

A National Agenda of Excellence and Equity for Deaf People of Color

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The American Deaf community has become more diverse and multicultural, and correspondingly, the major constituencies served by education, rehabilitation, and related human service programs are now people of color. It is well documented that deaf persons of color or from diverse non-white racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds, in general, lag significantly behind their white peers on nearly all national and regional studies of educational, occupational, or socioeconomic attainments (MacLeod-Gallinger, 1993; Anderson & Grace, 1991). To respond to the national need for comprehensive efforts to improve the educational and socioeconomic attainments of deaf or hard of hearing people of color, the University of Arkansas initiated a five-year project in 1992. The goal was to involve consumers, parents, and professionals in the development of a national agenda to guide improvement efforts.

Data for the development of the national agenda were collected through forums conducted at four national conferences of consumer organizations held between 1992 and 1994. The conferences included: *The Black Deaf Experience: Excellence and Equity* (Atlanta, GA); *The Hispanic Deaf Experience: Excellence and Equity* (San Antonio, TX); *Access Silent Asia Conference: The Asian Deaf Experience* (San Francisco, CA); and *First National Deaf Native American Convention* (Oklahoma City, OK). Conference attendees were invited to participate in the forums and to comment on a broad range of issues related to education, employment, advocacy, and empowerment. Approximately 200 participants attended the forums.

This paper provides a summary of four interrelated priority areas that emerged from the forums. Within each priority area, several recommendations are also presented. A more detailed discussion of the four priority areas is presented in Anderson and McGee (in press).

I. Elementary, Secondary, and Postsecondary Education

Participants voiced a need for schools to more vigorously promote excellence and equity for all deaf students of color. Among the strategies discussed for addressing these goals were the need for increased student access to deaf and hearing mentors and role models who are persons of color and support for greater infusion of culturally appropriate instructional materials about diverse racial and ethnic groups into K-12 programs.

Also discussed was a need for schools to hire personnel as ombudsmen or advocates to assist the parents. Potential functions included bridging language barriers, assisting parents with complex bureaucratic issues involving Individualized Education Program (IEP) procedures, and serving as cultural mediators between the parents and the schools.

Several parents supported establishing parent education and advocacy programs in their communities. Such programs could centralize resources for educating parents about legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and for disseminating information and materials in languages for families whose native language is not English. Finally, centers could provide the support network for parents in their efforts to navigate through the complexities inherent in most school systems.

Finally, several individuals discussed issues related to the underrepresentation of deaf students of color in postsecondary education programs. There are very few professionals of color

(deaf or hearing) employed in postsecondary programs to serve as role models to facilitate recruitment or to serve as on-campus mentors to enhance retention. Also, many postsecondary programs do not actively target their recruitment efforts toward deaf students of color.

Recommendations

I. a. Promote more accessible and supportive school environments for parents, families, and students, particularly for those who are new to American culture and whose native language is not English. Schools may utilize specialized personnel such as parent advocates, community liaisons, and tri-lingual interpreters.

I. b. Increase student exposure to positive adult role models and mentors by expanding employment opportunities for deaf and hearing persons of color in professional and paraprofessional positions.

I. c. Promote increased infusion of culturally appropriate instructional materials and resources about diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in K-12 school curricula.

II. Training, Recruitment, and Employment of Professionals of Color

The second major area of concern was the nationwide shortage of professionals of color, hearing or deaf, in diverse professional disciplines ranging from teachers, administrators, and rehabilitation counselors, to those involved in scholarly pursuits and research. Consequently, deaf youth, particularly those from racial ethnic minority groups, have little exposure to positive adult role models during their formative school years. Teachers, school counselors, and rehabilitation personnel are not making sufficient efforts to prepare talented youth of color to pursue professional careers working with people who are deaf.

The need for more professional interpreters of color to work in school and community settings was a major discussion topic for several participants. It was suggested that more outreach to potential interpreters of color be undertaken. Another suggested outreach strategy was that training and certification be developed for tri-lingual interpreting.

The chronic shortage of educators and vocational rehabilitation counselors of color working in schools and communities with deaf youth was another major discussion topic. Needed were strategies to recruit larger numbers of deaf and hearing people of color to pursue graduate training and employment in deaf education and rehabilitation professions. One suggested recruitment strategy was to encourage programs that provide graduate training for deafness specialists to explore ways to collaborate with colleges and universities that serve predominantly minority student populations.

In recent years, the growth of relay service programs in the various states has expanded employment opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing professionals in the telecommunications industry. New job opportunities have opened in positions such as managers of relay centers, trainers of relay operators, outreach program managers, and account managers. Concern was expressed about the lack of recruitment and employment of deaf people of color in the rapidly expanding telecommunications industry.

Recommendations

II. a. Expand opportunities for recruiting interpreters of color through establishing certification for proficiency in tri-lingual interpreting.

II. b. Expand opportunities for recruiting prospective students of color into the interpreting profession through incorporating both bilingual and tri-lingual curricula in Interpreter Education programs.

II. c. Increase outreach efforts to train and certify deaf individuals as relay interpreters, particularly those who are from racial/ethnic communities and are multi-lingual.

II. d. Expand recruitment of prospective students of color into undergraduate and graduate programs in deaf education and related human service disciplines through increased collaboration with colleges/universities serving predominately minority student populations.

II. e. Develop effective strategies to recruit and train deaf people of color for employment opportunities in emerging growth fields such as telecommunications.

III. Advocacy, Leadership, and Consumer Education

The third major priority addressed issues related to advocacy, leadership, and outreach. Two key issues identified were: (1) strategies for enhancing the leadership and advocacy skills of consumer organization leaders, and (2) the outreach and public education efforts of consumer organizations of deaf people of color.

1. Strategies for enhancing the leadership and advocacy skills of consumer organization leaders. Several individuals indicated that for leaders to more effectively advocate on behalf of their organizations, it helps to be well-informed about federal and state legislation that benefits all people with disabilities in addition to people who are deaf. Training to develop skills in advocacy and networking was viewed as a potential means for helping leaders and consumer organizations more effectively advocate for needed programs and services to benefit their members. Strategies for enhancing the outreach and public education efforts of consumer organizations were viewed as vital.

2. Enhancing outreach and public education efforts of consumer organizations of deaf persons of color. Several presenters stressed the need to develop strategies for effective outreach and public education to the larger hearing public, especially those within their own ethnic communities.

Local colleges and universities were suggested as potential resources for collaboration with consumer organizations to develop public education projects. Examples of such projects include documentary films about deaf people of color which could then be broadcast to the public on community access channels.

One parent's experience of networking with black deaf adults helped make it possible for her daughter to have access to deaf adult role models and helped raise her hopes and expectations about the future for her daughter. She and other parents recognized the need for organizations of deaf consumers of color to undertake programs and activities to help strengthen their networks with parents of deaf children of color.

Recommendations

III. a. Address the needs of consumers for training related to federal and state legislation for people with general disabilities and people who are deaf.

III. b. Address the needs of consumers for training in advocacy, leadership, and networking skills.

III. c. Develop resources and materials to enhance efforts of consumer organizations to provide outreach and public education to the larger hearing public, particularly those within their own racial/ethnic communities. Such resources are also needed to provide outreach and public education within their own deaf racial/ethnic communities.

IV. Scholarship and Dissemination of Literature and Resource Materials about Deaf People of Color

The volume of information, research, and literature produced in recent years about Deaf culture has contributed to the growth and expansion of Deaf studies curricula in schools and colleges. Similar developments have not occurred to increase knowledge and information about the various racial and ethnic groups that comprise the Deaf community. Materials are needed to educate deaf people of color about their own ethnic culture as well as their Deaf culture. They are also needed to contribute to the development of self-esteem and pride regarding their cultural heritages and to train service providers to become more knowledgeable about the diverse groups of deaf people they serve.

Research and scholarship is needed from individuals involved in diverse professional disciplines in order to produce a substantial body of knowledge about deaf people of color. National and local consumer organizations of deaf people of color will need to assume more active leadership roles to bring attention to the need for research and scholarship in this area. Ultimately, leadership by consumer organizations should lead to stronger collaborative efforts with deaf and hearing professionals involved in diverse professional disciplines who have the interest, resources, and expertise to undertake the needed research and scholarship.

Recommendations

IV. a. Encourage organizations of deaf people of color to initiate increased collaboration with their membership and professionals in diverse organizations to engage in research and scholarship to create print and audiovisual literature about the lives of deaf people of color.

IV. b. Encourage organizations of deaf people of color to initiate increased collaboration with their membership and professionals in diverse organizations to produce and disseminate books, videotapes, and related resources on the history, culture, and contributions of deaf people of color.

IV. c. Promote the infusion of instructional material and resources regarding deaf people of color within deaf studies curricula in schools and institutions of higher education.

In conclusion, we have attempted to build a framework for a national agenda to enhance excellence and equity in the education and rehabilitation of deaf people of color. Successful advocacy cannot occur, however, without commitment to empowerment and social change. At the same time, commitment to empowerment and social change is best effected through a widely supported national agenda which encourages consumers and professionals to join together as advocates at all levels—national, state, and local.

References

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