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Education

Gallaudet University adjusts to a culture that includes more hearing students

By Daniel de Vise
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The quiet campus of Gallaudet University in Northeast Washington 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 is also enrolling more hearing students in programs to train sign-language interpreters and teachers. Together, the changes are redefining a school that sits at the very 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 deaf schools 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.

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

"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."

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 I. King Jordan hijacked the proceedings to elevate Fernandes, his protege.

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 at Asheville. In an e-mail 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 provost, Fernandes said, upperclass 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’s 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 that 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.

The Gallaudet of today scarcely resembles that fractured campus.

President T. 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, who has been deaf since birth and is a fluent signer.

Hurwitz was so wary of Gallaudet's history that he turned down the search committee several times before consenting to an interview. On the day he was introduced as president, Hurwitz said, "We didn't know if everyone was going to stand up and protest."

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 e-mail 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. To help them, university leaders last year created a six-week crash course for 46 new signers, an orientation to Gallaudet and to the deaf world.

An explosive opinion piece in the school newspaper last fall decried the rise of non-signers on campus and the potential demise of “the one deaf space we can have in this country.”

Some students agree. Others favor a more patient approach to new signers.

“They’ve been speaking for years, and then they come here and they’re expected to sign,” said Tony Tatum, a 23-year-old senior. “It’s a hard habit for them to break.”

Tatum sat with four other students in the campus dining hall on a recent day. Three of them, including Tatum, came from public schools and learned to sign at an advanced age.

“Before I came to Gallaudet, I thought I was the only person in the world who was hard of hearing,” Tatum said. Now, he plays on Gallaudet’s celebrated football team, a squad that

invented the huddle in the 1890s as a way to hide signs from the other side.

Easter Faafiti, a 22-year-old junior, didn't know about Gallaudet until she took a sign language course at a community college. Her hearing parents "knew nothing about deaf culture, not one thing."

At the lunch table, Faafiti and Tatum communicated in sign, even though both are more comfortable with spoken English.

"I would prefer to speak," Tatum said. "But if I'm going to speak to someone who can't hear me, that makes no sense."

Leila Hanaumi, a 21-year-old senior, attended a deaf school and knew Gallaudet and its history when she enrolled. She's one of a few on campus who fully appreciate how much the school has improved; at an institution where the population turns over every few years, memories are short.

"In my class, we have the highest retention rate in I don't know how long," she said. Most of her class will graduate within five years, "and that's pretty much unheard of."

The university's future may depend on reaching further into the mainstream of American education. Gallaudet recruiters have tripled the number of annual visits to public schools since 2006.

A trip might focus on one or two students who know nothing of Gallaudet. Charity Reedy-Hines, the chief recruiter, recalled a recent visit to a public high school in Mississippi where

recruiters met with two deaf students.

“Both of them had never met another person like themselves,” she said. “They hadn’t even met each other.”