

The Hearing Impaired
and Post-Secondary Education

Barriers to Learning

by Diane Dyson
Canadian University Press



A well-intentioned Ontario professor hooked a teletypewriter up to his departmental phone so he could talk directly with his deaf students. But his students didn't phone. He couldn't understand the poor response until someone pointed out that the calls had to go through the main college switchboard — which wasn't equipped to handle them.

Deaf students face numerous barriers in the search for accessible post-secondary education, but well-meaning ignorance is the least of them.

"A deaf student will always be at the short end of the stick," says Ann Kerby, Co-ordinator for Disabled Student Services at Concordia University. "It's a language problem, a communication problem, a learning problem."

"In higher education, communication skills are critical," she says.

"Blind people are more able to develop vocabulary skills, and they have more ways to draw in information," Kerby says. "Reading skills for the deaf are usually low. A lot of American schools for the deaf give a remedial year to help remedy the situation."

Many deaf people who attend a hearing university have learned to compensate for their hidden disability.

"Some hearing-impaired students try it on their own, and it can be a very frustrating experience," says Judy Bauer of the Communication Services Department from the Canadian Hearing Society.



Problems facing hearing impaired students seem insurmountable

"They don't want to be singled out. Usually, they are able to pick up lectures, but once it comes down to participation and discussion it becomes much more difficult," Kerby says.

"The hearing-impaired are the same as you and I," explains Liz Scully, a sign language interpreter in Montreal. "They just have a slightly different background because of how information is accessed. Experiential learning is important."

Even if a student has been orally trained and is able to read lips, the classroom setting can be formidable.

Deaf students have to develop some way of communicating with the professors and classmates to get the informa-

tion they need. Deaf people usually have the communication skills to deal with daily living but when they get into university, they find their vocabulary does not include academic and scientific terms.

"To put it simply, the largest impact of deafness is the lack of exposure to information," says Scully. "Lack of exposure includes a lack of experience in English."

Therefore, the technical jargon in most textbooks is a new experience for the deaf student.

At the university level, writing presents its own problems, says Maria Barille, a hard-of-hearing graduate of McGill University and founder of the Montreal Disabled Women's Network (DAWN).

"People don't understand that if you're deaf, your whole communication skills are different. You're writing in your second or third language."



It's a language problem, a communication problem, a learning problem.

In the oral tradition of education of the deaf, educators focus on the acquisition of English right from kindergarten. If a deaf child of hearing parents hasn't been exposed to American Sign Language (ASL), communication skills are usually nil when they start school, says Jill Womack, a Montreal sign language interpreter and instructor. Womack is also a teaching assistant in a school for the deaf.

"We demand that they learn an aural/oral language when they have no language base, unless they have deaf parents who have taught them ASL," says Womack.

Some children have been lucky enough to have been exposed to a visual language such as ASL, but educators of the Oral school do not recognize the language in the classroom.

ASL was only recognized as a language, with its own set of grammatical rules, twelve years ago.

Barille says she thinks in sign language but she also speaks English and Italian.

Although it is still prevalent in Canada and on the east coast of the State, the concept of Oralism for the deaf is giving way to Total Communication, which emphasizes the right to communicate in any manner available.

"The enculturization of a deaf child is very different because all the information comes through the eyes. They miss songs, nursery rhymes, and fairy tales," says Womack.

In a hearing classroom, as throughout our culture, the majority of communication is aural/oral.



The classroom setting can be formidable

"One of our main problems is that the student doesn't have a lot of opportunity to interact with other students," says Bauer. "Unfortunately, there's not really an immediate solution to that."

"A deaf person loses environmental support," says Kerby. "Deafness is an isolating disability because you don't have the peripheral information. You miss the gossip."

Barille says she was often ignored because of her disabilities.

"It made me angry, especially in a group conversation. It was that, or you became a pet."

Once hearing-impaired students master the communication skills necessary to participate in the post-secondary education system, they have to raise the consciousness of the hearing community about the deaf and hard of hearing. In 1978, after receiving her early education at an institute for the deaf, Barille enrolled in a hearing university, even though one of the university counsellors discouraged her because she had a 'learning disability'.

Attitudes have begun to change in the past decade, and many of the problems hearing-impaired students face are more routine.

"There are different ways of addressing different disabilities," explains Kerby. "If a professor has a deaf student, we tell them to use the blackboard, whereas if they have a blind student, they shouldn't use it as much."

"In one art history class, a lot of slides were shown so the teacher couldn't be seen. Darkness is a real problem so you might as well not attend the class. If a light is shone on the interpreter or the professor, the problem's solved. Closed-



Usually, they are able to pick up lectures, but once it comes down to participation and discussion it becomes much more difficult.

captioned films are important, too," says Kerby.

Detailed class outlines also allow the student to become familiar with the material in advance.

But these problems are often the most manageable for the hearing-impaired, especially if they have access to appropriate support services. Note-takers, usually the hearing-impaired student's classmates, allow a hearing-impaired student to concentrate more fully on the spoken work. Interpreters, for those who want them, allow a deaf student to actively participate in the class.

"Once the student gets into the classroom with the proper support, it's usually very successful," says Bauer.

Bauer runs the Communication Services Department, a program that is unique in Canada because it is aimed at students who wish to study part-time. But she has only been able to fill a little more than half the requests for support services, such as an interpreter or note-takers, which are necessary in a hearing university.

"We're having a real problem with resources," says Bauer. "There aren't enough interpreters around, although there are several programs around the country, but they're just not coming out fast enough. The interpreters are overworked or overbooked."

Sometimes the problems facing hearing-impaired students seem insurmountable. Although Concordia has the highest number of disabled students in Canada, the hearing-impaired are the smallest proportion. Those statistics are similar at most universities across the country with the exception of a few places which offer specialized programs for the deaf.

Students in northern and rural regions of Canada often have to leave their homes if they want to advance their skills, says Bauer, because support services are just not easily available.

Because of the unique needs of hearing-impaired students, educational institutions for the deaf are often residential. Although this living arrangement means family ties are weakened, the deaf community provides a strong support network.



Most hearing impaired students who decide to pursue higher education move to the United States.

In fact, most hearing-impaired students who decide to pursue a high education move to the United States to attend a school for the deaf there. Until very recently, Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., was able to advertise itself as the only college for the deaf.

Gallaudet is a nerve centre for the deaf in North America and is a leading advocate of reform within the deaf community. This movement encourages the deaf to take charge of their own education.

"Deaf people have to take control of their lives and their culture," says Womack, "but they've been oppressed for so long, it's difficult."

Schools for the deaf allow this internal debate to occur.

"Gallaudet is the best place to serve deaf students because they have so many services," explains Maclin Young, head of the deaf department at Mackay Centre, an elementary and secondary school for the disabled in Montreal. "What is more, the students can participate in any extracurricular program or varsity teams."

Yet even at Gallaudet, there are drawbacks for Canadian students, says Liz Scully, who studies there. It's far from home, it's isolated from the rest of the community, and it provides an American education.

There are no blanket solutions to the problems hearing-impaired students encounter in Canadian universities because each individual is unique. But, as a starting point, Canada can begin by better serving the needs of the deaf community by establishing an institute of post-secondary education for the deaf.