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Best Practices for Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Student Success in Postsecondary Education

Mark J. Myers & Elaine M. Taylor

Abstract

More deaf students graduated from college in the United States in 1987 than were enrolled altogether just 25 years ago (Walter 1989). Yet this number is only about 30% of those who attempt postsecondary studies. In light of this estimated 70% withdrawal rate, we must ask whether the special needs of deaf students are being met in a manner that provides them equal opportunity to succeed at the postsecondary level (Stinson and Walter, 1992, p 57).

In studies conducted by Rawlings, Karchmer and DeCaro in 1988 and by Tinto in 1987, it was demonstrated that the withdrawal rate of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in 2-year colleges was 14% higher than that of hearing students. In 4-year colleges and universities, the withdrawal rate of deaf and hard-of-hearing students was 140% higher than that of hearing students. "What is different about deaf students, relative to the 'typical' hearing ones, is that they most often require special social environments and modifications in the academic environment in order to experience social and academic integration" (Stinson and Walter, 1992, p. 58).

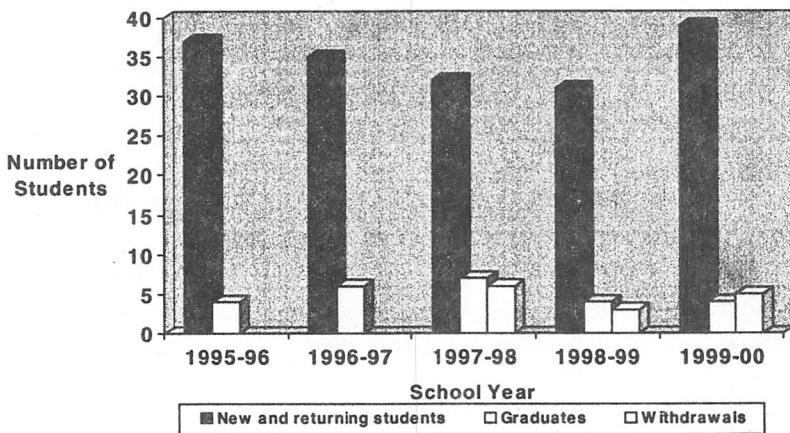
To gain true understanding for what the deaf or hard-of-hearing student faces in the postsecondary environment, the authors recommend the reader block his/her ability to hear (use maskers or ear plugs), walk into a classroom and try to participate on an equal footing with the hearing students. It will definitely be an "eye opener". This paper will examine the reality of hearing loss and the impact upon a deaf or hard-of-hearing student placed in the typical mainstream college classroom. The reality is, best practices for deaf and hard-of-hearing students *begin at the beginning and continue until the end* and *begin with the end in mind*. The *beginning* is taking time to understand the diverse backgrounds from which deaf and hard-of-hearing students may enter your postsecondary program (Flexer, Wray, and Leavitt, 1990).

Diversity of Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Students

Many deaf and hard-of-hearing students who are currently enrolled in postsecondary education have diverse educational backgrounds. Some have experience in residential school settings from a young age (a boarding school with a dormitory), returning home for weekends, holidays and summer vacations. Others have attended day school and/or mainstream

educational environments while residing at home. A few deaf and hard-of-hearing students never encountered another deaf person, while many deaf and hard-of-hearing students are part of the Deaf subculture. Naturally, preference of communication modes varies among these students. Some have been raised with the emphasis on aural/oral communication methods while others use manual communication such as American Sign Language, Signed Exact English, Cued Speech and other sign language systems. The diverse communication modes used by these students have pervasive implications for successful completion of postsecondary education, personal growth and social development. The Collegiate Education for Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Persons (CEDHH) program at Northwestern Connecticut Community College (NCCC) has enrolled a consistent number of students who are deaf and hard-of-hearing in recent years reflecting the diversity described above. Shown in Figure 1 are the enrollment, graduation and withdrawal rates of deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled at NCCC since 1995.

Figure 1. Enrollment, graduation and withdrawal rates of deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled at Northwestern Connecticut Community College between 1995 and 2000.



Listed below are many of the specific issues regarding the diversity among deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled in postsecondary institutions across the country.

- Ninety percent (90%) of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the United States come from hearing families (Schein, 1989). There

are also many students from families where other members have a significant hearing loss.

- Most deaf and hard-of-hearing students within the United States attend public schools though there are a large number of students who attend a school for the deaf. Within the public school setting, a deaf and hard-of-hearing student may be fully mainstreamed or may be taught within a self-contained classroom (resource room), or may experience a mixture of these environments.
- Students from mainstream public school settings tend to have much less contact with the deaf community, whereas students from a school for the deaf will have had much more interaction with the deaf community.
- A student may be very experienced and comfortable with support services or may have never used academic support systems.
- The student may communicate through ASL, signed English, speaking, cued speech, tactile signing, etc. (Stinson and Walter, 1992).
- Because of the limited opportunity for a deaf or hard-of-hearing student to “overhear” conversations as hearing students do (King, 1990), he or she may experience less incidental learning than his/her hearing peer.
- The one and only rule to follow is: *There is no general rule to describe deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Each student has his/her own mixture of family, educational background and life experience, which he/she will bring to your school.*

Initial Inquiry and Campus Visit

Given this diversity among deaf and hard-of-hearing students, effective response to his/her initial contact with your school is critical. If the contact is in writing, prompt response including *information regarding the existing support services* available to students is absolutely essential. If the initial contact is via phone, does the admissions office have a TTY (text telephone) and, if so, are the admissions office personnel knowledgeable and comfortable using it? If there is no TTY, does the admissions staff know how to receive and make calls to deaf and hard-of-hearing people through the state's telephone relay system?

When establishing appointments for on campus visits/interviews, communication needs must to be identified to insure clear and accurate communication during the interview process. Is there a need for an American Sign Language interpreter, an oral interpreter, a deaf blind interpreter, a cued speech interpreter, or a transliterator? Remember, that

during the interview you will be *revealing YOUR ability to provide services* while the student is on your campus. *The on-campus visit is NOT the time to depend on mom, dad or the counselor accompanying the student for clarity of communication in lieu of an interpreter to facilitate direct communication with the potential student.*

Interviewing for admission to college is an exciting time for both the student and the admissions counselor. “ Too often programs are concerned with attracting students to the college or university with little thought to the fit between the needs of the student and the expectations of the environment” (Stinson and Walter, 1992, p. 55). How does one guard against this?

During the campus visit/interview:

- ◆ *Communicate directly with the student.* This initial interview can provide excellent baseline information regarding the student’s communication strengths, how well he/she understands and follows directions, his/her ability to self-advocate, his/her level of self confidence, etc.
- ◆ *Include a class observation (preferably where support services are being provided).* The student needs to develop a strong sense of what to expect from classes (size of rooms, number of students enrolled, college classroom dynamics, etc.) and see the academic support services at work. You will need to arrange this with the faculty member ahead of time.
- ◆ *Visit the residential facility* to see how it is set up (size of room, number of students to a room, presence of a visual alarm system, availability of captioning on the television, availability of interpreters for dorm meetings) Many postsecondary institutions/programs do not provide dormitories for students. In this situation, provide housing lists and be able to recommend certain landlords who may be particularly eager to welcome deaf and hard-of-hearing students. If some students who are new to the area are seeking roommates, give them each other's name, address and phone number and encourage them to contact one another to discuss the possibility of sharing their living accommodations during the school year.
- ◆ *Discuss the student’s support service expectations.* Exactly what support services does the college provide? How does the student access these services? Whom does the student see if there is a problem? Are the interpreters “on staff” or do you hire from the outside? Do they have RID (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf) or NAD (National Association of the Deaf) certification? Do you

provide notetakers? Are they trained? Do you provide C-print or CART (Computer Aided Real Time Captioning) captioning services? Are these notes printed out and distributed to the student? Do you provide tutors? What are their qualifications? Do they have experience working with deaf and hard-of-hearing students?

A sense of community and belonging is one of the key factors in student success in postsecondary education (Tinto, 1989). Arrange for the visiting student to meet and chat with deaf and hard-of-hearing students who are currently enrolled in your program (Saur, 1992). Potential students will want to know: How many deaf or hard-of-hearing students are enrolled at your school; Are deaf and hard-of-hearing students welcome to join teams and clubs; If communication access is available for extra-curricular activities?

This is the time to FIND OUT what the student's abilities are:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Native language | Preferred mode of communication |
| English language skill | Ambient learning base |
| Educational background | Reality of what to expect in college |
| Experience with support services | Motivation to succeed |

Each of these areas is very important and can directly affect the student's achievement level, but the most critical personal quality is his/her motivation to succeed (Stinson and Walter, 1992). Students can overcome poor English language skills, lack of experience, and a myriad of other challenges if they have a reason to succeed.

Above all, do not expect that replicating the secondary educational environment will meet the student's needs at the college level. Most deaf and hard-of-hearing students who have come to NCCC from secondary programs where they received minimal, if any, support services in their classes, are awed by their own ability to achieve academic excellence when placed in a program which provides total communication access to information and involvement.

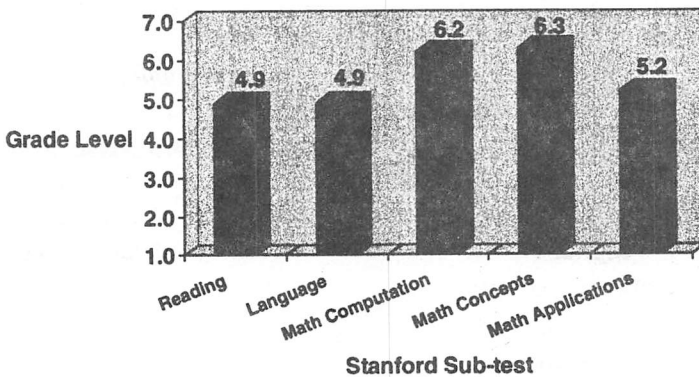
Professional Resources

It is critical that professionals new to provision of support services for deaf and hard-of-hearing students develop a network of resources as quickly as possible. This network will include the student's previous school professionals, his/her vocational rehabilitation counselor, agencies within your geographic area that work with deaf and hard-of-hearing adults, interpreter referral services, local hearing aid dealers, and, of course, the programs with years of experience in providing quality postsecondary education to deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

Assessment of Student Readiness

At NCCC, because of the open-door admission policy, every potential student is given a placement test. Because the reading, writing and general academic preparedness of deaf and hard-of-hearing students can substantially differ from that of hearing students (King, 1990), a screening is done to determine which of several placement tests is the most appropriate for obtaining an accurate measure of the student's academic readiness for college. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students may be given the regular college placement test (ACCUPLACER), or they may be given either the Intermediate III, Advanced I or Advanced II form of the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) which is normed for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The CEDHH suggested guideline for placement test results in recommending a student to enter the College is that they demonstrate a minimal 4th grade level on the reading, writing and mathematics components of the Intermediate III SAT test. A 4th grade level in these areas on the Advanced I form of the SAT is preferred. Pre-entry academic skill levels of deaf and hard-of-hearing students entering NCCC over the last seven years are consistent with this, as is shown in the table below:

Figure 2. Mean pre-entry academic skill levels of deaf and hard-of-hearing students entering NCCC from 1993 -2000.



Each incoming student who is deaf or hard-of-hearing is required to submit a letter of recommendation from her/his teacher or high school counselor. This provides CEDHH staff with additional information regarding the academic skills, motivation, creative thinking skills, leadership potential, maturity, personal and academic goals of the applicant. This information provides a better understanding of the student's

needs which leads to optimum class placement and establishment of appropriate support services.

Transitioning Students into the College

All new students want to be included, to feel a part of the college community. As mentioned above, the degree to which communication access is provided across the college community determines the degree to which new deaf and hard-of-hearing students feel welcome and wanted (Stinson and Walter, 1992).

In addition to campus-wide communication access, a formalized transition program, or orientation, contributes significantly to the comfort level of entering students. The CEDHH program at NCCC has developed, over the years, a weeklong, in-depth, orientation to college life followed by a semester-long "extended orientation" program. The CEDHH Orientation Week includes three components: *Academic Preview* is a three-day program during which students attend morning workshops focused on the academic content which they will be studying for the semester. These workshops introduce students to the textbook, specialized vocabulary and expectations of each of their classes. During this time students and interpreter/tutors work together to develop technical signs which will maximize the effectiveness of interpreting during the class lectures. Students spend the afternoons in the computer lab learning how to use their e-mail accounts effectively, the Internet, and Microsoft Word (which they will use to produce final drafts of their research papers). Students' level of comfort with the new environment and their academic success rates have clearly improved since the implementation of the Academic Preview program in 1996.

CEDHH Orientation is a full-day program during which students learn about the appropriate use of support services (interpreter/tutors, notetakers, counselor, communication specialist, education specialists). We all learn best when we are having fun so much of the information is presented through role plays, "returning student" panels, and Jeopardy-like games during which the students must guess the correct answers. The full CEDHH support staff is actively involved in the Academic Preview and CEDHH Orientation programs. This provides the students an extensive opportunity to get to know the support staff prior to the first day of classes. Students are asked to complete a "quiz" about what they have learned during the Academic Preview and CEDHH Orientation, by signing this quiz, students report their knowledge and understanding about effective use of support services.

NCCC Orientation is a full-day program during which all new students learn about the services of the College. Similar to the CEDHH Orientation, the NCCC Orientation makes highly effective use of "buddies". Returning students buddy up with 4-6 new students as they make their way through the maze of orientation. Buddies frequently become friends, and create an immediate bond with the new student; someone the new student can approach to ask questions without feeling embarrassed. NCCC Orientation has also found FUN to be a critical component of the program and includes a series of "New Games" to break the ice and help students get to know one another in a friendly, non-threatening way.

Extended Orientation is presented as "Student Success I" and "Student Success II" over the course of two semesters. These two courses focus on the issues of how to achieve academic success; balance time; set and achieve goals; communicate effectively with fellow students, faculty, staff, family and present or future sweethearts; how relationships can have either positive or negative effects on individual lives; the ethics of interpreting; how to obtain an interpreter for private needs such as medical appointments; and many other issues critical to the successful adjustment of new students to the College.

Support Services

The CEDHH program at NCCC is fortunate to have a full-time staff of 12 professionals working together to provide a strong support system for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. This system includes interpreting, notetaking, C-Print captioning, tutoring, counseling, academic advisement, remedial coursework, English language lab, mentoring, and communication assessment and training. *It is important for readers of this article to focus on the services being delivered rather than on the method of delivery* as most institutions do not have the luxury of full-time support services staff.

Direct Academic Support Services

Most deaf and hard-of-hearing students at NCCC attend classes with hearing students and receive full support services. The specific services provided for any one student are determined by individual educational and communication needs. Our goal is to provide sufficient support services to make each class fully communication accessible for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. We expect in return that students will be active participants in each of their classes, engaging in class discussions,

and asking and answering questions as much or more than their hearing counterparts.

The three academic support services, interpreting, tutoring and notetaking, provide a strength of support, which can be compared to a triangle. Each support service is represented by one leg of the triangle. No matter how much the triangle is shaken, pulled from one direction to another, it stands firm. But, take one leg away and the triangle collapses. This is exactly the input we receive from the majority of students who pass through our program, including many who *survived* high school with minimal supports only to realize, once they experience a classroom with full support services, how much information they had missed over the years. This is clearly reflected in the following personal commentary.

Here I was, planning my future - a latent, culturally developed deaf person - bound to go through life with a strained smile, pretending to understand everything. . . . [at NTID] never again did I have to spend long hours straining my eyes to try and capture bits of information like I did in front rows of my early school years. Public school teachers often had their backs turned to the class while writing on the blackboard and lecturing - never mind how many times they were politely asked to face the front while talking. If I was lucky, I could read a word or two off of their lips as they occasionally turned their heads sideways. When it came to class discussions I was lost, stuck with a couple of words, trying to put together a 50-piece puzzle that was missing 48 pieces. . . . [at NTID] I had an interpreter in front of me, allowing me to comprehend everything. A trained notetaker was nearby so I could fully concentrate on lectures and participate, unabashedly, in discussion (personal commentary by Willy Conley in Deaf Students in PostSecondary Education Programs, p. 163)

Students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing enrolled in mainstream classes at NCCC may request, through the CEDHH program, education access services which include:

Interpreter/Tutor

The CEDHH program at NCCC has used the model of Interpreter/Tutor for nearly 25 years. Experience has shown clearly that this is educationally the strongest and best model for provision of academic support. The interpreter assigned to a specific class is also the tutor for that class. In this model the tutor receives all academic information first hand and witnesses the student's comfort level and confidence during the class presentation. Because each interpreter must also be an effective tutor, the

educational requirements for candidates for these positions include a master's degree and RID or NAD certification.

Notetakers

At NCCC, notetakers most often are hearing students enrolled in the class with the deaf and hard-of-hearing student. Notetakers are employees of the CEDHH department; that is, they are paid to take notes. This model increases the responsibility felt by notetakers for producing high-quality notes and allows the notetaker manager to supervise the quality of the notes. Notetakers are hired and supervised by one of our 12 CEDHH staff members who also provides a brief training to each new notetaker before he/she is assigned to a class. This training explains the various forms for taking notes (outline, Cornell, mapping, etc.), and gives the notetaker a brief overview of the need for complete information, clear handwriting, use of white space and easy to read diagrams. The quality of notes is evaluated during the third week of the semester, at mid-semester and at the end of the semester.

C-Print Captioning

C-print captioning is a new computer-aided speech-to-print transcription technology that has been developed as a classroom support for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The C-print captionist types the faculty's lecture and students' comments into a laptop computer. The typed information is simultaneously displayed on a second laptop computer or a television monitor for students to read during the lecture. After class, the printed text is made available to the students for review and study purposes.

Additional Support Services

The three additional support services listed below provide the NCCC faculty and the members of the CEDHH staff with highly valuable information regarding student strengths, weaknesses, communication preferences, career goals, etc. Without this additional information, the CEDHH program would not be able to tailor individually the support services to each student to the degree it does. *Communication Assessment and Training Services* are provided by our Communication Specialist who holds two college degrees; one as an audiologist and the other as a teacher of the deaf. The results of the assessments are shared with the members of the team who will be working with the particular student. Important information such as restricted vision or a particularly strong reliance on speech reading, or a combination of both, have been extremely valuable in the provision of effective support services both in and out of the classroom.

Audiological services to students include hearing tests to verify a suspected change in residual hearing, minor repairs to hearing aids and an adequate supply of hearing aid batteries on campus. The communication specialists works with students individually to improve communication and trains members of the college community and the community at large regarding effective communication with deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

Reinforcing Student Retention and Program Completion

In spite of all the academic supports, students may still waiver, daunted by the overwhelming challenges of transitioning from their previous education or work environment to a new and strange environment called postsecondary education. *Counselors and mentors* play a vital role in helping the students over these difficult times (Saur, 1992). At NCCC, the CEDHH counselor is involved with deaf and hard-of-hearing students from the very beginning, meeting with them during their visit to the college and working closely with them throughout the application process which includes completion of placement tests and registering for their classes. The counselor meets regularly with the students throughout their stay at NCCC, helping them with career exploration, successful transfer to another college, and preparing for the job search process. It is critical for the counselor working with deaf and hard-of-hearing students to be fluent in all forms of communication and to have a strong background in deaf education.

When deaf and hard-of-hearing students at NCCC begin to show signs of floundering, a member of our CEDHH team becomes *a mentor* for that student. The role of the mentor is to meet with the student weekly, seek out the crux of the difficulty and then work with the student to develop the skills and knowledge to overcome the barrier(s) to success. The mentor is a person to whom the student can turn when the going gets tough. The recent addition of mentoring to our array of support services has impacted positively on the retention and completion rates of our deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

Another key strategy in our retention and completion rates and also impacting positively on the effective use of our limited human and fiscal resources, is the implementation of a "tracking system". Recently implemented within the CEDHH program, this system provides bi-weekly information to the CEDHH director on the attendance and preparedness of deaf and hard-of-hearing students about their academic responsibilities (classes and tutoring appointments). Students who demonstrate a pattern of non-attendance and/or non-preparedness are called in to discuss their situations with the CEDHH director. Most of the time this results in a

marked improvement in the students' attitude, motivation and behavior. Students who demonstrate no improvement in their pattern of non-attendance and non-preparedness after the second meeting with the director, may be advised to pursue their education in an alternative setting more appropriate to their educational skills and goals. If they choose to continue a pattern of non-attendance and non-preparedness they endanger the continuation of their support services.

Students Need to Belong

As much as quality support services and strong academic programs are important for the success of deaf and hard-of-hearing students, the need for a strong social environment and sense of belonging to the community is a vital component of ultimate success (Stinson and Walter, 1992). The Northwest Deaf Club provides a strong sense of community involvement and an opportunity for deaf and hard-of-hearing students to become active members of the NCCC community. The club is open to any NCCC student, though most members are either deaf and hard-of-hearing students or students majoring in Interpreting or Deaf Studies. Social activities and community service projects are planned and implemented by this club throughout the year.

"In a similar fashion, the communication needs of most deaf persons make it extremely difficult for them to take part in the usual campus social activities of hearing students. Therefore, even though a deaf person has access to college, he/she may remain isolated both socially and educationally from the mainstream. Such isolation, or lack of integration into the educational community, may be an important cause of attrition among deaf persons attending college. . . . Research by Walter (1989) points out that very few programs providing support for deaf students make provisions for the social aspects of college life. . . . It is the integration into the total educational community that we contend must be the goal of any program providing support services to deaf persons" (Stinson and Walter, 1992, p. 58).

Housing also plays an important part in feeling a sense of belonging to the college community. If dormitories are not available on your campus, share housing lists with students, encourage them to contact one another to discuss the possibility of sharing an apartment, introduce them with other students who have found living arrangements in the area and be aware of

landlords who are particularly interested in having deaf or hard-of-hearing students in their residences.

Hints for Faculty

As is true for all students, effective communication and teaching style is at the core of successful learning.

"Hearing students can relax and listen passively, eyes focused in the distance, soaking up auditory information as it washes over them. Lipreaders, however, must concentrate on a small visual point - the teacher's lips - actively hunting for clues to what is being said. "Listening" of this kind is extremely hard work. We cannot look out the window to rest our eyes ..., if we do so, we might miss something important and even lose the thread of the discussion. . . . The teacher might stop talking as someone in the rear of the room asks a question. Often I'd turn around, searching for the speaker, who might already have finished and lowered his arm. Quickly I'd whip back to the teacher, but the questions would be answered, the subject now changed anew" (Kisor, 1990, p. 75).

Often, teachers who encounter deaf and hard-of-hearing students for the first time feel nervous and rather "in the dark" about how to provide an effective learning environment for these students. Every two to three years, the CEDHH staff conducts an "Orientation to Deafness" workshop for new faculty and staff. The workshop includes effective teaching strategies for working with deaf and hard-of-hearing students. While this orientation for faculty and staff is not "required", we have experienced an excellent response probably because they realize that the likelihood of a significant amount of interaction with deaf and hard-of-hearing students is very high. Key points covered in the orientation include the following:

- *Expect full participation* from the deaf and hard-of-hearing student just as you would for a hearing student. Give a little extra time for the message to be conveyed through an interpreter or captioning services. This may mean asking students not to just "yell out" the answer, but rather wait a few seconds to give everyone an equal chance.
- *Have the same academic expectations* for the deaf and hard-of-hearing students as you have for the hearing students. Be willing to meet with the deaf and hard-of-hearing students to provide assistance as needed (remember our comment regarding the strong

- possibility of the student having less incidental learning).
- *Speak directly to the student*, not to the interpreter. *The interpreter is there to facilitate effective communication among everyone*; "works for" everyone in the room, not just the deaf or hard-of-hearing student.
 - *Be aware of and respect communication, cultural and behavioral differences*. For example, it is a normal practice in the deaf culture to tap a shoulder, stomp a foot on the floor, or switch the lights on and off to get a deaf person's attention.
 - *Make the classroom experience as visual as possible* (King, 1990). Use overheads to reinforce your discussion. Keep the number of words as limited as possible. Overheads should be clear, simple and quick to read. If you use videos be sure they are captioned. Finally, open the class with a written overview of the goals for the day, and close the class with a written summary of the discussion.
 - *Do not stand or sit in front of bright light*. The bright light behind you will block the deaf and hard-of-hearing student's ability to see your face clearly.
 - *Do not speak while your back is to the students*. Many deaf and hard-of-hearing students rely on speechreading, facial expression and body language to enhance their clear understanding of what is being discussed.
 - *Do not engage in "rapid fire" dialogues in the classroom*. There is no way that the deaf or hard-of-hearing student can keep up with this kind of discussion even with the use of an interpreter.
 - *Ask that each student raise his/her hand to be recognized prior to speaking*. This allows the deaf and hard-of-hearing student to know who is speaking and also provides a greater opportunity for him/her to join the discussion.
 - *Work collaboratively with the support services staff*. They are there to help you as well as to help the student.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Hopefully, if we have done our work well, students will experience a significant growth in self-confidence, self-awareness, self-actualization, self-empowerment, and accountability. The one thing we do NOT want support services to be is a system to enable poor habits and lack of responsibility. For providers of support services (be that interpreter, notetaker, counselor, educational specialist, communication specialist, teacher, mentor or tutor) the path is fraught with many challenging times and difficult decisions. As stated by Stinson and Walter (1992), "By not

receiving support in these areas a deaf student is put at risk of becoming isolated in the college environment and thus in danger of dropping out” (p. 57). This is eloquently and clearly reinforced through the personal statement of Slange C. Sevigny-Skyer, So much of my academic difficulties and social isolation could have been averted with the appropriate support services. Like anyone else, deaf students need to feel included wherever they are, as well as the specific need to talk with and share experiences with each other. Instead of a shameful disorder, deafness is a 'difference to be accepted'”(Personal commentary by Slange C Sevigny-Skyer in Deaf Students in Postsecondary Education, p. 142).

To begin with the end in mind and to realize that effective support services begin at the very beginning and continue until the student has completed his/her program of study is what we all need to remember and practice.

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