

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students
in Higher Education
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Although access to Higher Education was not a right *denied* to persons who were differently-abled, a lack of encouragement, inclusivity, and support can very easily be perceived in the same manner. Gaining access, recognition, and equality in the Higher Education system for the deaf community began much earlier than the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 or even of 1973; it began with the inception of Gallaudet College in 1864. (Gallaudet.edu)

Originally founded in 1856 as a school as well as housing establishment for 12 deaf and six blind students, what we now know as Gallaudet University, was incorporated as an institution for learning by congress in 1857 and known as the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind. (Gallaudet.edu) In 1864 Congress granted the institution the ability to award college degrees and President Abraham Lincoln signed the bill. (Gallaudet.edu) “Today, Gallaudet is viewed by deaf and hearing people alike as a primary resource for all things related to deaf people, including educational and career opportunities; open communication and visual learning; deaf history and culture; American Sign Language; and the impact of technology on the deaf community.” (Gallaudet.edu) All diplomas awarded by Gallaudet are still to this day, signed by the presiding US president.

Gallaudet, however, is not the only post-secondary institution dedicated to the holistic development of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, there is also the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. In 1966 Rochester Institute of Technology was chosen to host the federally funded National Technical Institute for the Deaf, which was established in 1963 by Public Law 89-36 and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. (Rit.edu) There were many reasons this site was chosen by the national committee but mostly for its extensive history of technical and cooperative education, and its emphasis on career preparation. (Rit.edu)

Individually, Gallaudet currently enrolls approximately 1,300 undergraduates and 600 graduate students while the National Technical Institute for the Deaf has a somewhat similar enrollment of approximately 1,100 students. Overall, the number of deaf students attending colleges and universities has been said to have increased dramatically over the past two decades (Lang, 2002, 1) and the National Center for Education Statistics (1999) found that there are currently approximately 25,000 students enrolled in some type of postsecondary institution. (as cited by Lang, 2002,1) Although between both Gallaudet and RIT one finds about 12% of the total population of self-identified deaf or hard of hearing students, these numbers reflect only those students attending North American institutions and does not accurately reflect those who are attending higher education institutions abroad. (Lang, 2002, 1; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999)

The most recent study to have been conducted was in 1994 by the National Center for Education Statistics and was based on the academic years 1989-1993. In the year 1989-90 there were approximately 17,000 students enrolled in a postsecondary institution who self-identified as either deaf or hard of hearing. By the 1992-93 school-year this number increased resulting in an estimated amount of about 20,040 students that self-identified; an increase of approximately 3,000 students in only four years . According to the study done by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1994, almost half (47%) of the nation's 5,000 two and four-year postsecondary education institutions enrolled one or more students who identified themselves as deaf or hard of hearing. Of students who self-identified as either, about half attended large institutions (9,710 out of 20,040) and were more likely to be enrolled in two year institutions as opposed to four year. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) In 1993 students tended to be enrolled in institutions in the West more so than in any other region and more students were

enrolled in public schools rather than private or independent institutions (79% vs 29%).

(National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) From 1989 to 1993 these characteristics were reported to have remained relatively stable. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994)

In 1973 Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act, which included Section 504. In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act was installed and this was also modeled after Section 504. These two pieces of legislation are very complex as they address multiple facets of living within society; for the purpose of exploring the accessibility of higher education for the deaf community our focus is solely on Section 504 as it addresses issues of equity in education. Section 504 made discrimination against persons with disabilities by programs, activities, and institutions that received federal financial assistance illegal. It also required that students with disabilities would not be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination by any institution which is subject to the ADA.(Ed.gov; ahead.org; nad.org) Other than enforcing the programmatic piece, 504 also regulates that schools provide “free appropriate public education” appropriate as defined by ensuring that the educational, communication, and learning needs of disabled persons are met through services provided so that they are fully prepared for their curriculum in the same way that non-disabled students are prepared. Throughout the course of the study conducted by NCES, they found that about a third (37 percent) of the 5,000 two-year and four-year postsecondary education institutions provided special support services.

In 2008 the Amendments Act, which was a revisionary document to these two previous pieces of legislation, updated the meaning of the term “disability” emphasizing that the definition to be considered more broadly. The act also called for a series of other items such as expanding the list of available activities to a non-exhaustive list, it made clear that a disability is disability if it disrupts major life activity, and also used more intentional language about who is able to

receive reasonable accommodations and who is ineligible. These legislative documents served as the catalyst for access and entry to higher education for deaf and hard of hearing students. As with other populations of students, it's not that they were necessarily *denied* access prior to these historical acts, but rather as a result of them are now being provided services and experiencing inclusivity within all higher education in a way that they as a community had not previously experienced. "In the past, the vocational rehabilitation counselors would often immediately send Deaf students to Gallaudet University or NTID. With the implementation of the ADA, vocational rehabilitation counselors are sometimes encouraging, or even requiring, students to attend local colleges to reduce costs." (Lippincott, 242)

The general accessibility of higher education has been altered because of the services being enforced. During the 1992-93 academic year, postsecondary education institutions provided 8,700 deaf and hard of hearing students with classroom note takers, 8,100 with sign language interpreters, 5,320 with tutors to assist with ongoing coursework, 1,070 with assistive listening devices, and 970 with oral interpreters. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) "Since the passage of the ADA, many more Deaf students have entered "hearing" colleges and have been provided with accommodations such as sign language interpreters, real-time captioners, note-takers, and other technological equipments. This has increased the options and opportunities for Deaf individuals not only in education but also in employment and other aspects of Deaf individuals' lives." (Lippincott, 242)

As a whole, the deaf community within higher education continues to increase steadily each year and with continued enforcement of legislation that encourages inclusivity of differently abled persons, this is a trend we should continue to see. Encouraging support within one's own college can be manageable and inclusivity should be a goal that is continuously strived for, but

first an understanding of the populations present, is essential. Although the process has been slow, administrators, legislators, professors, stakeholders, students, and anyone else involved in the university environment can do their part to ensure that students with different needs feel just as essential to their institutions as any other student, they just need to determine their priorities.

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