

# **Deaf, Diverse, and Distinct Enhancing Diversity at Gallaudet University Through Strategic Change: Implications for Higher Education**

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Good afternoon. First, I want to thank President Holbrook and Provost Snyder for inviting me to speak as part of this year's Diversity Lecture and Cultural Arts Series. I am deeply honored to be included among the distinguished men and women who have given addresses during this wonderful series. It is a great pleasure to be here.

I am also pleased to be here because I know that Ohio State University has long recognized disability as an aspect of human diversity. While preparing my presentation, I visited OSU's diversity website and saw that the link to disability identifies the intent "to remove physical and attitudinal barriers." I also found on the ADA coordinator's site that "...the office was created to guide the university's efforts to move beyond compliance and toward seamless access." These proactive commitments fit perfectly with what I will talk about this afternoon.

I have chosen five themes as the focus of my remarks:

1. Disability from a diversity perspective
2. Diversity within the deaf community
3. The intersection of disability and other areas of diversity
4. Strategic change as the key to enhancing diversity-and the unique challenges involved in achieving this change
5. Gallaudet as a "case study" - how we are addressing these four areas, progress made, work remaining to be done, and thoughts about implications for higher education and for our nation

Most of you know that throughout our history, people with disabilities have been viewed primarily from the perspective of their limitations-what they...or we... cannot do. Looking back on my own experience teaching the psychology of deafness many years ago, I developed a list of the characteristics of deaf people as they appeared in the literature. They were almost all negative.

The language used to describe people with disabilities reinforces the stigma many feel: confined to a wheelchair; deaf-mute, deaf and dumb, or hearing impaired. These are de-personalizing terms and phrases that imply that the disability is the sum of their identity.

In the literature about disability these views are associated with the medical model. In this context, disability is considered to be within the individual and is "managed" by medical intervention. Related to the medical model is the rehabilitation model that emerged after World War II. Interventions by medical and allied health professionals were designed to help veterans

with disabilities re-enter society. The rehabilitation model has continued to the present, extending to the general population of people with disabilities.

As people with disabilities have organized and become increasingly vocal, more empowering paradigms have emerged. There is a growing belief among those with disabilities and their "temporarily abled" supporters that disability is within the range of "normal" human experience, that it is one aspect of human diversity. I did not invent the term temporarily abled-this is a term often used to make the point that if we live long enough, all of us will develop some kind of disability, again conveying that disability is part of normal human experience.

From this perspective, barriers to full participation in society are related more to attitudes in society and to social policy than to characteristics of the disability. This view has led some to propose that disability is, in fact, a social construction. Consider, for example, the situation on Martha's Vineyard which for more than 200 years had a large population of people with hereditary deafness. In her book, *Everybody Here Spoke Sign Language*, Nora Ellen Groce described the islanders' response to the situation. Everyone learned sign language, deaf residents were fully integrated into the life of the community, and they were not considered disabled.

Bringing this to a personal level, I will use myself as an example of how social context defines disability. If there were no interpreters here today, as a deaf person, I would certainly have a disability. With interpreters here, the disability disappears.

Contrast my experience here with my experience at Gallaudet University, where almost everyone communicates using sign language. In that environment I do not have a disability, but visitors to the campus who do not know sign language do have a disability. Many visitors to Gallaudet who do not sign really "get" the concept of how disability depends upon the social context.

In 1988, when I was appointed President, only four of the 21 members of the Board of Trustees were deaf and interpreters were needed to give them access to board deliberations. Today, the majority of the board is deaf, and interpreters are needed to provide hearing members with access to board deliberations.

Are we making progress reducing barriers-attitudinal and physical-to full participation in society for people who have disabilities? The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 was a civil rights bill for people with disabilities. This law provides the opportunity to participate fully in society. ADA has done much to improve the lives of people with disabilities in the past 16 years, but barriers remain. Courts have not been consistent in determining who has a disability. There are many situations in which people are denied reasonable accommodation, and not everyone is willing or able to take legal action when it may be necessary. Many people are just not aware of what their rights are.

In reality, laws will never be the only solution to access and full participation. In some situations service providers, employers, and others simply need to be educated. Most difficult of all is changing attitudes and changing hearts. It is not enough to provide wheelchair ramps and sign language interpreters, particularly if that is done only because of fear of legal consequences. We will not achieve full participation for people with disabilities-nor for those who are members of

any diversity group- if we do not value, respect, and include willingly the vast diversity in our society.

The challenge to making the changes we are talking about this afternoon may seem very great. Sometimes, though, one individual can make a difference. Consider the high school student in the Midwest who used a wheelchair for mobility. One morning she arrived at school after a snowfall and found the custodian busy shoveling the steps, but not the wheelchair ramp. She asked him about this and he said he didn't have time to shovel both. Then she asked him, "why don't you shovel the ramp instead of the steps and then everyone can get in?"

Interestingly, accommodation for people with disabilities often benefit others. Curb cuts required by law to accommodate persons using wheelchairs also help parents with baby strollers, people (especially older people) with grocery carts, people on bicycles, and even skateboarders. Captioning on TV is a real plus for everyone in sports bars where different games are on the various televisions and the sound is turned off to eliminate the distraction of competing commentators.

What about Gallaudet University and our role in change? Gallaudet is the only university in the world whose mission is to educate deaf and hard of hearing students. Our enrollment includes approximately 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Nearly all undergraduate students are deaf or hard of hearing. Graduate programs are open to hearing students as well and enrollment is approximately evenly divided between students who are deaf or hard of hearing and those who are hearing.

During the 1960's, studies done at Gallaudet under the leadership of Dr. William Stokoe led to the validation of American Sign Language (ASL) as a true language. Over time, this shattered the myth that sign language was inferior to spoken language. It did not happen quickly or easily. As often happens when groups are devalued, some members of the group adopt the view of the majority group. Some deaf people did not initially accept that ASL was a language with a grammar and syntax of its own. However, with this groundbreaking discovery and research elsewhere confirming it, deaf people began to believe in their own language and their own culture...and they began to believe in themselves. Today, ASL is taught everywhere and I often meet hearing people who know sign language. I also know that OSU accepts ASL to satisfy the university's foreign language requirement.

Empowerment of deaf people achieved another milestone in 1988 when the Deaf President Now movement led to the selection of the first deaf president at Gallaudet University in its 124-year history. DPN, as it is commonly called, was a watershed moment in the history of deaf people. For one week, the world was mesmerized by the Gallaudet students who shut down the campus and refused to budge until a deaf president was selected. As the week wore on, deaf people and deaf communities across America-and throughout the world-rose up in support of DPN. In the end, the movement was not just about a deaf president at Gallaudet University, but also about equal rights for deaf people everywhere. What began as a protest united deaf and hard of hearing people in an unprecedented way and paved the way for a new era characterized by inclusiveness.

There has been much progress since DPN. There are more deaf people with successful careers in professions that they could only dream about in the past. We have deaf doctors, lawyers, college professors, scientists, actors, small business owners, and members of national parliaments. A major result of DPN is that deaf children today can aspire to anything they set their minds to. One of the things I enjoy most is talking with young deaf people and listening to their dreams. Another major outcome of DPN was the appointment of a deaf person as chair of the Gallaudet Board of Trustees and a change in the by-laws requiring that a majority of the board will be deaf.

Let me pause here and tell you that I cannot speak of Gallaudet's Board of Trustees without recognizing the contributions of Dr. Brenda Brueggemann, professor in OSU's English department and coordinator of the university's disability studies minor. Not only is Dr. Brueggemann a distinguished member and vice chair of the board, she also serves as chair of the Academic Affairs Committee. We are grateful to Dr. Brueggemann for her service to Gallaudet. We are also fortunate to have another board member from Ohio: Charles Williams from Cleveland. Clearly, Ohio is well represented.

Gallaudet's Board of Trustees has taken a leadership role in our efforts to achieve diversity. In May 2002, the board adopted a diversity statement and guidelines that say, in part, "...the pursuit of excellence is intertwined with a commitment to diversity at all levels."

When thinking about diversity at Gallaudet, it is important to know that the deaf community is not a monolithic group-it is very diverse. I will not attempt an exhaustive list, but I will identify some of the major groups. Keep in mind that each group is not mutually exclusive:

- Culturally deaf; those whose first or primary language is American Sign Language; often members of deaf families
- Hard of hearing; not necessarily related to degree of hearing loss; largely based upon self-identification
- Deafened adults; those who become deaf later in life as a result of illness, medical condition, accidents/injury, ototoxic drugs
- Those with cochlear implants, a surgical procedure that usually improves ability to process speech; may be children or adults; increasing numbers of children have this procedure
- Students with diverse educational backgrounds: residential schools for deaf students, mainstreamed programs, public schools

Then, of course, within each of these groups there is the same diversity you will find anywhere. Gallaudet is a microcosm of the broader society and has diversity in age, gender, disability, racial and ethnic background, educational background, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and social-economic class.

With such extraordinary diversity, there is a critical need for careful, ongoing strategic planning and change if we are to achieve a truly inclusive, diverse community in which everyone is welcome and supported. I also believe that such a major commitment to diversity is not in competition with achieving academic excellence. I am convinced that achieving our vision of an

inclusive deaf university is fundamental to achieving academic excellence. We are very fortunate to have the board's leadership in affirming this relationship.

How have we converted our principles and commitment into action? We began by acknowledging and discussing some painful issues and problems. We recognized that we faced many challenges in the areas of diversity, trust, and collaboration. In response to concerns expressed by many constituencies on campus, I initiated a campus climate process. The process was inclusive, intense, and involved the entire campus community over an extended period of time.

Many recommendations for change were generated and we are in the process of implementing them. Related to my remarks this afternoon, diversity fellows from among the faculty and staff were appointed to my office, the provost's office, and the office of the Vice President for Administration and Finance. The fellows work collaboratively, consult on diversity issues, help plan events related to diversity, and were instrumental in developing two university level strategic goals, utilizing substantial input from the campus community. These goals focus on:

- Being a model inclusive deaf university
- Promoting an environment where every member of the community is included, valued, and respected

Each year the university has an enrichment day for the campus community. The focus for fall 2005 was on racism and audism, from the perspective of white privilege and hearing privilege. Audism is a relatively new term and its definition is still being discussed and debated. Akin to racism, one view of audism is that it is an attitude that places higher value on the language and values of hearing people than it does on the language and values of deaf people. In addition, privileges and opportunities available solely because of ability to hear are taken for granted without considering what should be done to make those same privileges and opportunities available to those who cannot hear. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators spent the day participating in frank and sometimes difficult discussions of audism and racism in the Gallaudet community. This is just the beginning of dialog about how to address these issues on campus.

The interconnectedness of diversity initiatives and initiatives to achieve academic excellence is very clear in Gallaudet's division of Academic Affairs. The division's planning document, *New Directions for Academic Affairs*, has a strategic goal that emphasizes high quality academic programs, co-curricular programs, and research. Expected student outcomes include understanding and valuing the contributions of diverse cultures, understanding global communities and cultures, and being able to work collaboratively in an increasingly diverse workplace.

Obviously, diversity is not separate from the curriculum nor an add-on-it is an integral part of the curriculum that enriches students' learning and better prepares them for living and working in a world that is increasingly diverse. I believe that this integrated approach not only enhances the students' educational experiences, it also promotes positive changes in attitude and heart that I mentioned earlier.

These are just a few examples of how we approach diversity at Gallaudet. Achieving our goal of having an inclusive deaf university where everyone is included, valued, and respected requires a long term commitment, a commitment we have made.

Gallaudet University is changing the world for deaf and hard of hearing people. One of the major ways we accomplish this is how we educate our students. Our students develop knowledge, understanding, and respect for diversity and for non-pathological models of deafness. Gallaudet sends forth graduates with first-rate preparation for their chosen fields that incorporates cross-cultural understanding and competence that makes them better prepared for a rapidly changing and increasing diverse society: better employees, more effective leaders, and better citizens of their community and of the world.

I hope that my remarks this afternoon might stimulate thinking about implications for your individual circumstances. For those of you in schools, colleges, agencies, and communities who do not include deafness or disability when you think about diversity, I challenge you to do so. When you do program planning or training, make sure you have adequate representation from those who are deaf or have disabilities.

Speaking as the president of a university, I believe that any individual who has earned a degree should have learned something about people with disabilities and people who are deaf. I also cannot think of many professional programs where it would not be beneficial to learn about the communities and cultures of people with disabilities and people who are deaf. People with disabilities and deaf people are your neighbors, your colleagues at work, your students, your clients, and yes, even the owners of places where you do business. And if you haven't thought about learning sign language, try it...it can be fun and it might just be useful some day.

Thank you very much for your thoughtful attention.