and intellectual life of the institution. Generally, the more integrative those experiences are, that is, the more they are seen as satisfying and leading to integration into the life of the college, the more likely are individuals to persist until degree completion. Conversely, the less integrative they are, the more likely are individuals to withdraw voluntarily prior to degree completion. (p. 53)

Foster, Long, and Snell (1999) find that deaf students often do not feel they are part of, or identify with, the university to the same extent as their hearing peers.

Social integration into college can be difficult for many students regardless of their ability to hear. However, for deaf and hard of hearing students it might be a greater challenge. Stinson and Walter (1997) note that deaf students from mainstream high schools often have limited social experiences in secondary school because of the communication gap between them and their hearing peers, making it even more difficult to integrate socially in college. This difficulty is confirmed by multiple studies. This is further complicated at traditional colleges with small deaf populations because there are few deaf peers to turn to for friendship (Murphy & Newton, 1987; Walter, Foster, & Elliot, 1987; English, 1993). Additionally, deaf students from residential schools might find it hard to adjust to “the social freedoms of college life, compared to a highly regulated dormitory life in high school” (Stinson & Walter, 1997, p. 19).

Traditional colleges and universities often do not think about deaf students’ needs beyond the academic halls. Often, as required by legislation, these universities provide interpreting and note taking to their deaf students. But by stopping there, these institutions do not provide for the whole needs of the student (Porter, et al., 1997). The institutions are under the impression that “deaf students can be made equal to hearing students if they are provided access to regular classroom communication” (Stinson & Walter, 1997, p. 22). Typically, after an interpreter or other service is provided, deaf students are expected to succeed at the same rates as hearing students. In cases where they do not, Stinson and Walter (1997) found that “failure is often attributed to a lack of innate ability or effort rather than to the educational environment or method of instruction” (p. 22).

Rarely is integration into the broader educational and social community in college considered by the administration. In fact, very few traditional colleges provide social programs or support for deaf students (Walter, et al., 1987). Stinson and Walter (1997) contend, rightfully so that:

It is integration into the total educational community that . . . must be the goal of any program providing support services to deaf persons. We must constantly ask ourselves whether the academic and social needs of students are being met within the context of institutional environments where the typical hearing students to deaf students ratio is 500 to 1. (p. 22)

Deaf-serving institutions successfully attend to the entire student, providing not only classes and lectures that can be fully comprehended, but also affording the students with cocurricular activities, social interactions, and more access to student services than at traditional colleges and universities.
**Earnings Effect of a College Degree**

In a report looking at the effect of holding a college degree on a deaf person’s earnings, Walter, Clarq, and Thompson (2002) argue that degree completion is more important than attempting college. They found that if a deaf student does not persist, and never attains a college degree, their earnings would be lower than if that student never attended college in the first place. In contrast, earning a college degree has a greater effect on someone who is deaf than their hearing peer. Walter, Clarq, and Thompson (2002) found that those who graduated are two to three times less likely to receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits—available to individuals with disabilities—than those who withdrew or were denied admission. Data presented shows that a large percentage of those who do not persist remain heavily dependent on federal income support throughout their lives. Walter, Clarq, and Thompson (2002) make a clear case for the importance of a college degree for the deaf and hard of hearing.

**ARGUING FOR A DIFFERENT VIEW OF DEAF-SERVING INSTITUTIONS**

After understanding that Gallaudet and NTID do a better job at graduating deaf and hard of hearing students than traditional institutions, the question of the need for deaf-serving institutions is less important. However, why is it important to view these institutions as minority-servicing rather than a form of “special education and rehabilitative services,” as the U.S. Department of Education currently does? Does the classification really matter, as long as federal support continues? I argue yes!

The purpose of the classification of Minority-Serving Institutions is to make sure that underrepresented and underserved peoples have access to and funding to receive a college education. Such a classification should not and need not be given to all those populations that are non-majority, and it should not automatically be given to schools serving populations that were once excluded from higher education, such as women, Jews, or Catholics. While once excluded from U.S. higher education women, Jews, and Catholics were barred on an institutional level rather than through legislative segregation (Thelin, 2004). Deaf students were de facto excluded from higher education when universities lacked support services and classroom access. Our need to support Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and deaf education is different than those of other non-majority groups. By extending the classification to deaf-serving institutions, we will continue to support and further this marginalized group within society.

Minority-Serving Institutions are often credited as being empowering to the populations that they serve in terms of those who attend and the larger communities of their students (Freedman & Cohen, 2001; Nichols & Kayongo-Male, 2003; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2003). Kassie Freedman and Rodney T. Cohen (2001) present a convincing argument that links education to cultural empowerment and therefore economic development of the African American community.

Historically Black colleges and universities have been empowering in many ways, among them by teaching cultural history, establishing an accepting environment, providing self-esteem, and creating personal and professional networks (Freeman & Cohen, 2001). Researchers (Allen, 1992; Anderson, 1988; Davis, 1998; Epps, 1972; Fleming, 1984; and Wilson, 1994) find that “HBCUs have historically and culturally filled a niche that no other higher education institutions were or are willing to serve and that students who attend these institutions are psychologically and professionally well served” (Freedman & Cohen, 2001, p. 588).

Deaf culture has its own history, shared values, social norms, customs, and technology which are transferred from generation to generation. Culturally deaf people do not look on deafness as a disability. Many deaf individuals see their deafness as a positive trait or asset that is strengthened by the strong sense of community. While not being able to hear excludes deaf people from some aspects of the hearing world, it further reinforces unity within the community. The concept of Deaf culture often extends to children. Many deaf parents wish to have deaf children and refuse to consider procedures like cochlear implants that would give the ability to hear to their children.

The sense of empowerment can be the most important result of identifying deaf-serving institutions as minority serving. The current federal classification of these colleges and universities as “special education and rehabilitative services” is not empowering to deaf individuals and the strong Deaf culture that exists (Erting, 1994; Holcomb, Holcomb, & Holcomb, 1994; Padden, 1988; Ladd, 2003; Padden, 2003). In fact, by viewing deaf students solely as disabled and in need of “special education and rehabilitative services,” one is taking a view that was once believed of Blacks: that these students are not as capable of achievement as their peers. The federal government through its current classification is doing the opposite of empowering, and, as Freedman and Cohen (2001) suggest for Blacks this “can create feelings of inferiority, hopelessness and despair, entrapment, and disenchantment” (p. 587).

While classifying deaf-serving institutions as minority serving might be a change in name only, it is a significant way to show that the federal government sees deaf individuals no longer in need of special education, a term often reserved for students with developmental disabilities, or disabled
Deaf education is often forgotten. The education of the deaf on a post-secondary level is taken up by only a small number of scholars and is rarely discussed within the literature or the media. By introducing deaf-serving institutions as minority-serving, an increased level of focus and attention will occur toward these institutions. With increased attention comes increased responsibility; however, this will only help the students that are served by deaf-serving institutions and the Deaf community in general.

REFERENCES


