

## Section VIII

# Working with Students from Diverse Backgrounds



# Designing a Program in a Postsecondary Mainstream Institution to Meet the Needs of Multicultural Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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## Abstract

LaGuardia Community College is one of 19 City University of New York campuses in the New York metropolitan area. It is located in the borough of Queens and is the home of the Program for Deaf Adults, which provides academic support services and courses to deaf and hard-of-hearing students at LaGuardia.

Several years ago, the college made significant changes in curriculum and policy to support its commitment to pluralism and better meet the needs of its diverse population of students. It is important to understand the context in which these changes were made and how they have positively influenced the activities and initiatives of the Program for Deaf Adults (PDA).

The PDA model as described below has helped make an important contribution to our college, and it is hoped that this information will be valuable while designing your own programs to meet the needs of students from multicultural backgrounds.

## A Look at Diversity

Why is the issue of diversity so important today? Is it because President Clinton established a committee to address these concerns; or, because it is politically correct to talk about these issues? Or, is it that since the Civil Rights law of 1964, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, there remains little progress in the inclusion or acceptance of people of color in our society?

It is a sad truth that even today, segregation exists in communities, housing, and schools. More tragically, the resultant economic inequality and violence continues to devastate our nation.

Some people in the field of educating students who are deaf or hard of hearing feel that the situation is different. Working in this field does force one to deal with diversity. All of us are aware of the special educational concerns and supports for our students. And, for the most part, including those culturally different from mainstream populations; we serve them on an individual basis in terms of their unique needs without regard to race.

However, when students enter the classroom, they are often confronted by a mainstream curriculum – using materials and lessons plans that have consistently omitted the many accomplishments and contributions people of color have made to our society. We are not giving our students a true representation of how our nation was formed, and we are certainly not giving them the hope that they too may aspire to become leaders and influence the world in which we live.

In Beverly Daniel Tatum's book on race, racism, and racial identity, she identifies "the cycle of oppression." Dr. Tatum speaks eloquently about how we are bombarded with stereotypical images in the media, exposed to ethnic jokes of family members and friends, and are rarely informed of the accomplishments of oppressed groups.

Without illuminating the shadowy ignorance of the past, it likely that the dark periods of our history will be repeated. Until we begin to change the images in media, introduce a history that includes the contributions people of

color have made to society, and begin to talk openly about race relations, we will be stuck in this cycle. Dr. Tatum also speaks about how the cycle is true not only in the way we raise our children but in the material that continues to be chosen for and taught in schools from elementary level through university study. She writes, “we teach what we are taught – it is not our fault, but it is our responsibility to interrupt the cycle.”

One example she offers makes this very clear. While at a grocery store, a white mother and preschool child pass a black mother and her child. The white child says, “Mommy, look at that girl! Why is she so dirty?” (A common misconception among white preschoolers). The mother is embarrassed and says, “Shhh,” and walks away quickly.

What happened here is: one, the white girl’s misconception about the black child being dirty is confirmed by her mother’s reaction; two, the white girl is taught that you don’t talk about people “like that;” and three, you in fact run away from “those” people.

Absent a discussion by the white mother regarding different ethnicities, the girl is left to her own imagination. What could have happened is that the mother might have said, “No, the little girl is not dirty, she is has a different skin color...” Other discussions about the differences in height, weight, color of hair, kind of hair, etc. might have taken place and would have informed the little girl better.

One point that Dr. Tatum makes clear is that we develop prejudices not only from what we are taught, but more significantly from what we are not taught. We are often left to our own imaginations and previous experiences when thinking about someone who is different.

If we look at our own programs, we can begin to think about how to change the cycle of oppression. First, as educators we can start to look at our curriculum, the materials used, and the discussions held in class. As program administrators and counselors, we can look at how we treat each other in non-academic settings and in other program and school related activities.

The best situation is to be in an academic setting in which the administration supports an inclusive environment, an environment I will describe and that currently exists at LaGuardia Community College.

## LaGuardia Community College

Beginning with only a handful of students and administrators in 1971, LaGuardia currently serves 11,000 students in the academic division and 28,000 in the division of Adult and Continuing Education. Fifty percent of the students are immigrants. The student population is representative of over 100 countries and speaks over 130 different languages.

Eleven years ago, when President Bowen came on board, he stated his commitment to pluralism. In an effort to provide an environment of openness, equity, and support for this highly diverse population and to maintain a community of inclusion in which deaf and hard of hearing students will thrive, LaGuardia established systems specifically to promote pluralism and diversity.

*College-wide Infrastructure Task Force on Pluralism*—Formed by a mandate of the City University of New York in 1989 as a committee of the president’s office, this task force was established to promote pluralism and confront racism. Over the years, it has provided numerous college-wide forums and faculty development workshops focusing on issues of equity and diversity.

Lectures on stereotyping in the United States, were organized by outside scholars, writers, directors of organizations, and human rights leaders. The lectures served a dual purpose: to increase awareness of the evolution of stereotyping and of its manifestations in the American society and to provide accurate representations of various groups and their contributions to American culture.

The task force has two adjunct groups, the *Network to Confront Racism* and the *Student Network to Confront Racism*, which share the same goals: to educate and raise consciousness about racism; to provide forums for “difficult dialogues” about racism and other contentious issues; to serve as a resource on these issues to the college community; and, to identify strategies in dealing with bias and racial incidents in and out of the classroom.

Participants from both groups receive extensive mediation financed by the Office of the President, the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, and Student Affairs. The student component of the network assumed a leadership role in establishing a new initiative called “Town Meetings.” These provide a safe, comfortable, and constructive forum for students,

faculty, staff, and administration to ask questions, share concerns, disseminate information and develop a greater facility for dealing with difference. The forums proved to be an invaluable venue for airing problems and resolving conflicts.

The Task Force on Pluralism succeeded in raising consciousness about pluralism and worked to establish curricular policy in support of its goals throughout the college. When the college prepared to change its academic calendar from quarters to a modified semester system in 1991, the task force seized the opportunity to work with the Curriculum committee on establishing guidelines to ensure that all courses and programs in the academic division incorporate pluralism throughout the curriculum, instruction, materials and assessment of students.

These guidelines have now been institutionalized, and the Division of Adult and continuing Education supports them. The LaGuardia Library reflects its commitment to multiculturalism through its collections and services. The Program for Deaf Adults exemplifies the application of these principles.

#### Program for Deaf Adults (PDA)

PDA is a model, urban, postsecondary program primarily serving multicultural students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. It offers a comprehensive education through an extensive variety of both degree and continuing education courses, serves an average of over 1,000 students annually, and is among the largest of such programs in the United States.

PDA's student population is similar to that of CUNY overall: ethnically diverse recent high school graduates plus older students returning to school, many of whom work full or part time.

The largest group, Hispanic, includes students from Colombia, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and others. The second largest, non-Hispanic white includes students from Russia, Romania, Poland and Greece. The third largest group is Black, but only one-quarter of that is African-American; the majority is from Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti, Guyana and England. The Asian group represents India, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

PDA's on campus student body represents the following:

- 47 deaf/hard-of-hearing students in the academic division
- 430 deaf/hard-of-hearing students in continuing education courses
- 44 deaf/hard-of-hearing students in CUNY outreach programs
- 859 hearing students in ASL and Interpreter Education programs

The Program for Deaf Adults offers services and courses to students in both the academic division and the division of adult and continuing education. It also serves as a resource to college-wide offices and departments. The following is a list of such services:

#### *Services offered to Students:*

- Support services to deaf/hard-of-hearing students in the academic and adult and continuing education divisions
- Counseling and registration assistance for students in the academic and adult and continuing Education
- Specialized sections in remedial reading and writing for deaf students in the academic division taught by a professor proficient in ASL and skilled in teaching this population
- Reading and writing intensive workshops to prepare students for college and to prepare students for passing CUNY exit exams
- Continuing education and "feeder" programs for students preparing to enter the academic division
- ASL classes to students for credit or non-credit

#### *Educating the College Community and Collaboration within CUNY –*

- Serves as liaison to administrative offices: The Registrar, Admissions, Bursars, Financial Aid
- Provides education to the college community as a whole – security office, nursing, staff, general college community
- Collaborates with the Academic Division (Human Services Program) to initiate a Deaf Studies Program; Job Placement Office to make services more inclusive;

English and Communication Skills Department to offer courses specifically to deaf/hard-of-hearing students

*Outreach work within CUNY/throughout Region II, and New York State*

- CUNY-wide Regional Support Services (providing interpreter services)
- Interpreter Education certificate program and workshop training throughout Region II
- Through the Northeast Technical Assistance Center – looking at issues of diversity

*Staff and Teachers*

PDA's teachers and staff are ethnically diverse and fluent in both American Sign Language and English. PDA strives to recruit interpreters that meet the communication needs of students and match the cultural diversity of this population. PDA reaches out to established minority organizations in the New York City area and encourages members of these groups to enter the interpreting profession and join the interpreter education program at LaGuardia.

*Teaching Practices*

PDA provides individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing with the special education and skills they need to succeed in a mainstream environment. It offers students an education in an atmosphere with few communication barriers and significant numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing peers from different cultures with whom to socialize and share experiences.

The philosophy of teaching to students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing embraces the extensive understanding and usage of two different languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and English. ASL is the language of instruction used. Reading courses are based on themes, taught in context using a who language approach and include a multicultural perspective – example of such themes have been the Apartheid, Native Americans, Bosnia, and of course, Deaf Culture. Pluralism pervades the curriculum and pedagogy. Students read and write about works drawn from a wide array of genres by authors who represent a full range of ethnicity and national backgrounds.

The goal is to motivate students to question their preconceived ideas about race, ethnicity, sexual preference and gender by drawing them into an exploration of the backgrounds of the diverse characters they encounter.

The teachers hired by PDA are ethnically diverse as well as fluent in American Sign Language and English. Some of the instructors are graduates of LaGuardia. The particular needs of students insufficiently prepared for college-level work are met by creating learning environments where students are not afraid to take risks and where diverse ways of thinking and learning are valued and respected.

*Continuing Education Courses*

A sampling of Continuing Education courses for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students includes: ASL for Deaf Foreigners, Intensive Academics for Deaf Foreigners, Academic Skills Levels I through IV, GED, Typing and Computer Skills, College Preparatory courses (which is a part of the feeder program), and Individual Instruction.

Individual Instruction is a one-to-one intensive instruction provided to meet the specific needs of individuals whose educational needs cannot be met in a group setting. This course was developed about ten years ago when a late-deafened adult came to the program. Individual Instruction has been very successful and is offered to a multitude of students to meet very individual needs. For instance, a Haitian-native student who is hard-of-hearing and fluent in spoken Creole French required prep work to prepare for the American History Regents exam. We were able to provide a licensed high school teacher, also fluent in Creole French. Eventually, this student passed the Regents test and was able to earn his H.S. diploma and enroll in LaGuardia's degree program.

Unique to LaGuardia are the articulation agreements (with the Division of Academic Affairs' departments of English and Communication Skills) to run specialized credit course sections specifically designed for Deaf students in English (basic writing), Communication Skills (reading), and English 101. The English and Reading courses are very important to note, since courses such as these are rarely seen on mainstream campuses. Before these were established, students would pass these developmental skills courses only after 2 – 4 failures.

One attempt by the college was to place students in the ESL sections. Again, this failed. Finally, hiring an educator who is experienced and educated in teaching Deaf students and fluent in ASL was the solution. Students now pass these courses after one semester and gain the prerequisite foundation skills so necessary for success in other courses. These courses are not considered PDA courses but academic courses offered by the academic Division, which must meet all of the requirements as any academic course.

In addition to these courses, specific workshops are provided to Deaf and hard of hearing students to offer additional support to pass the University exit exams – Writing Assessment Testing, Reading Assessment Testing, and Math Assessment Testing (also known as CUNY Proficiency Exam). These exams have been used for placement into appropriate classes and are now required for graduation and to transfer to CUNY's four-year colleges.

#### *A unique support service system (Supplemental Instruction)-*

Supplemental Instruction Program, or SI, takes a unique approach to academic support. Rather than targeting students who are at high risk, the program identifies high-risk courses, mostly those taken by beginning students. All students in those courses have the option of attending study group sessions, facilitated by peers (also known as SI leaders), who also attend the class. SI leaders can be former students or tutors from the Deaf Community. The SI Model was developed by University of Missouri at Kansas City in the 1970's and is now widely practiced in many colleges all over the nation. Approximately three years ago, working closely with LaGuardia's SI Program Project Administrator, the Program for Deaf Adults adapted the model and implemented the SI Program for our Deaf and hard-of-hearing students here. The results were a higher rate of Deaf students passing high-risk courses.

One major project of PDA's college-wide was to increase the percentage of workers in the Deaf field who represent culturally diverse populations is the proposed Deaf Studies degree program. It is offered through the College's Human Services Program, and its students are mostly hearing whose career goals include working with the Deaf

population as interpreters, teachers, and/or human services providers.

Deaf students are also taking these courses. The curriculum includes two years of classes in American Sign Language (four different levels), Sociology of Deaf Communities, and Internship Seminars. The Coordinator and full-time professor is profoundly deaf and fluent in ASL and who teaches such mainstreamed courses as Principles of Human Relations. This professor also teaches a cross-cultural class to interpreter students (a program administered by PDA), which typically includes a panel of Deaf individuals (generally PDA students) from different cultural groups each week.

"Dual Access" courses are an outcome of the Deaf Studies initiative. Dual Access courses are either ASL (II through IV) courses offered in the academic division that can be offered to students for academic credit or continuing education status. This innovative system has helped increase the enrollment in these courses, a problem we had previously seen when continuing education and academic divisions compete for the same students.

The Dual Access system in Basic Writing and Reading Skills courses are also made available to Deaf and hard-of-hearing students who are not matriculated. This has helped students to maintain non-degree status for one semester before entering as a degree students and tapping into financial aid and vocational rehabilitation supports.

One other noteworthy item is worth mentioning. Every year, Deaf and Hard of hearing students of color and diversity in the Basic Skills Academic Writing course contribute their best essays to a college-wide reading. Some of these essays were published as a collection in the booklet, "Voices of Deaf Writers." This booklet was distributed throughout different secondary and post-secondary educational institutions for Deaf students. The collection was also part of the required reading in the current Continuing Education's feeder program courses and in Academic's Basic Writing and Reading classes for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. These stories have often inspired other Deaf and H/H students of color. In addition, some of the students' work can be seen in Professor Sue Livingston's recently published book, "Rethinking the Education of Deaf Students: Theory and Practice from a Teacher's Perspective."

### *Extracurricular Activities-*

The Deaf Multicultural Club (DMCC) caters to students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind both in the academic and continuing education divisions. Its main mission is to increase awareness of deaf culture within the college community and promote integration among students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing. It includes weekly meetings facilitated by a deaf, minority-group faculty advisor.

### Summary

Through its Program for Deaf Adults, LaGuardia Community College continues to be a successful pioneer in meeting the challenges and special needs of a unique multicultural student population segment—students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Specific courses and programs have been set in place and methodologies are used that are specific to this population. Significantly, the student success rate (graduation with degree) of PDA has consistently improved and now parallels that of mainstream institutions.

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