**Serving Deaf and Hard of Hearing Library Patrons at Morris Library**

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Librarianship is consistently devoted to the service of users or patrons regardless of social demographic. Occasionally, this devotion requires professionals and institutions to offer considerations and accommodations to populations to improve the quality of service and user experience. These considerations also apply to university libraries. The Core Commitment section of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Plan for Excellence states the goal to “identify and work to eliminate barriers to equitable services, spaces, resources, and scholarship.” (ACRL, 2022). Keeping these values in mind, the University of Delaware Morris Library must develop strategies to serve the deaf and hard of hearing population in its surrounding community. Training in DHH service techniques, assistive technology, and the incorporation of sign language education are vital in this venture to eliminate barriers in the academic library environment.

# User Demographics

Primary considerations to be made when serving deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) patrons begin with the need for visual cues in the absence of reliance on sound and recognizing that hearing-related disabilities can vary in debilitation and required accommodation. Using a universal approach to service promotes equity in the library to avoid unconscious biases or audism in the library’s everyday function (Cawthon, 2021). Rather than separating programs or strategies for each demographic, it would be more prudent to approach service in a way that prepares library staff to assist various demographic populations at the university, using the individual patron as the guideline for service. This preparation stresses the need for professionalism, adaptability, and user-based assistance, which is a key part of training library staff at Morris Library.

**Needs Assessment**

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention found in a recent study that five percent of adults in the state of Delaware have a hearing-related disability (CDC, 2022). This percentage equates to approximately 50,170 people. Given this, there is little excuse for the absence of proper service consideration for the DHH population in Morris Library. Additionally, the University of Delaware is just a few miles from the state's largest deaf learning institution, the Delaware School for the Deaf (DSD). It is not radical to assume that many children studying at DSD might eventually show interest in attending the University of Delaware when they reach that point in their education, as many already are. DSD has publicly stated that they would gladly collaborate with the university in DHH education (Thiruchittampalam, 2019). The presence of this community enthusiasm pushes the already existent need for DHH support at Morris Library further into undeniability.

**Program Strategies**

Bobbie Bushman at the University of Texas developed the “Model of Successful Services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Public Libraries” in 2018. The first stage or step of that model was “Staff Attitudes.” (Bushman, 2018). This finding is a common thread that runs through service strategies for DHH and many other disabilities and impairments in the library. Another study in Pakistan assessed the concerns of DHH students in a university classroom setting. In doing so, the most common concerns of the students were the lack of interpreters and the general feeling of being disregarded. With the lack of necessary accommodations, the students in the study reported feeling discouraged from asking for additional help, and their class grades worsened as a result (Fatima, 2012). One of the most powerful differences the library can make is showing that concern and creating a comfortable environment for everyone, including those with disabilities.

The way a patron is treated by the staff in a library profoundly affects their experience. In Morris Library, training for librarians in service techniques that enhance the user experience of DHH patrons is ideal. In this training, the characteristics of this disability are considered and translated into the following points:

* **Reliance on visual cues**. DHH Patrons are likely to require some form of visual cue to communicate (ASL, lip reading, body language, etc.). When working with a DHH patron, ensure a well-lit area to enhance visibility. Do not speak louder or slower than usual, but use some annunciation for clarity. If the patron does not understand something, try rephrasing rather than repeating.
* **Kindness and consideration**. This is not unique to DHH patrons but is worth extra consideration. The library experience is user-based, so prioritize attitude. Be sure to have the patron’s attention before attempting to speak with them. If an interpreter is present, still speak directly to the patron, not the interpreter (Mvanyek, 2021).
* **Universal approach.** If addressing a group of people that includes a DHH patron, be sure that the patron can see you, but try not to single them out. This could make the patron uncomfortable and embarrassed, which is the opposite of the ideal experience for any patron. Visual text is ideal as additional supplementation, as not all DHH patrons are able to read lips (K. Mendez, CF-SLP, personal communication, August 3, 2022).
* **Be open to variation.** While the universal approach promotes equity in library service, it is crucial to remember that every patron is an individual, and DHH holds excessive variation (Cawthon, 2021). One person might prefer a different way of communicating than another (writing rather than lip reading or ASL, for example), so the librarian should be open to altering their service approach by being observant and paying attention to the patron’s preferences.

There is a plethora of literature about the need for adequate DHH programming and attention in libraries, particularly academic. Instead of pushing for the incorporation of exclusive programs for DHH patrons, the common direction is pushing for universal or all-inclusive programs. This would mean that the programs and services offered by academic libraries would be usable for various patrons, including those with disabilities like DHH. That being said, one-on-one assistance with Morris Library Reference Librarians is available to every student at the university, whether in person or by online communication.

**American Sign Language (ASL)**

There is no formal American Sign Language (ASL) education at the university, regardless of expressed interest in the student population. Many students at the University of Delaware have expressed interest in taking classes in ASL through the language department. However, any proposal to include any class in the subject has been ignored or turned down. In 2019, the student-run ASL Club proposed incorporating these courses, with over 200 students showing interest, and nothing ever came of the request (Thiruchittampalam, 2019). The National Association of the Deaf presents the education and use of ASL as a core value, highlighting the benefits of increasing ASL education (NAD, 2022). As pioneers of inclusivity, librarians can take steps to take the community in this direction. Since, as mentioned previously, DSD has expressed interest in collaborating with the university, it would be a wise venture to educate library staff in basic ASL. At the very least, offering ASL education as an option would be well worth the time and resources spent.

**Technology**

Multiple assistive listening devices (ALDs) exist for amplification at the University of Delaware in classrooms and the library. These include FM systems, Roger remote microphones, and Bluetooth microphones. What remains of this observation is the desire to discover which ALD is most effective in learning environments. When asked about the state of the university’s consideration of DHH students and faculty from a technological standpoint, Speech-Language Pathologist and University of Delaware alumna Krystal Mendez expressed her concern about the lack of preparation of staff in using ALDs:

The university does acknowledge the possibility of students in the deaf community, providing information on auditory devices and communication methods. However, with the knowledge that staff members have access to for FM systems, it is important to note that each system must be synced to an individual channel. Channels can have interference, which needs to be adjusted by a specialist. [These systems] are a common tool in the school system, and staff must be aware of communication modifications to support these students. (K. Mendez, CF-SLP, August 3, 2022)

In addition to providing professional ALD training for staff, Mendez expressed concern about background noise in common spaces potentially interfering with ALD technology. A 2016 study at the University of Melbourne sought to determine the most efficient ALD to use in “sub-optimal listening environments.” (Zanin, 2016). Conducting the study in classrooms, the researchers found that Roger remote microphones were the most effective in assisting hearing with background noise. Mendez agrees that the Roger microphones are most effective in a learning environment, calling on her experience with ALDs at the university.

Regarding these points, the presence of ALD technology training would improve the experience of DHH library patrons. In addition, considering the environment of common spaces in the library and assessing the amount of background noise would be ideal. Using some separate spaces in the library as areas where there can be excessive noise and limiting background noise in common spaces would act as a universal action (Zanin, 2016). This modification would improve user experience for DHH patrons and create a peaceful and uninterrupted learning environment for other students.

**Conclusion**

Considering DHH patrons in the University of Delaware Morris Library is no less than a necessary improvement to an inclusive educational environment, and it begins with this conversation. An article in Review of Research in Education stated that “…perhaps the most important aspect of a deaf-centered framework is that it is not just inclusive of deaf perspectives but begins with them in mind.” (Cawthon, 2021). This plan is not a fad movement, but rather it attempts to begin the work of preparing library staff to serve a variety of patrons, regardless of disability or demographic. Using DHH service techniques and effective ALDs, as well as beginning the incorporation of sign language education at the University of Delaware, help ensure this goal, prepare library staff for work in Morris Library, and set an excellent example for our educational community.

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