Sign Language at the University Level

Abstract:

The issue I explored was how a deaf student decides where to go to school, how the University of Illinois accommodates for deaf or hard of hearing students, and whether or not those students could succeed at the University of Illinois. In order to find this out, I interviewed three people who are, in one way or another, associated with the deaf community at the university. I found that the university will make all the accommodations a student needs in order to succeed, and that a deaf or hard of hearing student can most definitely succeed.

Introduction:

Imagine going off to college and asking yourself the following: Will I be able to survive at this university? How am I going to be able to adjust to this new environment? Can I actually succeed? It’s a lot to think about, right? Now imagine asking yourself these questions, but you cannot hear. You are deaf. The questions pose a slightly different meaning. Will I, being Deaf, be able to survive at this hearing university? How am I going to be able to adjust to this hearing environment? Can I receive the accommodations I need to succeed? These questions address my research: how a student decides where to go to school, how the University of Illinois accommodates for their deaf and hard of hearing students, and whether or not those students can succeed at the University of Illinois.

Background:
Ever since sign language was brought over from France in the early nineteenth century, there has been a controversy between deaf students learning through American Sign Language or by the oral approach. Instructors believed that one method of teaching was superior to the other. This topic was discussed in much detail for an entire century until common ground was established.

The disagreement all started when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet traveled to Britain in hopes of finding a method to teach deaf children. He found his answer in France with Abbe’ Laurent Clerc. Clerc was the first instructor of the deaf in America at the Hartford Asylum for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (now the American School for the Deaf) in 1817 (Miller 227).

Everything was going extremely well with the teaching of sign language, so well they called this period the Golden Ages of Deafness (Miller 228). However, some did not like the idea of deaf people not being taught an oral language. Alexander Gram Bell was one of those. He and his supporters of the oral approach felt “that sign language was a form of savagery that kept its users isolated from the rest of humanity.” This idea ultimately won the vote of the International Congress of Educators of the Deaf and from 1880 until 1960, deaf students were taught by the oral approach. They were not allowed to use sign language for any reason, and if they were caught doing so, they would be punished (Bollag 3).

Then in 1965, a man named Dr. William Stoke introduced the world’s first American Sign Language dictionary. Up until this turning point in deaf history, sign language “was widely considered to be a form of pantomime or a system of broken English, even among deaf people” (Miller 229). Dr. Stoke published various scholarly works which identified ASL as a true language, consisting of its own grammatical structures and rules. Scholars, as well as deaf fluent in ASL and oral English believed that American Sign Language is just as good of standard as English when it comes to communicating with others (Bollag 3).
Nowadays, American Sign Language is not only considered a first and second language, but also an instructional and foreign language (fulfills foreign language requirement at U of I). It contains the same elements as other languages, and is also organized in the same way as others are organized (Miller 229). Also, there have been advances in technologies, such as digital hearing aids and cochlear implants, which make oral methods more appealing, but numerous scholars do not agree. They believe that it would highly benefit deaf children to be fluent in both ASL as well as oral English because it is common that many of the parts of the world are now bilingual, even multilingual (Bollag 4).

When it comes to normal student’s perspectives, many seem to feel that ASL is the best route to go. However, this does depend on the person, as shown in Merv Hyde’s article “The experiences of deaf and hard of hearing students at a Queensland University: 1985–2005.” According to the article, students she interviewed said that ASL, as well as interpreter/note-taking combinations were a “huge plus.” It allowed their students to be able to really interact with the lecture and take in all the information. They said the notes were a good tool to refer to after the lecture and they also allowed them to watch the interpreter and fully comprehend what the student’s instructor was saying. They did however have downfalls. An interpreter was not always available when needed, and other times note-takers did not take good-quality notes and didn’t write down all vital information (Merv 91-92).

Some students, who are more accustomed to the oral approach, felt that they got the most knowledge out of hearing aids and FM devices saying that “were vital to my success in understanding lectures” and that they are lost in lectures without their FM system. Sometimes these devices did not work, and then students felt lost throughout the entire lecture. Other students had problems hearing when professor’s talked indistinctly, even with the help of hearing aids and sitting in the front of the room. Also if a lecturer was showing slides, having the lights off made it difficult to lip-read (Merv 92).
In contrast to liking the oral approach more than American Sign Language, Ruth Ann Schornstein feels that ASL is the only way to go. Being deaf herself, she believes that students were always missing out on vital information because they were stuck learning how to pronounce correctly because speech classes took precedence over all other classes. She states that “Teachers would brag that it took seven years, but finally ‘little Johnny’ could say his name.” Teachers of deaf students seemed to maintain low expectations, and Schornstein also felt that these low expectations impacted not only how she viewed herself, but others, too (Schornstein 398).

Overall, I feel Burton Bollag says it best, “’ASL exposes children to the world’s knowledge,’” he says, "and it incorporates self-esteem and aspects of deaf culture." Mastering English "gives them access to the richness of the English world, like Shakespeare and idioms. “”

**Methods:**

As shown in the history of American Sign Language, there has been a huge controversy in deciding which way of communication will be taught in schools and work the best for the Deaf. Now that the different sides have come to an agreement, both methods are taught in schools. Students must now decide what type of schooling is going to benefit them the most, especially when going to college. They have to choose whether a public university with accommodations is the way to go, or if they will be better suited at a school specifically for the deaf. The method I used to find this out was interviewing. I used this method to discover how a deaf student decides where to go to school, and how the University of Illinois offers it students with a hearing disability an education that is just as good as a student without a disability. I also wanted to discover what accommodation a deaf student must make before coming to a university such as Illinois. The interviews asked the following:

1. In your opinion, what do you think would be better for a deaf student wanting to go to the University level: mainstreaming or going to a school specifically for the deaf?
2. Let’s say a student has chosen to go to the University of Illinois instead of somewhere like Gallaudet University (a deaf university). What would be some of the obstacles they would run into? And could these obstacles ultimately stop them from succeeding at the U of I?

3. By looking at the DRES webpage, there seems to be a good amount of services and opportunities for the disabled. Can you go into a little bit more depth about what specifically the accommodations for the deaf are?

I interviewed Max*, Bob*, and Tracy*. They are all faculty who are involved in the deaf community on campus in one way or another. I sent out these interviews via email all in one day. Those who were emailed the interview have all been Caucasian, male, and in their thirties or lower forties, except for Tracy, who is of course female.

In addition to those questions, the interviewee’s were also asked the following:

1. Do the students take advantage of most of these services?

2. How many students used interpretation when you first started compared to now?

3. Do you think the University does a good job of supplying enough services to the University deaf students?

4. Do you often hear about complaints from the students or parents about the University? If so, what are they?

5. What is something a deaf student should do prior to coming to the university in order to make things easier for themselves?

*Denotes name has been changed
Results:

When it comes to whether a student should mainstream or go to a school for the deaf, Max said that it depends on each individual student. What is going to be best for him or her might be totally opposite from another student. It would also depend upon what communication skills were used at home, whether it was American Sign Language (ASL) or another type of communication skill. Parents and a students’ home environment also factor into this decision. In Bob’s opinion, your future has a lot to do with it. He says that if you’ve grown up with ASL as “your first language where you immerse yourself in the capital D Deaf culture…go to Gallaudet.” On the other hand, he believes that if a student is planning on working in the hearing world and you just need accommodations to make it, and you want to fit in, then you should go to the University of Illinois. “It’s a great school!” Tracy states that, like Max, a student’s means of communicating at home have an impact on what type of school is better suited for them, but that the University of Illinois has had students from both programs come to U of I.

When asked whether or not a student would run into obstacles and could succeed at a university such as U of I, Max said that students will not run into any obstacles, but there are things that there are some aspects that may have a student pick a university like Gallaudet. Two, for example, being, “(1) they are surrounded by people who are "like me" and who they can relate to easily and form friendships with, and (2) social and academic activities are conducted in ASL, and they therefore have full access to University life.” Also, the fact that there is not many staff that is deaf may also turn a student away because they are underrepresented. Tracy said that “a feeling of isolation” may affect a student if there is not a large deaf population. She assumed that obstacles a deaf student may face could prevent a student from succeeding at the U of I, but she personally has not experienced any students leaving the university because of obstacles. Bob said that some of the obstacles a deaf student would run into would be a student knowing sign language, but not having an interpreter available.
Captioned videos can also be an obstacle because now, not all videos are captioned. Also, not all places on campus have the greatest sound system and you have to sit in a certain place to even hear well. Some students will sit all the way in the back because they can hear better, but then can’t see as well. That’s just another obstacle. Finally, he feels that students “lack contact and camaraderie…I think that’s hard.”

Accommodations, according to Max, will usually be made for students depending upon individual needs. He had heard of students having an ASL/English interpreter and note taking. However, Max did not know a whole lot on this topic, so he referred me to the Department of Rehabilitation and Educational Sciences. Both Bob and Tracy have had students used extended time on exams, and request to have a personal note taker in their classes. Interpreters are there for students who need them, and are also available for school functions such as football and basketball games, as long as they are asked for in advance.

From the time Tracy started working at the University of Illinois, she has seen the number of students who use interpretation jump from 2 students to 8 students. Bob is currently working with 12 fully deaf students and 35 students who are hard of hearing. For all of these students who permanently have or occasionally use interpreters, there are currently 6 interpreters working on campus.

When asked if students took advantage of all the accommodations offered to them, Tracy said that students most definitely take advantage of the accommodations. Bob said that it depended on the person, but generally, if a student wants to succeed, he or she will do what it takes to succeed. He always stated that some students say “Well I really don’t wanna ask for that if I don’t need it”, so they don’t use it.

Bob and Tracy were also asked if they felt that the university does a good job supplying enough accommodations for the students. Bob felt that they could do better in areas such as their audio
material. They don’t have close captioning on all of their videos, so he feels they can do more. He also believes that big public events, like assembly hall performances or comedians, should always be interpreted. Tracy believes that they do a good job and that they work very close with the faculty and students to guarantee their student’s success.

When it comes to receiving complaints from parents or students about the University, or of its services, Tracy stated that indirectly she hears that people think it would be nice to have more interpreters working in order for more public locations to become accessible to the deaf. Like Tracy, Bob has also heard of services from parents that they would like to see offered here. Parents will ask if U of I offers a specific service, and if they don’t, he simply tells them “Sorry, I’d love to, but I just can’t do it.”

Before students come to the university, should students do anything in particular to make things easier for them? Bob thinks they should get a feel of what their high school did for them and then compare that to what services are offered at U of I. He says that high schools sometimes hold a deaf students hand, and at the university, they won’t receive that kind of help. However, Bob said he will do as much as contact a professor in advance and advise them to get notes and note takers early, but this doesn’t always work out. Note takers are not always available, and students may not be able to meet up to make copies of daily notes. Bob always said that students will need to learn to advocate for themselves, and that they will have to be tough because of the encounters they will face compared to those from their schools. Tracy said that deaf students have the same expectations as hearing students, but that they will then have to apply for the services they need through DRES.

Discussion:
Throughout the entire interview process, the most amazing thing about it was the knowledge that I gained from asking those involved with deaf community. Questions snowballed thanks to new knowledge, and it became that much easier to come up with more questions. I learned about different opinions on mainstreaming versus schools for the deaf, how the University of Illinois makes accommodations for its students, the use of/desire of accommodations, and whether or not people working at U of I feel that deaf students can overcome obstacles and succeed at a hearing university.

These interviews answered my questions firstly by offering various viewpoints on whether or not mainstreaming is the way to go. Those that were interviewed gave very logical answers, and both sides had their pros and cons. It most definitely depends on each individual. I agree that both students and parents need to decide together, and that a student’s background plays a huge role when deciding where to go. It is a major life decision, and students need to be 110% sure that this is the right one for them.

Also, I learned how a university will offer students with a hearing disability the same quality of education that it offers to its other students. Interviewee’s stated that interpreters are available upon request and that they can come to class with you. It was surprising to find that there is a very small number of interpreters that work at the university. Even though the university has an extremely small percentage of deaf students in comparison with the entire student body, there should be enough interpreters that one should be available to work with a student at all times. It seems that certain students are more dependent on interpreters than others, but when a big social event comes to campus, the majority of deaf or hard of hearing students may need an interpreter, which may not be available. All interviewed believed that most students take advantage of the accommodations offered to them. The only time they may not use them would be when they don’t want to ask for them.
All interviewed believed that deaf or hard of hearing students who come to the University of Illinois can definitely succeed, as long as they want it bad enough. “Yes,” all interviewees agreed when asked if they would run into an obstacle, but what student doesn’t? It does not matter whether or not you’re deaf or hearing, or having any other disability for that matter; everyone will face obstacles throughout college. It’s a new environment for all, and just like the deaf have to adjust to hearing and vice versa, we all must learn to adjust to our new surroundings.

Conclusion:

Overall, the controversies over ASL and the option of both ASL and an oral education makes deciding where to go to school a huge decision for deaf and hard of hearing students. I feel that the University of Illinois does a pretty good job when it comes to making accommodations for students and leading them down the path of success. Yes, there are always going to be other things that they could offer to students, but they can’t have everything. If I could decide what the university should do differently, I would say they need to do two things: (1) hire more interpreters and (2) put closed-captioning on all of their videos. These two minor additions could very easily make the University of Illinois more appealing to those deaf students who are deciding where to go to school. If more time was allotted for this paper, I would have done further research such as interview deaf students on campus to see what influenced their decision to come to U of I. Ultimately, the university will most definitely make necessary accommodations for deaf students and will ensure their student’s success if they are willing to do what it takes.
Works Cited


