

## **Traditionally Underserved Deaf Adults: Triumph or Tragedy?**

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### **Introduction**

This seminar will try to offer characteristics of traditionally underserved deaf adults while also help you identify how your program can assist or provide needed services. Much of the information we have included was received from the Northern Illinois University Research and Training Center on Traditionally Underserved Persons who are Deaf and also from years of exposure and service to students in our postsecondary programs. A growing portion of "low achieving" deaf adults, in which a disproportionate number of who are also from minority backgrounds, are applying to postsecondary programs throughout the country. The more selective postsecondary programs have suffered some degree of enrollment decline. The extent of the decline in enrollment depended on how responsive they were to demographic insistence and if they found creative ways to accommodate students with complex and challenging needs. At the time of admissions, many students cannot meet the literacy requirements for admission. That's the time when a program stretches its role and must step outside the norm to accommodate individual needs.

There are many deaf adults who are very successful and have tremendous talents. Our presentation does not address this group. Instead, it deals specifically with deaf and hard of hearing students with multiple problems. They "lack a combination of communication, academic, social, and/or independent living skills to such an extent that they are unable to function independently without significant support services" (Long & Clark, 1994). These attributes are also applicable for vocational skills of the traditionally underserved deaf individual.

Traditionally underserved deaf students are applying to postsecondary programs and are entering classes. As a result, we have gone through many programmatic changes. We began asking questions such as:

- ◆ Where do these students fit into the services that we offer?
- ◆ What additional services do we need to better serve their individual needs?
- ◆ What types of support services must we provide to get results?
- ◆ What type of assessment data do we need?
- ◆ Are we able to serve this population? If not us, who?

Emphasis must be placed on the identification of needs for all students. The longer this phase is delayed, the greater the risk for failure. Appropriate data collection is important for several purposes:

1. Identifying physical, academic, social, emotional, and behavioral strengths and weaknesses

2. Program planning
3. Establishing additional support services for counseling, care coordination, etc.
4. Setting academic and vocational/career goals

Once a traditionally underserved student enters a program, it is usually not sufficient to provide only an opportunity for access. Left unsupported, the student is very likely to experience a series of failures. If it is the opinion of staff members that services must be provided, then a support system must be established to help the student understand his/her rights, limitations, and needs. More importantly, he/she needs to know how to access the systems that can provide support. Services that are provided and those that are needed may not be parallel. Support is needed to:

1. Make the classroom instruction beneficial,
2. Increase employment potential,
3. Appropriately encourage the selection of appropriate career goals, and
4. Encourage good decision-making processes.

Identifying students who can be included in this group may be difficult. This population may also demonstrate one or more of the following characteristics:

- Minimal speech or speech-reading skills
- Low reading skills (1st - 4th grade)
- Low math skills (1st - 4th grade)
- Limited writing skills
- Minimal to adequate range of sign language skills
- Limited independent living skills
- Limited social skills
- Fundamental need for counseling
- Poor emotional control
- Low frustration or tolerance level
- Difficulty establishing social support
- Impulsive behaviors
- Desire for either positive or negative attention
- Compulsive behaviors
- May require long-term support for successful employment
- Generally poor attitude

One of the most important predictors of academic success is reading. A significant portion of severe and profoundly deaf 17 year old adolescents have very low reading skills. While poor readers can be found among all racial and ethnic groups, the problem is most acute among the African American and Hispanic American populations. This fact is of increasing importance to postsecondary programs because the portion of minority students in the pool will increase dramatically during the 1990s (Nash, 1991).

Many vocational and trade schools require at least a 4th grade reading level in order to benefit from instruction (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1986). If Allen's findings (1991) remain good estimates, then 19% of Hispanic deaf students, 22% of African American deaf students, and 52% of white deaf students read at or above the 4th grade reading level. This leads to the conclusion that many deaf young adults are illiterate.

### **Data Collection: An Essential Component**

Traditionally underserved students may come to programs at great risk for problems, having concomitant conditions and severe learning problems that make assessment information invaluable. Without clear descriptions of unique learning styles, academic potentials and achievement levels, the student is set up for failure and frustration as they move through a system that is not aware of or designed for their needs (Glenn, 1992).

Further supporting the concept of risk, Nash (1992) reported that hearing impaired students are at a great risk: only 50-55 percent will earn high school diplomas, 10-20 percent will receive certificates, and 25-30 percent will drop out. During recent interviews with supervisors of transitional studies including remedial and non-credit courses, they related that over the years they have served almost all of the deaf and hard of hearing students attending their institutions. A low percentage have completed the transitional studies program and successfully moved into their major areas of study. This is not to say that deaf students cannot be successful, but rather to imply that the system may not accurately evaluate and identify strengths and limitations of the students.

### **Assessment Reluctance: Why?**

Regardless of the growing formal and anecdotal evidence that emphasizes the need for evaluative data to be used in determining programmatic needs, there continues to be resistance to gather and use this data by many support and instructional staff. The reluctance to use either diagnostic procedures or previous assessment information may be attributed to the following:

History of abuse. There appears to be an attitude carried over from the late 1960s when many training programs rightfully challenged invalid applications of assessment procedures. But assessment data, if correctly used, can assist career exploration, program selection, support service linkages, instructional methodology, etc.

Empowerment movement. In the past ten years, there has been a very strong movement to emphasize the abilities of deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Although this attitude has been and continues to be appropriate and beneficial, it has sometimes been taken to extremes, almost ignoring what individuals cannot do, potentially misleading them.

Open door admissions. Many community colleges have open door admissions policies that involve minimal entrance requirements. These flexible requirements are often a boon for adults who have the skills and potential to succeed; however, the process may also allow students to enter programs without accurately evaluating or gathering information needed to identify strengths and limitations.

Turfism and time restraints. It takes time to collect data and it takes trust and effort to work with other specialists unfamiliar with deaf and hard of hearing students. Turfism and the tendency to "be all things" to our students sometimes prevents professionals from using specialists to assist in the data collection process.

### **Reality Rub: Student Profiles**

The five profiles shown during the presentation have been consolidated for this publication. The profiles were gathered from information on students referred to our vocational assessment center as a result of exit exam failures, unsatisfactory progress, suspected learning disabilities, lack of progress, as well as for consideration for re-admission. One student was hard of hearing and did not have sign language skills. All five were from southeastern states. While the authors were unable to gather in-depth information on several students from secondary programs, records indicated a variety of completion credentials including state certificate, certificate of graduation, diploma, graduate, and unknown status. Of these five students, four were in college programs for approximately three years while the fifth student was referred for assessment after one semester and given information for further career exploration. The other four students dropped out of college because of either frustration and or the lack of funding.

- Average number of remedial course hours (n=5): 42 hours
- Placement scores required prior to taking major courses: Rdg - 41 Math - 42 Wrt - 41
- Actual placement scores (n=5): Rdg - 29 Math - 30 Wrt - 28
- Performance IQ, WAIS-R (n=5): 87
- Stanford Achievement Test - HI (n=3): Rdg Comp - 3.0 (GE)  
Math - 3.1 (GE)

### **The Cost/Impact of Insufficient Data**

What is the potential negative impact of not using assessment data for those individuals discussed in this presentation? In addition to not having information for guidance, program development, and appropriate support services, there are other costs that are described below.

Economic. Individuals misplaced or misdirected often deplete limited training funds from various sources such as Vocational Rehabilitation, scholarships, grants, family resources, etc. In addition, individuals spending years in programs where there is minimal ability to benefit, are losing valuable time away from the job market, the opportunity for advancement and salary increases . . . not to mention the tax dollars these individuals could personally be contributing.

Emotional. "Why wasn't I told the truth about my skills a long time ago?" is a question program staff often silently echo with students. The sense of frustration and failure can be an immeasurable cost, having a lasting impact on some of these students. The longer students remain within a college setting, and the stronger their self-identity crystallizes as a "college students," the more difficult it is to endure what can

become a tremendous sense of failure. The often unmentioned reverse of a positive self-esteem is not only knowing one's capabilities, but also knowing and accepting one's limitations.

Career Development. Most models of career development support the notion that children begin vocational exploration by first following their interests, dreams, and fantasies, and later dreams and interests are tempered by realities provided by actual capabilities and limitations, achievement, and experience. Without clear information concerning student potential, systems can inadvertently prolong a fantasy stage of career exploration. This experience can be described as a clash or internal battle between one's career interest and actual ability or potential.

Public Misperceptions. Like their hearing peers, some deaf and hard of hearing people can and do have challenges that make college success improbable. When students and program staff are not given accurate data, and when these same students remain within a college setting for long periods of time, an unfortunate impact relates to others misperceiving that "all deaf and hard of hearing people are unable to do college level work."

### **How To Minimize Costs?**

Although the authors are not the "experts" and continue to struggle with the best approaches to serving these students, we have a number of recommendations that might minimize frustrations. General recommendations for staff members are as follows:

Don't "throw the baby out with the bath water." Become comfortable with assessment information and use this information to assist students in making choices in a realistic manner. Enlist people with credentials in assessment, e.g. psychologists, diagnostic evaluators, vocational evaluators, etc., to assist in understanding and explaining information in an honest, helpful, and sensitive way.

Know "red flags." Become knowledgeable of the skills and abilities required by various programs and majors, and know the signs or indicators that might indicate a potential inability to benefit by continued efforts.

Investigate and innovate. Take the time to investigate staff or student concerns about learning difficulties. Ask for permission to request additional information from other sources, e.g., high school records, teachers, and/or referring agencies having other assessment data, etc. Also, ask open-ended questions of students showing serious learning problems. Their responses to these questions might lead to recommendations of additional assessments. Questions might include: specific duties and opportunities of chosen major, local and state geography, and even elementary questions concerning calendar/time and general knowledge of the environment, to name a few.

Formal service coordination. Case management or formal service coordination can also be very helpful. Once the student is accepted, it is important that regularly scheduled meetings are held between the case manager and the student. Progress should be assessed, barriers identified, and problem-solving techniques practiced. A formal case management process can structure the needed assessment and help develop plans for academic, independent living skills, and counseling. A case manager can also assist with the

coordination of monitoring reassessment needs and recommend any programmatic changes. Using this process, there is a good chance that students will not attend a program for years with little or no benefit. Systematic case management can promote ongoing meetings with opportunities for open discussions concerning student potential and performance standards.

Advocate and collaborate. Postsecondary staff members must communicate with referring parties, e.g., secondary programs and vocational/human service agencies, etc., regarding the skills and competencies needed to become a successful consumer of various majors and programs. In addition, staff members need to become advocates for the following:

- Career guidance and counseling
- Early and compassionate assessment sharing
- High standards and rigorous training
- Early career/occupational exposure
- Accurate and non-misleading graduating credentials

Training and sensitizing. Professionals knowledgeable about the potentially negative effects of paternalism and overprotection should sensitize and train staff about the very human, and, most often, well-intended feelings that can sometimes lead to open and frank discussions about performance and potential.

While an individual may function at a higher level in one area, it is the overall level of functioning that is important when determining a classification of traditionally underserved. Areas of consideration should be independent living skills, vocational skills, academic achievement, and social/emotional skills. We must look at the broad picture and plan for a total program. In order to plan effectively, we suggest the following programmatic concepts:

- regular meetings to discuss program progress in each class
- flexible time limits
- program alternatives to address functional academics, sign language classes, etc.
- positive emphasis on vocational courses and behaviors
- behavior management support
- work adjustment skills and career counseling made available to all
- on-the-job training opportunities
- tech-prep concept adopted, including hands-on, applied learning in technical areas
- pre-college preparation program
- cooperative efforts with high schools that refer students

It is strongly recommended that assessment data be compiled to include: psycho/educational information, physical and occupational therapy, social-emotional adaptive coping, and sign language assessment data, along with reading, math, and writing levels.

A tremendous amount of information about the traditionally underserved deaf and hard of hearing population was made available from the Northern Illinois University Research and Training Center on Traditionally Underserved Persons who are Deaf. Unfortunately, this center lost its source of funding and

closed in 1995. This is an example of how funding sources for the programs that serve multiply disabled deaf people have been cut, and then cut out.

In closing, the Commission on the Education of the Deaf raised the issue in 1988 in Toward Equality: Education of the Deaf, A Report to the President and Congress of the United States:

The vast majority of postsecondary-aged deaf persons are unemployed or seriously underemployed because appropriate rehabilitation training and related services are not available. . . . Under the current system, state rehabilitation agencies must provide time-limited services and, consequently, they cannot always deliver comprehensive rehabilitation services to a population whose rehabilitation needs are long-term and intensive (p. 69).

### References

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