Gallaudet reflects changes in deaf culture

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Freshman Jeffery Willoughby, center, and sophomore Michael Schmitz in a signing conversation during lunch.

The influx of "non-signers," who can hear and speak, or who read lips or text, may be necessary for the survival of Gallaudet University, the nation's premiere university for the deaf and hard of hearing. Yet it has sparked passionate debate on whether it is becoming "hearing-ized" and whether deaf culture is slipping away.

By Daniel de Vise

WASHINGTON — The quiet campus of Gallaudet University here was always a place where students could speak the unspoken language of deaf America and be understood.

That is no longer so true. For the first time in living memory, significant numbers of freshmen at the nation’s premiere university for the deaf and hard of hearing arrive lacking proficiency in American Sign Language and experience with deaf culture.

Rising numbers of Gallaudet students are products of a hearing world. The share of undergraduates who come from mainstream public schools rather than residential schools for the deaf has grown from 33 percent to 44 percent in four years. The number of students with cochlear implants, which stimulate the auditory nerve to create a sense of sound, has doubled to 102 since 2005.

Gallaudet also is enrolling more hearing students in programs to train sign-language interpreters and teachers. Together, the changes are redefining a school at the epicenter of American deaf society.

A new generation of deaf and hard-of-hearing children can study where they please. Changes in federal law have rerouted deaf students from residential schools for the deaf to mainstream public campuses, which are now obliged to serve them. Cochlear implants are gaining acceptance and changing the nature of deafness, although the deaf community remains divided on their use.

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“We want a signing environment, because how often do deaf students get that environment?” said Dylan Hinks, 20, student body president. “This is the place where I want to have comfort and ease in my communication.”

Protests, problems

There was talk of a vanishing deaf culture at Gallaudet five years ago, when protesters shut down the campus over the appointment of then-Provost Jane Fernandes as president. More than 100 demonstrators were arrested. Trustees eventually revoked the appointment.

The consensus on campus today is that the protest centered on the propriety of the presidential search. Protesters said outgoing President King Jordan hijacked the proceedings to elevate Fernandes, his protégé.

But Fernandes portrayed herself as a casualty in a deaf-culture war. Born deaf, Fernandes grew up speaking English and learned to sign as an adult. She claimed that, to students advocating the primacy of sign language, she was "not deaf enough."

Fernandes now serves as provost of the University of North Carolina, Asheville. In an email interview, she said, "There remains entrenched at Gallaudet a strong deaf culture that perpetuates a very narrow way to live as a deaf person."

One year during her tenure as Gallaudet provost, Fernandes said, upper-level students hazed freshmen, ordering them not to speak in any of their classes so that they were forced to sign.

"I had freshmen in tears, telling me that Gallaudet recruited them under false pretenses, because they were told Gallaudet welcomed all deaf students," she said.

After Fernandes' ouster, accreditors from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education put Gallaudet on probation. The censure dealt a stunning blow to Gallaudet's academic currency. Some feared the school would close.

Accreditors found academic standards virtually nonexistent. The university admitted students who could not graduate and employed professors who could barely sign. The institution was not keeping pace with the changing deaf world. Undergraduate enrollment had slipped from 1,274 in fall 2005 to 1,040 in 2007.

A bilingual vision

The Gallaudet of today scarcely resembles that fractured campus.

President Alan Hurwitz, recruited away from a rival deaf school within New York's Rochester Institute of Technology, has raised standards and largely united Gallaudet around a new vision of bilingual deaf education.

"People are beginning to realize that American Sign Language is a value added," said Hurwitz, deaf since birth and a fluent signer.

Twenty months into his administration, there is little to protest.

Gallaudet's graduation rate has risen from 25 percent to 41 percent in four years. The share of graduates who continue their education has nearly doubled, to 63 percent. The school has raised admission requirements, and average ACT reading scores for entering freshmen are at their highest point in recent history. Undergraduate enrollment has rebounded to 1,118.

Hurwitz has calmed the culture wars with a schoolwide policy that affirms the primacy of sign language but also posits Gallaudet as a bilingual school.

Professors now must prove mastery of sign language to get tenure. Students, too, are expected to sign. In a campuswide email last fall, Hurwitz wrote: "Everyone on campus — no matter his or her signing level — should make every effort to communicate in sign language when in public areas on campus."

But upholding that standard is increasingly difficult on a campus where nearly half of the freshmen now come from mainstream high schools and dozens arrive not knowing how to sign. University leaders last year created a six-week crash course for 46 new signers, an orientation to Gallaudet and to the deaf world.

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