# National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes

Root Causes of Gaps in Postsecondary Outcomes for Deaf Individuals

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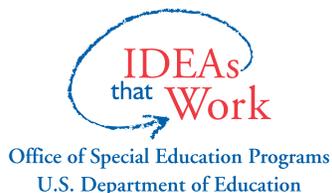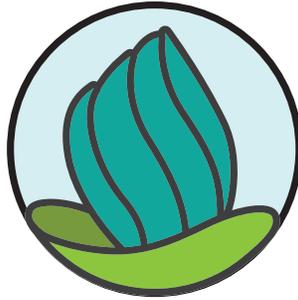
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Summary

This brief explores the following root causes of the gaps in postsecondary outcomes for deaf people.

(a) Limited Access to Language and Communication
Deaf individuals of all ages experience limited access to language and communication in the home, at school, in the community, and in the workplace.

(b) Reduced Social Opportunities
Many deaf individuals face barriers to communication at home and at school. This reduced access to a rich social environment has an impact on opportunities to build networks critical for future success.

(c) Negative Attitudes and Biases
High expectations are critical to the support of successful postsecondary outcomes for deaf individuals. Negative attitudes and "the tyranny of low expectations" serve as a persistent barrier to post school success.

(d) Lack of Qualified and Experienced Professionals
Experienced professionals who understand the range of communication preferences, disabilities, family contexts, educational experiences, and so forth are critical components of effective interventions and support.

A review of current postsecondary outcomes for deaf[1] people may seem disheartening, with significant educational attainment and employment gaps between deaf and hearing people. Across the nation, only 48% of deaf people are employed, compared to 72% of hearing people.[2] Furthermore, only 18% of deaf people receive bachelor's degrees, compared to 33% of hearing people,[3] which is a critical concern given that employment rates for deaf people increase from 28% for those without a high school diploma to 74% for those with a terminal degree.[2]

These visible outcomes are the result of deeper, underlying factors that may not always be immediately visible but play a significant role in the level of postsecondary achievement of deaf people. Deafness in and of itself does not directly cause the present gaps in achievement, but it is related to other complex factors that may have a more direct impact on achievement gaps. Those complex factors, or what we refer to as root causes, are pervasive across all levels of the system and inhibit deaf people from reaching their full potential.

A root cause analysis is a systematic approach to uncovering and addressing the causes of a condition or problem, not just the symptoms.[4] Conducting a root cause analysis is useful because it (a) dissolves problems, not symptoms; (b) reduces wasted effort; (c) improves use of resources; (d) enhances discussion and reflection; and (e) justifies strategy selection.[5]

The National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC) conducted a root cause analysis of current data and existing literature to identify the following underlying root causes of the gaps in postsecondary outcomes for deaf people:

- Limited access to language and communication
- Reduced social opportunities
- Negative attitudes and biases
- Lack of qualified and experienced professionals

Though not all encompassing, these four root causes provide a critical foundation for examining systemic factors that underlie postsecondary outcomes for deaf people.

ROOT CAUSES OF GAPS IN POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES

(a) Limited Access to Language and Communication

Regardless of their communication modality, deaf individuals of all ages often experience reduced access to language and communication in the home, at school, in the community, and in the workplace.[6] Deaf individuals increasingly enroll in a broad range of educational and training programs across the United States, yet most of those who use sign language do not have access to direct communication. Even those who rely on spoken language and auditory channels, such as residual hearing or auditory technologies, face gaps in comprehension[7] and their long-term success rate is highly variable.[8] Reduced access to language and communication has a significant negative impact on the well-being of deaf people.[9] On the other hand, full access to the richness and complexity of language and a range of communication models can contribute to increased readiness for postsecondary environments for deaf people.

(b) Reduced Social Opportunities

Reduced access to a rich social environment has a negative impact on self-concept and autonomy, and it results in fewer opportunities to build networks that are critical for future success.[10] Barriers to communication can lead to significant struggles in socioemotional development for deaf people.[11, 12] Loneliness, isolation, and lack of access to social opportunities may have a significant impact on well-being and academic achievement.[13, 14] Consistent and equitable access to a range of social opportunities is an important contributor to positive youth development.[15, 16, 17]

(c) Negative Attitudes and Biases

High expectations are critical to the support of successful postsecondary outcomes for deaf people. In contrast, negative attitudes and "the tyranny of low expectations" can serve as persistent barriers to advancement in school and the workplace. Deaf people who internalize negative biases about deafness are less resilient to stress and adversity.[18] As with many marginalized communities, deaf people have a long history of underrepresentation in spheres of influence. The impact of this underrepresentation is particularly acute when the decisions being made have a significant impact on those within the deaf community.[19] Professionals and parents who have optimistic expectations for deaf people are crucial contributors to the postsecondary achievements of deaf youth.[20, 21]

(d) Lack of Qualified and Experienced Professionals

An insufficient number of professionals have the qualifications and experience to work with deaf people and facilitate strong postsecondary outcomes. As teacher training programs in deaf education continue to close down, the number of professionals with specific training in pedagogy for deaf people declines. This issue manifests in school settings, where only 60% of educational interpreters have adequate interpreting skills, according to one study.[22] Financial constraints also affect resource availability, with the average vocational rehabilitation counselor now serving 154 deaf applicants.[23] There is rarely a one-size-fits-all approach to supports and services for the deaf population, which is more heterogeneous than the hearing population. Experienced professionals who understand the range of communication preferences, co-occurring disabilities, family contexts, and educational experiences of deaf people are critical to effective, student-centered interventions and supports.

ROOT CAUSES IN YOUR CONTEXT

Postsecondary outcome gaps between deaf and hearing people are symptoms of deeper problems that affect all levels of the system. To narrow those gaps, a systems change perspective that addresses root causes is necessary. Band-aid solutions address the symptoms but do not facilitate the longer term, broader systems change that is needed to increase the postsecondary achievement of deaf people in a sustainable manner.[24] Understanding how root causes come into play in your context contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by deaf people and helps prioritize and allocate limited resources.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1   NDC uses the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as Deaf, deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many individuals, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, *deaf*, with the goal of recognizing experiences that are shared by individuals from diverse deaf communities while also honoring their differences.

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