JADARA

October 2019

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Barbara L. Mallory
University of Alberta

Jerome D. Schein

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MEDIATED COMMUNICATION FOR DEAF POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

BARBARA L. MALLORY
JEROME D. SCHEIN
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada

Abstract

The increasing numbers of deaf students in postsecondary education place a strain on the institution's resources. To obtain information on how U.S. colleges and universities address this problem, all institutions having significant numbers of deaf students were sent a questionnaire. The results of the survey reveal an awareness of assistive listening devices and depict a variety of approaches to recruiting, orienting, and supervising sign-language interpreters. In addition, the sale of assistive listening devices is briefly discussed. Models for managing interpreter services are examined with respect to their advantages and disadvantages.

Deaf students sought access to postsecondary educational facilities with increasing frequency in recent years. According to the U.S. National Census of Educational Services (1989), the enrollment of deaf students grew by 29 percent from 1982 to 1987. During the same period, the total enrollment in U.S. postsecondary institutions increased by only 8 percent. Thus, the proportion of deaf students attending postsecondary institutions greatly exceeds that of the first six decades of this century (Schein & Bushnaq, 1962; Schein & Delk, 1974).

What interpreting services and assistive equipment are provided to assure that increasing numbers of postsecondary deaf students have full access to the programs they enter? How is the quality of these services monitored and maintained? Information obtained in response to such questions may be used to advantage when shared among administrators and educators who program for deaf students at the postsecondary level.

Method

To obtain information pertinent to the research questions, every U.S. postsecondary institution that reported serving deaf students was surveyed. All questions in the survey pertained to educational support services for deaf students, the main focus being provision of interpreting services.

The Sampling Frame

The December, 1989 issue of the *American Annals of the Deaf* lists 96 U.S. institutions having postsecondary programs serving deaf students. A 10-item survey form went to each of the 96 programs. In addition to asking for answers to its questions, the form requested copies of all print materials pertaining to interpreting services, whether designed for students, instructor or interpreter use. These documents were content

analyzed, providing some of the data reported below.

Results

Of the 96 institutions to which the questionnaire was mailed, 63 (65.6 percent) have replied. This response rate is generally accepted as adequate to represent the population surveyed (Kish, 1965). Of the 63 responding institutions, 61 report that they employ one or more visual-languages interpreters (VLI)[1] during the 1990-91 academic year. Fifty-three institutions have a job description and/or a list of qualifications for their interpreters. Twenty-four of these programs have sent job descriptions and 32 have provided handbooks given to their interpreters.

Job Descriptions. Job descriptions characteristically outline VLI responsibilities. Included are duties, such as general classroom interpreting (sign to voice and reverse), interpretation at special events (e.g., field trips, student-teacher conferences, special meetings and other co-curricular activities), adaptation of communication methods based on students' needs and preferences, and the development of signs for use in academic/technical disciplines. Additional duties in seven institutions include individual tutoring of deaf students.

Recruiting VLI. Only nine programs report having VLI as part of their regular school staff, while seven hire VLI only as needed. The preponderance of programs—a total of 45—manage interpreting by a combination of full-time staffing and contracting as needed.

As to sources of VLI, 51 report using informal procedures, such as word of mouth, to locate needed VLI. Twenty-four institutions advertize, either in newspapers or journals. Twenty-six programs obtain VLI from referral agencies. Of the referral agencies listed, eight are government and 12 private agencies. Eight institutions recruit from

local chapters of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and nine from other agencies. Interpreter-training programs serve as sources of VLI for 20 programs, or nearly one-third of respondents. Four programs report job posting as a method of recruiting VLI. Only one postsecondary institution reported having an "in-house" supply of VLI at the ready.

Orienting VLI. Of the 63 responding programs, 45 use print materials to introduce VLI to their duties, while 16 did not do so. Two programs did not answer this query. Fifty-seven orient VLI to their support role through workshops, monthly support meetings, on-staff mentorship, and provisions of "technical sign videotapes." Forty-three institutions give their VLI a policy manual or other listing of do's and don'ts. More than one-quarter of the programs do not make their policies available to VLI in print form.

Policies for VLI. Materials given VLI emphasize ethical conduct, tutoring, and dress code. In the area of professional conduct, 26 institutions refer their VLI to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf's Code of Ethics, whereas three facilities provide their own ethical guidelines. With regard to tutoring, 18 of the handbooks caution VLI *against* serving as tutors to hearing-impaired students. By contrast, seven programs define tutoring as part of the VLI's duties. Regulations relating to appearance appear frequently in VLI handbooks: 16 programs outline some form of clothing regulation and five require VLI to wear a smock during classroom service. Nine institutions have guidelines regarding the wearing of jewelery and accessories, and seven prescribe correct hair and moustache styling.

Policies for Students. The majority of postsecondary institutions (61 of 63) inform their deaf students about the interpreting services available to them by one or more of several means. Fifty-one schools do so by supplying students with print materials; the same number use individual counselling for this purpose. Thirty give lectures

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to advise deaf students about interpreting services. In addition, 23 programs describe various other methods of informing students about provisions for interpretations, like posting notices on bulletin boards. Only two institutions have no formal procedures in this regard.

Determining VLI Quality. Respondents were asked to explain how their institutions determined the quality of VLI services. Sixty responded with one explicitly stating it takes no steps to evaluate VLI, while 13 rely on pre-employment information. Forty-seven do an on-the-job assessment.

The 47 on-the-job evaluations have been categorized as *formal* or *informal* according to the description provided. Formal evaluations are regularly conducted in accordance with preset methods, while informal evaluations are sporadic and vary from time to time in the way assessment data are gathered and assessed.

For the purpose of formal evaluation, 33 institutions use direct observation of VLI performance by their supervisory staffs. Deaf students formally evaluate VLI in 16 institutions. Only three institutions make use of reports from their instructors.

Informal evaluations are conducted by 15 institutions, using student reports as they arise. Ten institutions make occasional use of observations by supervisors, and two obtain sporadic reports from instructors.

Special Equipment for Deaf Students. The survey question asked respondents to indicate what, if any, special equipment was purchased during the previous four-year period to support postsecondary programs for hearing-impaired students. A total of 48 answered that they have bought equipment: 28 assistive listening device systems and 27 caption decoders for television sets. Thirty programs made other equipment purchases, such as real-time captioning equipment, telecommunication devices for the deaf, and assorted flashing doorbells and alarm systems.

Discussion

The majority of U.S. postsecondary programs (42 institutions) provide *both* VLI and assistive listening device systems or other equipment to aid deaf students in their educational programs. By far, however, programs spend the most on VLI services; only two of the responding 63 institutions do *not* report employing at least one VLI during the 1990-91 academic year.

Whether one considers VLI as professionals, technicians, or some other category of service providers, there are three basic models for acquiring their services: Staff, Contractor, and Mixed models. Each had advantages and disadvantages for the responding institutions.

Staff. Nine U.S. institutions that have large numbers of deaf students hire VLI on a full-time basis. The advantages to such an arrangement are both administrative and educational. By having VLI on hand whenever they are needed, administrators are relieved of the often-difficult task of impromptu recruiting and scheduling VLI. The quality of interpreting is more easily ascertained and maintained when VLI are employees than when they are independent contractors. Such matters as providing orientation to the facility's policies and making allowances for unusual assignments (interpreting in a highly technical course, for example) are much easier to manage when VLI are full-time employees.

The disadvantages of the Staff Model are largely economic. Full-time staffing means a commitment for salaries and fringe benefits. Another potential disadvantage is a loss of flexibility in staffing: whether needed or not, staff VLI continue to be paid.

Contractor. Only seven respondents said they depend entirely on freelance interpreters. Such an arrangement holds costs strictly to use and promotes maximum flexibility—provided that VLI are sufficiently available in the community to meet the deaf students' requirements.

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The disadvantages are those noted as advantages for the Staff Model: less quality control, constant recruiting, and scheduling difficulties. An interesting sidelight is the case of Gallaudet University which states is only hires VLI as needed. That response is not surprising when one recalls that all of its faculty are expected to sign, so freelance VLI are only engaged for special occasions, not for regular classroom assignments.

Mixed. The Mixed Model is, by far, the most common: 45 of the 63 respondents use it. Its major advantages are increased flexibility and quality control at relatively small cost. The full-time staff provides supervision for the free-lance VLI, thus lending more quality assurance than can usually be obtained by a facility when it depends solely on contractors and lacks full-time supervisory staff knowledgeable about interpreting.

If adequate numbers of VLI live in and around the facility, the disadvantages are relatively few. The Mixed Model faces problems in direct proportion to the number of VLI in the area and the number needed to staff deaf student's programs. The interpreter staff does not have the high esprit de corps that often accompanies the Staff Model. Contractors seldom identify with the programs in which they serve intermittently.

In terms of the trade-offs of costs, flexibility, and quality control, however, the Mixed Model would appear to be both the most practical and most desirable for postsecondary institutions that serve deaf students. However, the other two models have advantages worth considering.

Conclusion

A principal means of making spoken communication visible is through VLI, whether manual or oral. Unlike assistive listening systems the costs of VLI are high, their services are in short supply, and their maintenance—supervision, evaluation, and quality assurance—is complicated. Although most U.S. institutions providing postsecondary educational programming for deaf students make assistive equipment available to them, the most frequently purchased support is interpreting. Survey responses indicate that the Mixed Model for managing interpreting services is most commonly used in the U.S. Whether it is best for the deaf students is the next question that should be addressed by researchers.

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Notes

1. The term *visual-language interpreter* is used to cover both sign language and oral interpreting. It is also preferable to the unmodified use *interpreter*, which applies to those who speak in one language what is spoken in another.

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