

## **Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: Perspectives from the Past and Vision for the Future**

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Closing Presentation

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Good afternoon. I am honored to be here as the closing speaker at this important symposium. As the President of Gallaudet University for nearly 19 years, I have overseen our pre-school programs, elementary and high school programs, and college programs through the Ph.D degree. As I think about our students and the factors that contribute to their success at all educational levels, it is very clear that the work you do beginning at birth and during the child's early years is critical. The work you do as parents, audiologists, speech and language pathologists, early intervention specialists-and many others-establishes the foundation upon which the deaf and hard of hearing child's future is built. Strong, coordinated early intervention that focuses on child and family has a significant impact on the success of the deaf and hard of hearing child-in school and in life. Recognizing the importance of these efforts, I want to commend the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind, the Florida Department of Health-Children's Medical Services, and the Florida Department of Education for their collaborative efforts that made this symposium possible. I also want to commend all of you for participating in this symposium.

As I prepared my remarks for today, I thought a lot about what I could share with you in about 20 minutes that might be useful at the conclusion of what I am sure was an information-packed symposium. I decided on three major areas:

1. A child born today who is deaf or hard of hearing has unlimited opportunities;
2. Barriers to success for deaf and hard of hearing people of any age are not primarily because of the "disability." Barriers and experiencing disability are primarily because of the attitudes of others-attitudes in our society and sometimes, even attitudes among professionals;
3. Educational programs and the vast array of services do a fine job for deaf and hard individuals, but we can do even better. I will talk about how we can do better.

When I became the first deaf president of Gallaudet University in 1988, I proclaimed that "Deaf people can do anything but hear." Some were inspired by my conviction; others were doubtful. Some-including some deaf people-didn't believe a deaf person could succeed as the president of a university and expected me to fail. Why would deaf people think that? That's part of the power of attitudes in society and the dynamics of oppression. When people are told all of their lives, and sometimes for generations, that they cannot do certain things or that they cannot have the same aspirations as others, some come to believe it.

That was eighteen and a half years ago. I firmly believe what I said about the abilities of deaf people and it is equally true for hard of hearing people. Even then there was evidence that it was true. Some deaf people owned their own businesses, there were deaf teachers, college professors,

administrators, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. Even then there were deaf lawyers and a few physicians. I wonder if you know that a few deaf people were licensed pilots and flew their own planes, even before 1988.

Today, especially since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the opportunities are even greater and more deaf and hard of hearing children will achieve their dreams. There are deaf scientists, actors, elected members of parliaments-just about any field you can think of. What can we do to make sure that deaf and hard of hearing children are able to reach for the stars, just as children with normal hearing do?

One thing we can do is to expose deaf and hard of hearing children and their families to successful deaf adults. Many years ago, I read about a deaf adult who said that for most of his childhood he believed that deaf children didn't live to adulthood because he had never met a deaf adult. Can you imagine that? That is an extreme, and I hope there is no deaf child in 2006 with that experience.

It is important for children to see people like themselves who are successful. Most deaf children have hearing parents and understandably, it is sometimes difficult for parents to see this as important, particularly if they encourage and support their child to achieve her or his potential. Those qualities in parents are absolutely essentials and what I am suggesting is a supplement-not a substitute-for parental involvement with their child. The deaf and hard of hearing child must know that he or she is loved and included in the life of the family. It is also important for children to know people like themselves who are successful.

During the early years of my presidency, I was honestly amazed at the reaction young deaf children had to meeting a deaf university president. The experience got them thinking that if a deaf person could be a university president, then they too could achieve their dreams.

Perhaps some of you work with children who are so young that a university president would mean nothing to them. I fully understand that, but I also know that even the very, very young child can relate to and benefit from role models who are like them. Very early in my presidency (I think I had only been president for a few weeks) I was attending a meeting in Providence, Rhode Island. I was invited to visit the Rhode Island School for the Deaf and accepted with pleasure. Because I was so recently in the news and with DPN being fresh in everyone's memory, there was a lot of attention given to my visit and a lot of press people were there. Newspaper reporters, cameras, tv cameras, it was quite a show.

The superintendent met me and shook my hand and cameras flashed and people pointed microphones at us and it was all quite amazing. Standing and watching were all the children from the school. Later, during the tour, I visited a pre-school classroom where all the children had been carefully arranged in a semi-circle on the floor and there was an empty, pre-school sized chair in front for me to sit down and talk to them. Of course, I didn't have a clue what I should say to these little children, but I began signing to them and as I was signing a little boy got up, walked up to me, looked closely at my hearing aid, smiled and put his elbow on my shoulder. He stayed there, leaning on my shoulder the whole time I was sitting down.

Now he almost surely didn't know I was a deaf president or what I did for a living, but he knew that the superintendent was treating me with difference and the reporters were busy taking pictures and paying close attention to me. He knew I was important. Most importantly, he knew I was deaf. He knew I was like him. I don't know what goes on in the heads of little children, but I'm willing to bet that he recognized that I was like him, that I was important and that maybe some day he would be too.

It is not only children and youth who benefit from adult role models. People who can hear, especially those who don't know deaf people, tend to think that being deaf is a terrible thing. I guess this shouldn't surprise us. If you can hear and you try to imagine what it would be like to be deaf, you would think only about what you couldn't do, about what's missing.

Let me tell you that becoming deaf changed my life for the better. I grew up with normal hearing and was a very average student in high school-all five years of it. After high school, I enlisted in the Navy. At age 21, after several years in the Navy, I was in a serious motorcycle accident. I woke up in the hospital profoundly deaf. That was, of course, a great shock, but as I recovered my health, I quickly realized that if I wanted to make anything of my life, I would need an education.

I enrolled at Gallaudet and earned my B.A. degree and then got a masters and Ph.D at the University of Tennessee. Before becoming deaf, I never dreamed I would become a college professor or deaf, and certainly not the president of a university. It was as a student at Gallaudet-interacting with other deaf students and with deaf professors-that I learned how to be deaf and learned that I could succeed as a deaf person.

Earlier I said that opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing people today are unlimited. Deaf people today are changing the world. A young woman from South Africa who is deaf and black received a degree from Gallaudet, tore down barriers and changed the world. Chosen as the undergraduate speaker at her commencement, she spoke of experiencing racism and oppression as a black person, "handicappedism" as a deaf person, and sexism and unequal opportunities as a woman in South Africa. One of her dreams was to one day obtain the right to vote in her country. When she returned to South Africa, not only was she able to vote, she has been twice elected to the National Parliament. Another of our graduates was elected as a member of parliament in Ontario, Canada.

A Gallaudet undergraduate student who had a two-month internship in Argentina helped a deaf community there organize and advocate successfully to change the law to permit the use of sign language for educating deaf children. Prior to this effort, only oral education was permitted. That is a remarkable achievement for anyone, and an undergraduate student intern led it. Deaf people are changing the world and deaf children and youth need to know about these achievements.

It is not possible to talk about factors that contribute to the success of deaf and hard of hearing people without discussing education. Currently, education in this country is at a critical juncture and so too is the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. Among the issues are education policy trends such as high stakes testing, an increasingly diverse population, and technological

advances. Other factors that particularly affect education of deaf and hard of hearing children include:

- The number of children with cochlear implants is skyrocketing;
- More than 80% of deaf children now attend public schools, many residential schools are experiencing declining enrollment, and some have closed.

These changes present challenges for those of us working with families and educating deaf and hard of hearing infants and young children. The Clerc Center at Gallaudet has Kendall Demonstration Elementary School and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf. At the Clerc Center, we have a National Mission Program with established priorities for research, demonstration, and dissemination of best practices in education of deaf and hard of hearing students. Since 1998, 591 schools and programs have adopted innovative curricula or modified their strategies because of this work.

The Clerc Center's research and dissemination initiatives focus on literacy for all children, education of families with deaf and hard of hearing students, and transition to the world of work and postsecondary education. One of the literacy initiatives is the Shared Reading project. We know that early book sharing experiences contribute to higher reading ability in school. The Shared Reading Project is designed to teach parents and other caregivers how to read to their deaf and hard of hearing children using American Sign Language and how to use strategies to make book sharing most effective. During the past three years, 52 schools, programs, and organizations have become Shared Reading Project sites. Last year, the Clerc Center collaborated with three programs in Florida on this project: Deaf Services Bureau, Family Center on Deafness, and the Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Another priority initiative is our Cochlear Implant Education Center. The center investigates, evaluates, and disseminates effective practices related to cochlear implant technology and its role in the education and lives of deaf children from birth through high school. The goal of the cochlear implant technology is to provide deaf children with increased access to sound. An important focus of this implant is, therefore, to maximize this access to sound toward the development and use of spoken English. We also believe that students with cochlear implants should be provided with the opportunity to develop skills in American Sign Language and knowledge of deaf culture. This should not be an "either/or" issue.

These are just two of the many things we are doing at the Clerc Center. We continue to seek ways to enhance the educational experience of deaf and hard of hearing students, and share what we have learned with the many schools and programs who serve them.

What does the future hold for deaf and hard of hearing students in America? I would like us to think together about a vision for education that will help us progress toward the goal that every child's education will focus intentionally on incremental learning outcomes that will prepare him or her for success in life: in job or career, as spouse, parent, and citizen. I suggest that we think in our educational planning about every deaf and hard of hearing individual as on an educational journey from the moment she or he is born until the end of life. Most of us probably think this way in general already. What I'm not sure we think enough about is: how does what each of us

does link with-and build on-prior learning? How does what each of us does provide a foundation as the student continues on this life-long educational journey? It may be difficult for those of you who work with pre-school deaf children or other young children to imagine them in college or with a job, but everyday, you are building a foundation that will help shape their future.

In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) issued a report titled *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. That report was developed by a "national panel of top education, private sector, public policy, and community leaders [who] spent two years analyzing higher education in the United States today." The panel found that "broad, meaningful reform in higher education is long overdue." Higher education and, in fact, education at all levels has been criticized in recent years. What I like about the *Greater Expectations* report is that it proposes "a new vision that will promote the kind of learning students need to meet the emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world."

This is the kind of learning students need, whether or not they go to college. *Greater Expectations* points out the importance of "solid preparation for challenging college work achieved through excellent K-12 teaching and curricula." Isn't such excellence equally important for students who may not attend college? Shouldn't they too be expected to meet the "emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world?"

I think we may be too elitist in our approaches to education. Typically, the best teachers are found in programs and classes for talented and gifted students and in honors programs and, overall, we expect that these students will go to college. Yet we know that we also need the best teachers for students with special needs such as those with learning disabilities, emotional problems, or behavior problems. We also know that for a variety of reasons not all capable students want to-or expect to-go to college.

In *Greater Expectations* there is an emphasis on life-long learning, recognizing that part of what we know about our changing world is that people change jobs and careers far more commonly than our parents and grandparents did. We also know that the growth in information and changes in technology require new knowledge and new skills almost daily.

I know the focus of this conference has been on early childhood hearing loss and I know that I speak from the perspective and experience of a university professor and president, but I truly believe in the concept of life-long learning and how everything connects. What you do with young children is so very, very important for the rest of their lives, the rest of their learning lives.

As a university president, I know that colleges often express concern, and even complain, that many students come to college poorly prepared. *Greater Expectations* notes that 53% of first-year college students take remedial courses. Just this week, Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, spoke of the importance of aligning high school standards with college expectations. But how many colleges communicate with secondary schools about what students need to know to be prepared for college?-the skills and competencies they need to have?

I suspect (and I've heard whispered) that this is true at all levels. High school teachers want to know why students were not better prepared in elementary schools. Elementary school teachers wonder what happened in pre-school. What is often missing is the effort to link all the different levels of education and better communicate among them.

The challenge we face is developing student learning outcomes that are built on at each level in the educational system. That will promote integration of learning and progress towards achieving increasingly more complex learning outcomes.

I recognize that current mandatory testing at elementary and secondary levels typically does not emphasize analytic and integrative skills. Yet, these skills are important for students to succeed-not just in college, but also in life. They are important too as colleges strive to better prepare graduates for the challenges of the 21st century. In this era of high-stakes testing, many of you know better than I the sometimes competing priorities of increasing the number of students who pass these tests, and providing the kind of educational experiences students need to be successful, in employment, as citizens, in college, and in other aspects of their lives.

At Gallaudet, we are engaged in the process of adopting a new vision of liberal education. The base comes from *Greater Expectations*, but is adapted to fit Gallaudet as an inclusive deaf university. Thus, learning about cultures and languages includes deaf culture and American Sign Language-and also the many different ways to be deaf. The new vision was discussed widely on campus during the spring semester and we have begun discussions about implementation, a process that has implications for our curriculum and for what we will be expecting students to have as a foundation when they come to Gallaudet.

Through our collaborative efforts, I am confident that we will all see increasing numbers of deaf and hard of hearing students become successful in careers, as leaders, and in life.

Thank you.