

Working Together to Change the World for Deaf People

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Keynote Presentation

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I want to thank the NAD board for inviting me to deliver the keynote address at the opening of our 48th Conference. I also want to congratulate the NAD on 125 years of successful advocacy. Gallaudet and NAD have a long history of cooperation because we share the significant goal of achieving greater recognition of the rights and abilities of deaf and hard of hearing people.

What I want to talk about tonight is how critical it is for deaf and hard of hearing people to come together to "change today for tomorrow." I know, however, that everyone here is thinking about the protest at Gallaudet, so I'll talk first about the presidency of Gallaudet University.

Let me begin by looking back to 1988, and Deaf President Now (DPN). The DPN protest was the right action at the right time. DPN addressed an undeniable civil rights issue. In less than a week, the entire country came to understand that to continue to have a hearing board and a hearing president in charge of a deaf university was equivalent to having white people in charge of Howard or other fine historically black colleges and universities.

Only, some members of the higher education community remained fearful that challenging the legal authority of a University board would set a bad precedent. Not many individuals outside of American academic communities know about the unique governance of American colleges and universities. Volunteer boards bring American higher education flexibility and innovation that a system of more rigid government control cannot. And it is that ingenuity and resilience that makes American higher education so successful. Even the higher education community came to understand that the mostly hearing Gallaudet Board of 1988 could not govern effectively. They came to understand that DPN was about social justice for an entire group of Americans.

But 2006 is not 1988. Today's Gallaudet Board of Trustees is very different. As a result of DPN, the Gallaudet Board bylaws require that the majority of Board members are deaf. Specific to the presidential search: 13 of 17 members on the Search Committee were deaf; twenty-one out of 24 applicants were deaf or hard of hearing; the six deaf semifinalists included candidates of color and gender diversity--three of the six were either women or people of color. Each of the semifinalists met for an extensive interview with the Presidential Search Committee and was given the opportunity to share his or her vision for Gallaudet's future. The Committee then recommended three finalists to the Board.

After reviewing every pertinent document, interviewing each finalist, and either attending the public presentations or watching them on DVD, the Board deliberated for two days before making its decision.

Some people have questioned the integrity of the presidential search and selection process, but it is difficult--perhaps impossible--for those of us outside the process to understand how thorough and comprehensive it was. The Presidential Search Committee, the entire Gallaudet Board, and the search consultants who helped with the process assured us that the search was fair. I believe them.

Even though every one of us here today is a stakeholder in the success of Gallaudet University, and even though some individuals both on and off campus disagree with the Board's decision, we all must accept their right and responsibility to make the final selection. Often people are disappointed and surprised at the result of a search process. We must understand that a search committee and a governing board base their decisions on a number of factors and on information that is not public.

The current protest calls into question the legitimate authority of the Gallaudet Board. The president of the Association of Governing Boards, an organization that has a commitment to "advance the practice of citizen trusteeship and help ensure the quality and success of our nation's colleges and universities," recently wrote:

"Choosing the president is among the board's core responsibilities... The Gallaudet Board appears to have conducted a fair and reflective search; barring the emergence of some new information... The Board must stick by its choice."

A continuing protest hurts Gallaudet. As a well respected member of the higher education community, Gallaudet must ensure that transition to the next president is orderly and civil. We can't send the message that protesters, not the Board, govern the University. The eyes of the world are on us again -- and we must prove that we can do what is fair, right, and consistent with the best practices in higher education.

We all have to understand that the Board's decision to appoint Jane Fernandes as Gallaudet's ninth president is final.

Many people here this evening are passionate about Gallaudet. I am passionate about Gallaudet. Such strong feeling always leads to diversity of opinion--that's as it should be. But now we have to recognize that it is time for reconciliation and moving forward.

After apartheid ended in South Africa, Nelson Mandela said to both white and black South Africans:

"Reconciliation requires that we work together to defend our democracy and the humanity proclaimed by our constitution."

Let me paraphrase that. Our reconciliation requires that we work together to support and defend all that makes our University great.

I respect everyone's right to disagree with any decision made at Gallaudet, but if we are to "change today for tomorrow" we must come together and we must come together now.

In keeping with the theme of this conference, in the time remaining I want to talk about the future, because change is already here. We need to look with open minds and open hearts at what is happening in our country and our world today. We need to make sure we work together now for the sake of deaf and hard of hearing children and young adults -- because they are our future.

We already know about profound changes in who will be the next generation of deaf and hard of hearing people.

Consider just these three facts:

- The number of children with cochlear implants is skyrocketing.
- The fastest growing population of deaf children is Hispanic, mirroring the fastest growing population in this country.
- More than 80% of deaf children now attend public schools. Many residential schools have experienced declining enrollment and some have closed.

In America, each generation is different from the one before, so we should not be surprised that the generation of deaf and hard of hearing children growing up now will be very different from us.

In America, each generation struggles with a new set of differences. We should not be surprised that the American deaf community mirrors that struggle.

Clear evidence of our examination of difference is the proliferation in the last thirty years of other organizations for deaf and hard of hearing people. I am a proud member of both NAD and the Association of Late Deafened Adults. Each group has a separate national conference. The National Black Deaf Advocates, the National Asian Deaf Congress, and the National Council of Hispanic Deaf and Hard of Hearing also have separate conferences. This week while we are meeting here, the Hearing Loss Association of America is having its conference on the other side of the country in Florida. It is understandable that each of these organizations has good reasons to meet separately. But there is also good reason to work together.

I know that what makes America great is our continuing attempt to find common ground among many groups, groups with different backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, languages, and cultures. I believe it is time for all the groups that work for the best interests of individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing to find common ground and work together on common concerns.

Although change is difficult, we learn throughout life that if we do not change we do not grow. I will continue to work to encourage people to understand that there are many different ways to be deaf, and that the deaf community reflects the rich and wonderful diversity of America.

Last year, when I was interviewed for the upcoming PBS movie "History Through Deaf Eyes," I was asked about Gallaudet's future and the next president. I said, of course, the next president will be deaf, "...and then the next president, and then the next, and next. I would guess that they'll all be deaf in different ways..... And that's fine."

I am optimistic about our future. Yes, we are different; yes, we have different identities. But I know that more unites us than divides us. I know we will try to understand and value each other. I know we will become more inclusive. I know we will come together to build a better world for deaf and hard of hearing children. Such fundamental change is not easy for us or for America. But I know that we can truly work together to "change today for tomorrow."

How is Gallaudet changing now to secure our future? How can you help?

Gallaudet is demonstrating that we welcome and include people who choose different ways to be deaf. At the same time, we also celebrate and carry on the rich tradition of American Sign Language, deaf history, and deaf culture. These two values are deeply rooted in Gallaudet's strategic plans. I want to emphasize that these two values do not compete with each other. Indeed, they complement each other. We must work together to infuse these values into the entire deaf community.

I know the deaf community will continue to support the educational mission of Gallaudet University. Gallaudet has been and will always be a symbol of the achievements of deaf people. But at its center, Gallaudet is a university that has achieved significant stature in the higher education community.

I know you will be pleased to know that:

- Gallaudet is already a leader in educational change with a new vision for liberal education that emphasizes a fully integrated curriculum, successful student outcomes, career preparation, and lifelong learning.
- Every year the students who enroll are better prepared. Many of them begin their education at other fine universities and then come to Gallaudet.
- Our honors program is becoming nationally recognized and our honors students are active in the National Collegiate Honors Council.
- The Clerc Center is meeting its national mission to provide models of best practices in deaf education to the nation. In all 50 states, public schools and state schools for the deaf are partnering with the Clerc Center. Clerc Center programs have earned the respect of K-12 educators across the nation.
- Gallaudet University --at every level and in every program -- provides a model for the world of what deaf people can achieve. Their achievement -- our achievement -- is the best advocacy I know.

I know Gallaudet and NAD will continue our long tradition of working together to support each other on common goals. We will dream together of ensuring the future for deaf and hard of hearing people across the globe.

In June of 1858, Abraham Lincoln said "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Six years later, during the Civil War, Lincoln signed the Gallaudet charter. The United States held together, and we are the better for it. Gallaudet will hold together, because all of us who love our University will never allow it to falter.

I know we will have a successful conference. And I know Gallaudet and NAD will continue to work together to change today for tomorrow.

This is the last time I will speak to you as president of Gallaudet University. When I became deaf, I never dreamed of being here today. I didn't have the dreams that young deaf people can have now. Like most people who grew up hearing, when I became deaf, I thought only about what I couldn't do. Fortunately, I found Gallaudet where I not only received an excellent education, but became the first person in my family to earn a higher education degree. Perhaps, most importantly, at Gallaudet I learned how to be deaf.

I was fortunate that many years later, I was in the right place at the right time. DPN made it possible for me to be the first deaf president of Gallaudet. It has been an amazing 18 years. Even though Gallaudet has dealt with many difficult problems during these years, I consider myself to be the luckiest deaf man alive.

I have read from time to time about the "leadership crisis" at Gallaudet. There is no crisis at Gallaudet. Gallaudet is strong and I'm very confident that under Dr. Fernandes' leadership, Gallaudet will be even stronger in the future.

People often ask me what I will do after I step down as president. I always respond that I will continue to speak out about and advocate for the rights and abilities of deaf and hard of hearing people – all deaf and hard of hearing people.

And finally, I cannot end without thanking the many, many people who advised and helped me -- many who are sitting here today. The list is long, but at the top is my wife, Linda Jordan. Without her love, her wise counsel, and her infinite patience, I could not have done the job. Thank you, Linda.