

Best Practices for Student Success In Postsecondary Education Institutions

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Abstract

This workshop, presented in an interactive mode, provided participants with practical suggestions and resource information for solutions to common challenges (both academic and non-academic) faced by professionals working with students who are deaf or hard of hearing. These challenges include:

- Intensive orientation programs to help students adapt more effectively to college life;
- Effective communication assessment and individual communication training;
- Effective remedial course structure for language arts and basic mathematics;
- The interpreter/tutor model for more effective academic support;
- Student success courses related to personal living skills; and
- Housing options.

Best practices for deaf and hard of hearing students begin at the beginning and continue until the end and begin with the end in mind. The beginning is taking time to understand the diverse backgrounds from which deaf and hard of hearing students may enter your postsecondary program.



Diversity of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

- The large majority of deaf and hard of hearing students in the United States come from hearing families. There are also many from families where other family members also have a significant hearing loss.
- Most deaf and hard of hearing students within the United States attend public schools, although there are a large number of students who attend schools for the deaf. Within the public school setting, deaf and hard of hearing students may be fully mainstreamed, taught within the self-contained classroom (resource room), or experience a mixture of these environments depending on individual academic strengths and weaknesses.
- Students from schools for the deaf tend to be strong users of sign communication and are not accustomed to using support services in the classroom.
- Students from the mainstream public school settings tend to have much less contact with the deaf community whereas students from schools for the deaf will have had much more interaction with the deaf community.
- A student's native language may be American Sign Language (ASL), English, Spanish, or any other language.
- A student may be very experienced and comfortable with support services or may have never used academic support systems.
- The student may communicate through ASL, signed English, speaking, Cued Speech, tactile signing, etc.

- Because of the limited opportunity for deaf or hard of hearing students to “overhear” conversations as hearing students do, in general they will experience less ambient learning than their hearing peers.
- The one and only rule to follow is: *There is no general rule to describe deaf and hard of hearing students.* Students have their own mixture of family, educational background, and life experience which they will bring to your school.

Initial Inquiry and Campus Visit

Given this wide diversity among deaf and hard of hearing students, an effective response to their initial contact with your school is critical. If the contact is in writing, prompt response including information regarding the existing support services available to students is an absolute must. If the initial contact is via phone, does the admissions office have a TTY and, if so, are the admissions office personnel knowledgeable and comfortable using it? If there is no TTY, do the admissions staff know how to receive and make calls to deaf and hard of hearing people through the relay system?

When establishing appointments for on campus visits/interviews, communication needs must be discussed. Is there a need for an ASL interpreter? An oral interpreter? A deaf-blind interpreter? A Cued Speech interpreter? A transliterator? Remember, during interview situations, you will be revealing *your* ability to provide services to students while they are on campus. The on-campus visit is *not* the time to depend on the parent or the counselor accompanying the student for clarity of communication because there is no interpreter to facilitate direct communication with the potential student.

Interviewing for admissions to college is an exciting time for both the student and the admissions counselor! Everyone tends to be on the optimistic side of realistic during this process and this may cause difficulties for both the student and the school later on. So how does one guard against this?

During the Campus Visit/Interview

- Communicate directly with the student. Apologize, if necessary, to mom, dad, teachers, etc. for “ignoring” them, and explain your need to get to know the student as much as possible. This initial interview can provide excellent baseline information regarding the student’s communication strengths, how well he/she understands and follows directions, his/her ability to self-advocate, his/her level of self confidence, etc.
- Include a class observation, preferably where support services are running. The student needs to develop a strong sense of what to expect from classes (i.e., size of rooms, number of students enrolled, college classroom dynamics) and see the academic support services at work. Arrange this with the faculty member ahead of time.
- Visit the residence hall to show how it is set up. Potential students should see the size of a typical room and learn how many students are assigned to each room. They also need to be aware of the accessibility of the residence hall. Is there a visual alarm system? Is there captioning on the television? Will interpreters be provided for hall meetings? Since many postsecondary institutions/programs do not provide residence halls for students, provide housing lists and be able to recommend certain living situations which may be particularly eager to welcome deaf and hard of hearing students. If students who are new to the area are seeking roommates, share names, addresses, and phone numbers, and encourage them to contact one another to discuss the possibility of sharing their living accommodations during the school year.

¹Northwestern Connecticut Community-Technical College is the Northeast Technical Assistance Center (NETAC) site for Connecticut.

- Discuss the student's expectations of the college. Be prepared to answer questions such as the ones listed below.

Academic areas:

- Exactly what support services does the college provide? How does the student access these services? Who does the student see if there is a problem?
- Are there interpreters on staff or do you hire from the outside? If you hire from the outside, are the interpreters dependable? Are substitutes provided when interpreters are absent? What are the qualifications of the interpreters? Do they have RID certification? Are they familiar with the classes (biology, chemistry, computer science, law, medicine, etc.)?
- Do you provide notetakers? Are they volunteer or paid? Are they trained? Do they understand that taking notes for deaf and hard of hearing students is different from taking notes for themselves? Is the quality of the notes supervised? If the notes are not satisfactory, what does the student do?
- Do you provide CART (Computer Aided Real-Time captioning) in the classroom? Are these captions printed and distributed to the student?
- Do you provide C-print services? Are these notes printed and distributed to the student?
- Do you provide tutors? Who are they and what are their qualifications? Do they have experience working with deaf and hard of hearing students?

Non-academic areas:

- How many deaf and hard of hearing students are enrolled?
- Are deaf and hard of hearing students welcome to join teams and clubs?
- Will communication access be available for extra-curricular activities?
- Clarify what is expected of the student, both academically and non-academically.
- Ask the student to provide a writing sample. This can be as simple as a 15-minute description of something that has happened to them over the years, or what it is like to be deaf. Written English is often a difficult skill for deaf and hard of hearing students. This writing sample will be very helpful in determining placement in the appropriate level of English and other classes which require a great deal of writing.
- Ask the student to sign a release form. This will allow gathering of related information from the student's school, vocational rehabilitation counselor, etc. which may be pertinent to establishing the optimum education environment for the student.
- Arrange for the visiting student to meet and chat with deaf and hard of hearing students who are currently enrolled in your program.
- This is the time to find out more information about the student's:

Native language	Preferred mode of communication
English language skills	Ambient learning base
Educational background	Level of understanding about what to expect in college
Experience with support services	Motivation to succeed

Each of these areas are very important and can directly affect student achievement levels, but the most critical quality may be motivation to succeed. Students can overcome poor English language skills, lack of experience, and a

myriad of other challenges if they have a reason to succeed. This is what they depend on for motivation when the going gets tough. Above all, do not expect that replicating the secondary educational environment will meet the students' needs at the college level. We find this is almost never the case! For example, most deaf and hard of hearing students coming to Northwestern Connecticut Community-Technical College (NCCC) from secondary programs where they received minimal, if any, support services in their classes are awed by their own ability to achieve academic excellence when placed in a program which provides total access to communication, and therefore, information.

Resources

It is critical for professionals new to provision of support services for deaf and hard of hearing students to develop a network of resources as quickly as possible. This network will include the professionals at the secondary level, vocational rehabilitation counselors, agencies within your geographic area that work with deaf and hard of hearing adults, interpreter referral services, local hearing aid dealers, and of course the programs with years of experience in providing quality postsecondary education to deaf and hard of hearing students. The Collegiate Education for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (CEDHH) program has an extensive list that is available upon request.

Transitioning Students into the College

All new students want to be included, to feel a part of the college community. As mentioned preciously, the degree to which communication access is provided across the college community determines the degree to which new deaf and hard of hearing students feel welcome and wanted.

In addition to campus-wide communication access, a formalized transition or orientation program contributes significantly to the comfort level of entering students. Over the years, the CEDHH program at NCCC has developed an in-depth week-long orientation to college life followed by an extended orientation program that spans the first semester. The *CEDHH Orientation Week* includes three components:

- *Academic Preview* is a three-day program during which students attend morning workshops focused on the academic content which they will be studying for the semester. These workshops will introduce students to the textbook, vocabulary, and expectations of each of their classes. During this time students and interpreter/tutors work together to develop technical signs which will maximize the effectiveness of interpreting during the class lectures. Students spend the afternoons in the computer lab learning how to effectively use their e-mail accounts, the Internet, and Microsoft Word (which they will use to produce final drafts of their research papers). Students' levels of comfort with the new environment and their academic success rates have clearly improved since the implementation of the Academic Preview program in 1996.
- *CEDHH Orientation* is a full-day during which students learn about the appropriate use of support services, including interpreter/tutors, notetakers, counselor, communication specialist, and educational specialists. We all learn best when we are having fun so much of the information is presented through role plays, returning student panels, and Jeopardy-like games during which the students must guess the correct answer. All CEDHH support staff are actively involved in the Academic Preview and CEDHH Orientation programs. This provides the students an extensive opportunity to get to know the support staff prior to the first day of class. Finally, students are asked to complete a quiz on what they have learned during the Academic Preview and CEDHH Orientation and to sign this quiz, reflecting their knowledge about *their* role in effective use of support services.
- *NCCC Orientation* is a full-day program during which students learn about the services of the college. Similar to the CEDHH Orientation, the NCCC Orientation makes effective use of "buddies" who are returning students who

will be matched with four to six new students as they make their way through the maze of orientation. Buddies frequently become friends with and create an immediate bond with new students; a buddy becomes someone a new student can approach to ask questions without feeling embarrassed. The NCCC Orientation also found *fun* to be a critical component of the orientation program and includes a series of new games to break the ice and help students get to know one another in a friendly, non-threatening way.

- *Extended Orientation* is a series of four six-week classes for deaf and hard of hearing students only. *Study Skills, Life and Communication Skills, Human Sexuality, and Interpreting From a Client's Perspective* comprehensively focus on the issues related to achieving academic success; balancing time; setting and achieving goals; and communicating effectively with fellow students, faculty, staff, family, and present or future sweethearts. These classes may also enhance the understanding of the positive or negative effects of relationships on individual lives; the ethics of interpreting; obtaining an interpreter for private needs, such as medical appointments; and many other issues critical to the successful adjustment of new students to college.

Support Services

The CEDHH program at NCCC is fortunate to have a full-time staff of 12 professionals working together to provide a strong support system for deaf and hard of hearing students. There are a variety of models of support service delivery that are possible in other situations. Therefore, it is important for the reader to focus on the *service* being delivered rather than the *method* of delivery.

Direct Academic Support Services

Most deaf and hard of hearing students attending NCCC attend classes with hearing students and receive full support services. The specific supports provided for any one student are solely determined by his/her educational and communication needs. Our goal is to provide sufficient support services to make each class fully communication accessible for each deaf and hard of hearing student. In return, we expect that students will be active participants in each of their classes, engage in class discussions, and ask and answer questions as much or more than their hearing counterparts. Available support services include interpreters, tutors, and notetakers.

Interpreter/tutor. The CEDHH program at NCCC has used the model of interpreter/tutor for nearly 25 years. Evidence has clearly shown this is educationally the strongest and best model for provision of academic support. The interpreter assigned to a specific class is also the tutor for that class. We have found that this provides the most effective tutorial situation possible. Because each interpreter must also be an effective tutor, the educational requirements for candidates for these positions includes a Master's degree and RID certification.

- *Interpreters*

Interpreters provide full communication access between deaf and hard of hearing students, the teacher, and the hearing students during a given class, workshop, meeting, etc. It is a misconception to say that it is the deaf student who needs the interpreter. Everyone in the room needs the interpreter if communication is to be complete and clear. Depending on the communication strengths of the student, interpreters must be fluent in American Sign Language, Signed English, oral/aural communication modes, and/or deaf-blind interpreting. It is also critical that interpreters be fluent in the content area of the classes to which they are assigned. How is it possible to convey concepts and ideas accurately and effectively to another individual if the conveyer does not understand the concepts and ideas? Therefore, the qualifications of the interpreter are crucial to the provision of effective communication within the classroom.

- *Tutors*

Students are strongly encouraged to make weekly appointments with tutors for review and reinforcement of the information from their respective classes. Effective tutors for deaf and hard of hearing students must be individuals who understand the educational gaps common to deaf and hard of hearing students *and* must be able to communicate effectively. Records and experience clearly show that students who make regular use of tutoring services demonstrate much higher levels of academic success than those who do not use this service regularly.

- *Notetakers*

Notetakers most often are hearing students enrolled in classes with deaf and hard of hearing students. Notetakers are employees of the CEDHH department; that is, they are paid to take notes. This model increases the responsibility felt by notetakers for producing high quality notes and allows the notetaker manager to supervise the quality of the notes. At NCCC, notetakers are hired and supervised by one of the 12 CEDHH staff members. New notetakers participate in a brief training before classes are assigned. This training explains the various forms for taking notes (i.e., outline, Cornell, mapping), and gives the notetaker a brief overview of the need for complete information, clear handwriting, use of white space, and easy to read diagrams. The quality of notes is evaluated during the third week of the semester, at mid-semester, and at the end of the semester.

Interpreting, tutoring, and notetaking provide a strength of academic support which can be illustrated by a triangle. Each support service represents one leg of the triangle. No matter how much the triangle is shaken or pulled from one direction to another, it stands firm. However, take one leg away and the triangle collapses. This is exactly the kind of message we receive from the large majority of students who pass through our program. Many students survived high school with minimal support only to realize, once they experience a classroom with full support services, how much information they had missed over the years.

Additional Support Services

Communication services, English remedial studies, and mathematics remedial studies are three additional support services that provide highly valuable information regarding student strengths and weaknesses, communication preferences, career goals, etc. Without this additional information, the CEDHH program would not be able to individually tailor the support services to each student to the degree it does.

- *Communication services* are provided by a communication specialist who is both an audiologist and a teacher of the deaf. Services provided include:
- Communication assessments for each student. The results of the assessments are shared with the members of the team who will be working with the particular student. Important information such as restricted vision or a particularly strong reliance on speech reading, or a combination of both, have been extremely valuable in provision of effective support services both in and out of the classroom.
- Audiological services to students including hearing tests to verify a suspected change in residual hearing, minor repairs to hearing aids, and an adequate supply of hearing aid batteries on campus.
- Working with students individually to improve communication skills (amplified telephone, TTY, use of residual hearing, conservation of speech, etc.).
- Training to the college community and the community-at-large regarding effective communication with deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

- *English and mathematics remedial studies* are provided by two educational specialists, one in Language Arts and one in Mathematics and Computer Science. These professionals each hold Master's degrees in Education along with Bachelor's degrees within their specific content area. Specifically developed for deaf and hard of hearing students, classes in reading, writing, vocabulary development, and basic mathematics are taught by the two instructors who are fluent in ASL, signed English, and oral/aural communication modes. A key component of this program is the understanding and ability to address effectively the educational gaps that are common to deaf and hard of hearing students. These classes are limited to 15 students.

Reinforcing Student Retention and Program Completion

In spite of all the academic supports, students may still waiver, daunted by the overwhelming challenges of transitioning from their previous educational or work environment to a new and strange environment called postsecondary education. Counselors and mentors play a vital role in helping the students over these difficult times. The CEDHH counselor is involved with the deaf and hard of hearing students from the very beginning, meeting with them during their visit to the college and working closely with them throughout the application process which includes completion of placement tests and registering for their classes. The counselor meets regularly with the students throughout their stay at NCCC, helping them with career exploration, successful transfer to another college, and preparing for the job search process. It is critical for the counselor working with deaf and hard of hearing students to be fluent in all forms of communication and to have a strong background in deaf education.

When a student begins to show signs of floundering, a member of the CEDHH team becomes a mentor. The role of the mentor is to meet with the student weekly, identify the crux of the difficulty and work with the student to develop the skills and knowledge to overcome the barrier(s) to success. The mentor is a person from whom the student can receive support and comfort, and is a knowledgeable, trustworthy person to whom the student can turn when the going gets tough. The recent addition of mentoring to our support services has definitely impacted positively on the retention and completion rates of deaf and hard of hearing students.

Another key component affecting our retention and completion rates is the implementation of a tracking system. The tracking system also has a positive impact on the effective use of our limited human and fiscal resources. Recently implemented within the CEDHH program, this system provides bi-weekly information to the CEDHH director on the attendance and preparedness of deaf and hard of hearing students regarding their academic responsibilities, such as classes and tutoring appointments. Students who demonstrate a pattern of non-attendance and/or non-preparedness are called in to discuss their situation with the CEDHH director. Most of the time this results in a marked improvement in the student's attitude, motivation, and behavior. For the few students who demonstrate no improvement in their pattern of non-attendance and non-preparedness after the second meeting with the director, support services are withdrawn

Students' Need to Belong

Although quality support services and strong academic programs are important for the success of deaf and hard of hearing students, the need for a strong social environment and sense of belonging to the community are also vital components to success. The Northwest Deaf Club provides a strong sense of community involvement and an opportunity for deaf and hard of hearing students to become active members of the NCCC community. The club is open to all NCCC students, though most members are either deaf and hard of hearing students or students majoring in Interpreting or Deaf Studies. Both social and community services activities are planned and implemented by this club throughout the year.

Housing also plays an important part in feeling a sense of belonging to the college community. If residence halls are not available on campus, share housing lists with students, encourage them to contact one another to discuss the possibility of sharing an apartment, link them with other students who have found living arrangements in the area, and be aware of landlords who are particularly interested in having deaf or hard of hearing students in their residences.

Hints for Faculty

As is true for all students, effective communication and teaching style are at the core of successful learning. Often, teachers who encounter deaf and hard of hearing students for the first time feel nervous and rather "in the dark" as to what to do to provide an effective learning environment for these students. Every two to three years, the CEDHH staff conduct an *Orientation to Deafness* for new faculty and staff working at the college, depending on the numbers of new faculty and staff hired each year. While this orientation for faculty and staff is not required, there is an excellent response from these professionals, probably because they realize that the chance of a significant amount of interaction with deaf and hard of hearing students is very high. The teaching strategies which are most effective for deaf and hard of hearing students are also most effective for all students. Thus, if one is dealing with faculty who are less than enthusiastic about attending a workshop related to working with deaf and hard of hearing students, perhaps the same information could be included within another title. Administrative support for such workshops is always highly effective!

When working with faculty, it may be necessary to clarify myths and challenge stereotypes. Some of the suggestions listed below might be helpful.

- Expect full participation from the deaf and hard of hearing student just as you would for a hearing student. Give a little extra time for the message to be conveyed through an interpreter or captioning support service. This may mean asking students not to just "yell out" the answer, but rather wait a few seconds to give everyone an equal chance.
- Have the same academic expectations for the deaf and hard of hearing students as you have for the hearing students. Be willing to meet with the deaf and hard of hearing students to provide assistance as needed. Remember that students who are deaf and hard of hearing have fewer opportunities for ambient learning.
- Speak directly to the student, not to the interpreter. Interpreters are there to facilitate effective communication among everyone; they "work for" everyone in the room, not just the deaf or hard of hearing student.
- Be aware of and respect communication, cultural and behavioral differences. For example, it is a normal practice in the deaf world to tap a shoulder, stomp a foot on the floor, or switch the lights on and off to get a deaf person's attention.
- Make the classroom experience as visual as possible.
- Use overheads to reinforce your discussion. Keep the number of words as limited as possible. Summarize. Overheads should be visually easy and quick to read.
- Use captioned videos and movies. There is a resource catalog available which identifies which movies and videos are available in captioned form. (See the resource page).
- Use a variety of colors to emphasize the important points of your discussion.
- Open the class with a written overview of the goals for the day .
- Close the class with a written summary of the discussion.
- Do not stand or sit in front of bright light. The bright light behind you will block the deaf and hard of hearing student's ability to see you clearly.

- Do not speak while your back is to the students. Many deaf and hard of hearing students rely on speechreading, facial expression, and body language to enhance their clear understanding of what is being discussed.
- Do not engage in "rapid fire" dialogues in the classroom. There is no way that the deaf or hard of hearing student can keep up with this kind of discussion even with the use of an interpreter.
- Ask that students raise their hands to be recognized prior to speaking. This allows the deaf and hard of hearing student to know who is speaking and also provides a greater opportunity for him/her to join the discussion.
- Work collaboratively with the support services staff. They are there to help you as well as to help the student.
- Consider allowing exams to be interpreted into ASL.
- Be open minded and eager to learn about becoming an effective teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Hopefully, if we have done our work well, students will experience a significant growth in self confidence, self awareness, self actualization, self empowerment, and accountability. The one thing we do *not* want support services to be is a system to enable poor habits and lack of responsibility. For providers of support services, whether interpreter, notetaker, counselor, educational specialist, communication specialist, teacher, mentor, or tutor, the path is fraught with many challenging times and difficult decisions. To begin with the end in mind and to realize that effective support services begin at the very beginning and continue until the student has completed his/her program of study is what we all need to remember and practice.

Time to Say Goodbye

As students approach completion of their programs of study at NCCC, the counselor works diligently to prepare them for their next transition, whether continuing their studies at another institution or preparing to enter the world of work.

Successful transfer of credits. Extensive work by our counselor has resulted in several articulation agreements with various 4-year colleges including Rochester Institute of Technology and Gallaudet University. The process of successful transfer to another institution actually begins as soon as the student arrives on campus. Dialogue with the receiving college must be initiated as soon as possible. Early identification of which courses will be accepted for transfer credit and which will not saves the student time and money and expedites the entire transfer process.

Job seeking skills. *Job Search Skills* is a six-week course taught by the CEDHH counselor. This course focuses on proper development of effective resumes, how to handle an interview effectively, the shared responsibility of ensuring that necessary communication facilitation is at the interview, etc. Students develop a final resume and experience mock interviews with various individuals role-playing employers during the course.

Graduation. Graduation is always a time for special celebration and recognition for the deaf and hard of hearing students. Exit interviews are held to gather valuable feedback from the students regarding their experience at Northwestern. Graduates names are added to the database to insure their receiving the CEDHH newsletter and announcements of special events.

Author note:

The Collegiate Education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons at Northwestern Connecticut Community-Technical College (NCCC) in Winsted, Connecticut has nearly 25 years of distinguished work in the field of provision of support services to deaf and hard of hearing students. Total enrollment at NCCC is approximately 2000 students per year, of which approximately 35-40 students are deaf or hard of hearing. There are 12 members of the CEDHH support team including the Director, the Assistant to the Director, the Program Liaison, the Communication Specialist, two Educational Specialists, the Counselor and 5 Interpreter/Tutors. We also employ approximately 40 hearing students each semester to work as notetakers. Northwestern also serves as the NETAC (Northeast Technical Assistance Center) Site Office for Connecticut. The NETAC team includes the NETAC Site Director (Mark Myers), the NETAC Site Coordinator (Elaine Taylor), the NETAC Site Assistant, and the C-print captionist/trainer (Lucie Forsling Hobart).

We greatly appreciate the multitude of questions submitted by our participants and hope we have effectively responded to each question and concern within the text of this manuscript. We welcome any and all questions and concerns from the readers of this article and look forward to continued collaboration to improve the postsecondary educational environment for deaf and hard of hearing students. Please feel free to call us or e-mail us with any questions. We look forward to assisting you in any way we can. Please contact us at:

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