

## **A Customized Residence Hall Experience for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

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Northern Illinois University is a state supported, comprehensive university. There are approximately 16,000 undergraduate and 7,000 graduate students enrolled at NIU. NIU is about 65 miles east of Chicago and thirty miles south of Rockford, Illinois' second largest city.

For many years, NIU has had a larger than normal population of deaf and hard of hearing students for a mainstreamed university (average of 40 students enrolled at the college level). One reason this is true is probably due to NIU's location and the existence of several large high school programs for deaf and hard of hearing as well as several good programs in community colleges located in the Chicago suburban area. Also, even many years before Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 went into effect, the Program for Hearing Impaired, a self-contained transition program for deaf and hard of hearing students was established at NIU. In addition, an undergraduate program in deaf education and graduate and undergraduate programs in deafness rehabilitation add to the attraction of NIU for students.

Early on, the problem was identified of providing appropriate housing for the student who was deaf or hard of hearing. Adapting all residence hall rooms on a campus to accommodate students would be both impractical and financially prohibitive. "Deaf community" is important, but we did not want to segregate students. Since 1978, a cooperative endeavor between the office providing support services to deaf and hard of hearing students and Student Housing Services, provides interested hearing and deaf/hard of hearing students a unique learning experience, utilizing as a catalyst a residence hall floor.

### **Academic Residential Programs**

Academic Residential Programs are special housing options jointly sponsored and administered by the Office of Student Housing Services and an academic unit of the University. These options are highly recommended for students who have interests or career plans in the related programs. Student participants take part in the usual social and educational activities characteristic of any residence hall floor, but also have the opportunity to gain additional benefits oriented towards specified areas of academic interest. These benefits include additional faculty interaction, special facilities and equipment, programs and activities in the academic area of interest, exposure and concomitant discussion with other students who share the same interests, and an increased opportunity for career information and faculty references.

NIU's first academic residential program was created in 1974 and is currently in its 22nd year of operation. The ten academic residential programs created since 1974 currently accommodate over 600 students on thirteen residence hall floors. The Hearing Impaired Interest Floor was created in 1978, and has been a popular option since that year. The description of the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor is as follows:

This special floor option is designed for those students who are deaf/hard of hearing or for those who are majoring in areas that relate to hearing impairment. Examples would include such majors as deafness rehabilitation, audiology, speech and language pathology, and teacher training of children who are hearing impaired/deaf or the multiple handicapped. The goals of the floor include: 1) bringing together those students who have common interests; 2) providing special recreational and social events including captioned tapes; 3) providing educational programs that pertain to hearing impairment; and 4) stimulating interaction between those students who are deaf/hard of hearing and those who are preparing for careers in working with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Such activities will enhance personal and educational growth and will create a better understanding of all members involved with this floor. All students will have access to 1) staff who are knowledgeable of hearing impairment, and 2) special equipment such as visual doorbells, a visual fire alarm system, amplified handsets for telephones, a TTY, and a television with closed captioning.

### **Program Management Team**

Each academic residential program requires the cooperation of a number of individuals: faculty, central housing office staff, residence hall staff, and program participants. The first component of an academic residential program at NIU is the "Faculty Coordinator." The selection of the Faculty Coordinator by the participating academic unit assures consistent involvement on the part of the academic unit in the development of the residential option. The Faculty Coordinator must be committed to the goals of the academic residential program and have time allotted to work with both the program and its student participants. In addition, to be successful, he/she must be able to interact effectively with students and have a positive perception of Student Affairs and the potential of the academic option component in the residence halls. The Faculty Coordinator assists in the design and implementation of the academic residential program through the development of program goals and expectations for student development. In addition, the Faculty Coordinator works cooperatively with the housing staff in establishing criteria for the recruitment, selection, placement, and retention of student participants. He/she is involved in the selection process for the undergraduate Resident Assistant (RA) assigned to the program. The Faculty Coordinator also holds specific responsibility for coordinating the involvement and support of other faculty in the activities of the academic residential program and for supervising the work of the Resident Assistant in those functions directly related to the academic aspects of the program. The Faculty Coordinator attends and participates in appropriate staff meetings, works with the housing staff, Resident Assistant, and floor

participants in planning and implementing academically-related activities, and participates directly in the ongoing evaluation of the program.

In order to assure good communication and planning, the Office of Student Housing Services also designates a specific member of the administrative staff to work with the academic option floors. This individual, the "Housing Office Liaison" holds responsibility for overall coordination of all academic residential programs. As well as working with the Faculty Coordinator to develop the program and procedures involved in the program, the Housing Office Liaison has specific responsibilities including chairing academic residential program staff meetings, coordinating residence hall facilities and services used by the academic residential programs, and clarifying or mediating issues of concern between the academic and student affairs staff members associated with the program.

The creation of the position of Housing Office Liaison demonstrates the level of commitment from the Office of Student Housing Services and the Division of Student Affairs to the concept of the academic residential program. Time must be allotted for the Housing Office Liaison to take on this task and the individual must be able to work with faculty members and reflect an appreciation for the faculty role in a such a program. Finally, the individual selected must have demonstrated leadership, organization, communication, and administrative skills.

Residence hall professional staff members also have an important role with an academic residential program. In addition to their general administrative, supervisory, training, advising, counseling, and programming responsibilities in the residence hall, designated residence hall staff members must become involved with an academic residential program. This involvement consists of assisting in the development of the residential program's special activities, supervision of the program's RA, and attendance and participation in the academic residential program's staff meetings. In the case of the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor, the Director of the Residence Hall and the senior staff member responsible for supervising the RA of the floor are directly involved with the program.

As the member of the management team that lives on the floor and has the most contact with the residents, the Resident Assistant (RA) of the floor is a very important member of the management team. The RA is supervised by the residence hall senior staff for the standard RA position responsibilities including, but not limited to: establishing positive rapport with individual floor residents; assisting in crisis intervention; developing and maintaining a community environment; advising student activities; enforcing rules and regulations; participating in hall coverage; and completing administrative requirements. In addition, the Resident Assistant is supervised by the Faculty Coordinator for any appropriate responsibilities designated by the Faculty Coordinator and approved by the Housing Office Liaison. Typical additional responsibilities include: assistance with the program's special academic activities; coordination of special equipment, completion of reports for the sponsoring academic unit; and participation in the academic residential program staff meetings.

The selection of the Resident Assistant for the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor has been a joint effort between the Senior Residence Hall Staff and the Faculty Coordinator(s). The Student Housing

Office has a planned procedure for RA selection which begins with informational meetings for students thinking about becoming Resident Assistants and proceeds through many group processing activities and interviews. After Housing Services determines the candidates that will be invited to apply for RA positions, candidates interested in the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor are referred to the Faculty Coordinator(s) for interviews. Returning RAs that might be interested in the floor are also referred for interviews. The ideal RA for the floor would be a person with strong RA skills, RA experience, knowledge of deafness and good signing skills. Unfortunately, candidates fitting this description are few and far between. Through the years, we have found that the most important quality for the RA is strong RA skills. We would like an RA who could sign, but we have found that this skill is not as important as the RA skills and the willingness to be flexible in communication and to learn some sign.

Communication between the members of this team is essential to the smooth running of this program. Communication is facilitated by monthly meetings of the Academic Coordinators, the Housing Office Liaison, the Residence Hall Senior Staff members, and the RA. Information at these meetings include feedback on residents' interactions, floor members' participation, prior floor activities, and upcoming activities. In addition, regularly scheduled meetings occur between the RA and a Faculty Advisor (weekly or bi-weekly).

The Hearing Impaired Interest Floor is a coed floor located in Grant Towers South, a large residence hall of two towers with ten floors of student rooms in each tower. The floor has twenty-five student rooms, one room for the Resident Advisor, a "typing/study" room, a pressing room, two restrooms, and a lounge. At full capacity, with no single rooms allotted, the floor will have fifty residents and one RA.

Typically, the floor population can be categorized into several different groups: students who choose to live on the floor who are deaf or hard of hearing; students who choose to live on the floor who are in a related major; students who choose to live on the floor for some miscellaneous reason; and students who are assigned to the floor. It is interesting to note, that although the last group of students did not initially choose to live on that floor, the majority elect to return to the floor the following year.

Each student who requests to sign up on the floor, signs a "Request to Live on Hearing Impaired Special Interest Floor", which contains the expectations of the residents of the floor. These expectations are:

1. Be in good academic standing.
2. Abide by rules and regulations regarding study hours, as well as respecting study rights of all others on the floor.
3. Attend all floor meetings called by the RA
4. Participate in social and educational activities sponsored by the floor. (Non-hearing impaired students must attend at least two educational programs per semester).
5. Assist in the organization and/or implementation of at least one social, cultural or educational program per year.

6. Contribute to a good atmosphere on the floor through a positive attitude towards other residents and towards planned activities, in order to develop a strong sense of community spirit and involvement.

If a student does not abide by this set of expectations, they may be removed from the floor or denied the right to return the next year. (This would probably not occur in the case of a student who is deaf or severely hard of hearing who needs the safety features of the floor). It is interesting to note that in the nineteen years the floor has been in existence, only a handful of students were “encouraged” to not return, and only one was actually “denied” the right to return. The residents of this floor have always been very active and enthusiastic, and have high rates of participation in activities.

### **Equipment**

Each room on the floor has been equipped with strobe fire alarm lights. In addition, each room has been wired with “doorbell light” and a flashing light for the telephone. Telephones are also equipped with volume control handsets. Illinois has a state funded program for eligible residents to obtain a TTY, so most qualified students have them, but there are TTYs available for short-term check-out for students who do not have their own. Through the years, the residents have also raised money for a television set, VCR, and decoder for the lounge. Last year, the floor won a contest for most participation points in Grant South, and won a large screen television which has the closed caption option in it. They have donated the older set and decoder to the hall to use for programs.

### **Recruiting**

Students are recruited to become residents of this unique academic option floor in a number of ways. A brief description of the floor is already included in the housing informational packets that prospective students receive shortly after being accepted. In addition, approximately every six weeks, the Office of Registration and Records sends the Faculty Coordinator names and addresses of prospective students who have indicated on their applications that they intend to major in one of the majors related to deafness. The Faculty Coordinator then sends them packets of information explaining the purpose of the floor and encouraging them to consider the floor as their choice of housing options on their “Housing Application.”

When Student Housing Services receives prospective students’ applications, they are processed for room assignments. If students have selected the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor as their second or third choice, the Faculty Coordinator is given the student’s information, and a letter is sent to the student encouraging the student to reconsider their choice. Sometimes, the Faculty Coordinator will call a student to see if they have questions regarding the floor that will help them make informed decisions about their housing options.

The Faculty Coordinator is also the coordinator of support services for deaf/hard of hearing students at NIU. As such, she is able to disseminate information to prospective deaf/hard of hearing

students about the floor, stressing the importance of the safety benefits of living on the floor. Students may choose to live elsewhere in the residence halls with more limited accommodations, but most choose to live at least their first year on this floor.

In-house networking assists in effective recruitment. Encouraging academic advisors in the various deafness/health-related departments to disseminate information during orientation for prospective students, or advising week for currently enrolled students has worked well. In addition, the institution's scheduled Open House's are another means of promoting the floor.

Current and past residents of the floor are excellent promoters for the floor. Often, friends of residents request to live on the floor after visiting and seeing the floor "in action." Prior to "Hall Sign-up" for current students, residents of the floor sometimes will go to select classes to give short announcements about the floor, encouraging students to sign-up for it. These are usually introductory level special education or communicative disorders classes. Short presentations or oral announcements are often given in various sign language classes around campus.

### **Activities**

Traditionally, the residents of this floor have been very active in floor and hall activities. A variety of floor activities including social, academic, and service-oriented are available. The floor regularly wins "participation contests" in the hall ranging from the number of residents contributing in a blood drive to the number of activities and participants during a semester. Students are active as floor and hall officers, and participate and contribute to many of the hall committees.

Emphasis is placed on providing programming in the area of deafness to not only residents of the floor, but also to all residents of the hall. Every fall, the residents of the floor are active in planning a "Deaf Awareness Week." Guest speakers, movies, Sign Sync, and other activities are highlighted during the week. One evening, all residents of the residence hall must fingerspell their name to get into the cafeteria. An announcement of the requirement as well as the alphabet are placed in each resident's mailbox. Residents of the floor are available that evening, to teach and assist students to fingerspell their names. Throughout the year, residents of the floor teach non-credit sign language classes to interested hall residents.

Opportunities are provided to allow students and faculty more interaction than just through classes. Faculty members are invited to give presentations at the hall. The floor has sponsored "advising workshops" with advisors from related departments. Presentations/workshops on career opportunities in the related fields have been successful. More informal interaction between students and faculty members is encouraged by inviting faculty members to have dinner with the floor residents.

### **Evaluation/Feedback**

Written evaluations are received from the residents of the floor. These evaluations reflect a high level of satisfaction in the experience of living on the floor. Comments from residents and observations from professionals involved indicate the following :

- The floor usually develops a strong sense of unity and community. Students indicate that they have interests in common and therefore benefit from living together. A high number of returning students each year further indicate residents' satisfaction with the program.
- The residents learn from each other and learn to appreciate their differences. Students who are majoring in deafness related fields, but who are not familiar with the Deaf World, comment that they learn many things about the deaf that they would never learn or experience in the classroom.
- The floor provides positive exposure to the world of deafness to the entire population (approximately 1,000 students) of the residence hall.
- Parents of new students feel more secure knowing their daughter/son is a resident of the floor. The additional faculty contacts, contacts with the Faculty Coordinator and the closeness of the floor help them to feel that their "child" will not just be a number that gets lost in the crowd.
- Living on the floor assists many deaf or hard of hearing students that have had little or no contact with other deaf or hard of hearing students, to feel more comfortable interacting with their peers. They transition in to better acceptance of their situation and become comfortable interacting in a deaf community.
- Residents who are deaf or hard of hearing tend to have more frequent contacts with the coordinator, and are not as hesitant to approach her with problems as students who live in different situations.
- Students without much prior sign language experience, benefit from living on the floor and seeing and using sign language on a daily basis.

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