Silent Life: The Perception of the College

Experience for Deaf Students at the

University of Illinois
Abstract

My research centers on if being deaf at the University of Illinois changes the college experience. It discusses the daily lives of deaf students on campus and how they make their education work for them differently than for hearing students. In my research I used items from the ideals website, archived studies, and books to get a better idea of the deaf community and how they have come so far in education since the past. I observed my deaf cultures class that has two deaf students in it to watch how the classroom was different for them compared to the rest of our hearing class. I also interviewed a deaf student from my deaf cultures class to introduce me to her world and to get her perception on education here at the University.

Introduction

I became interested in the deaf community when I took a class in Deaf cultures. Our teacher is a CODA, or child of a deaf adult. Both her parents and her two siblings are deaf. Her first language is American Sign Language (ASL) and her second language is English. It was interesting hearing her speak about her family and how it was a big challenge for her parents
growing up transitioning from deaf children to a hearing child. We also have two deaf students in our class. They have spoken in class on occasion about what their lives are like being deaf and how they have made changes to help them hear better. As a hearing student, I often struggle when I don’t understand something a teacher says or when I can’t see the board all the way, but for deaf students they are put at an even farther disadvantage. Being hearing sets me far apart from the deaf community and I am an outsider taking a look in to see how life is for them as insiders. In this paper I investigated how a deaf student interacts day to day compared to that of a hearing student and how this affected their education. The questions that guided my research were: How does being deaf affect your education? Why did you choose the University of Illinois? How do you feel about hearing students wanting to learn ASL? Did your social life change when you came to a large university? How many deaf students attend the U of I? What accommodations does the university make for you? Do you think it sets you apart from other students? Does the deaf community consider themselves disabled or handicapped? What affect does being deaf have on your social life and activities? Do you prefer to be referred to as deaf or hearing impaired or hard of hearing? Do you take ASL classes? Do you think the university acknowledges the deaf community and does everything they can? Are their areas they lack? Finally, I wanted to know what it was like on a typical day.

Description

To learn about the lives of deaf students on campus I interviewed a girl from my Deaf Cultures class. I observed our class and read many articles and books about the deaf community. I decided to interview her because I knew that would be the biggest step in trying to discover what a deaf person’s daily life is like at a large university. I wanted her inside opinions, feelings, and thoughts on how the deaf community and she felt about what the university is trying to do to
accommodate them. When I reviewed the school’s disability page, DRES, I realized all the things they do to help build a solid education foundation for all students. They want the campus to be equal opportunity and they strive to do their best in making that happen. They provide many services and make them readily available to any student who needs them. I read a book about a hearing mother of a deaf daughter and how their lives functioned about twenty years ago. I also read an article about distance learning that I was able to tie into the paper because of the results that they found comparing hearing and deaf college students. I looked over the Ideals website and found several articles about the ASL program on this campus and compared them with other foreign languages that are provided at the U of I. With all of this information I was able to get a better understanding about the deaf students and see how their lives were affected during through their college experience.

**Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES)**

Disability Resources and Educational Services, (DRES), provides different accommodations to fit any student’s needs. This program was set in place to ensure that students with disabilities earn the same college degrees as non-disabled students. It gives prospective students the opportunity to learn in the same environment as their peers. The University of Illinois doesn’t want students to feel like their disability hinders them in any way. DRES offers a variety of services to accommodate any student needs. Some of the academic services provided are course selection, interpreters, inaccessible classrooms, note takers, orientation to campus locations and assistance in registration and testing.

After reading the DRES website I chose their initiative to point out what the university offers for disabled students. The text points out the vision, mission and objectives of DRES and how it
works for each individual student. Their mission is to provide equal opportunity education for all students. Their vision is to see all students intertwined with no levels in between them. Their main objective is for the university to be an advocate for the disabled community.

I think it is interesting that DRES has their objective to be an advocate for the disabled and that includes the deaf, when they do not see themselves as disabled. It is kind of a double standard for deaf students at the university because they look to DRES for a few services and accommodations but do not want to be categorized with handicapped or disabled because they feel as if that term refers to being “broken” and in need of being fixed. I feel as if the deaf community views themselves as normal but being a part of DRES puts them in a spot of being different. They embrace their gift of being deaf and do not want to be viewed as different. My teacher’s father had a good quote about the deaf: “Deaf people can do anything hearing people can except hear.” I think this is a good quote because they are normal people except for the fact that they cannot hear. It shouldn’t make them any more different then someone with a different hair or eye color.

Class Observation

It was my first day attending my new Deaf Cultures class. I didn’t know what to expect from the class. When I got to the classroom there were about 30 students. I took a seat in the back since I was late and the class had already started. Right off the bat I knew that this class was going to be different than any other class I had taken before.

As the teacher began talking she also started signing. She started telling us about her childhood and how her parents and siblings are all deaf. As a hearing child of deaf parents she had to learn to sign to communicate with them. After about five minutes of the teacher talking and signing, an interpreter came into the classroom quietly and took a seat at the front of the class.
facing two female students. I couldn’t stop watching her. I was so interested in how well she kept up with the teacher’s speech and how she managed to also have an “inside” conversation with the two girls during short breaks. They all seemed to know or, if not, been acquainted with each other before this classroom interaction. After about an hour of the class the interpreter slipped out as another woman stepped in. She picked right up from where the teacher was talking but I couldn’t help but notice the gap of time in between interpreters and what the girls might have missed. These are the moments that I realize the differences between hearing and hearing impaired students.

After our teacher lectured and we watched a movie, she decided to have the two girls from the class come up and tell everyone a little about themselves. The topic of the week was about cochlear implants. A cochlear implant is a surgically implanted electronic device that provides a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or hearing impaired. The film we watched discussed how it is much easier for a child to learn to hear sounds when they are implanted at a young age. Both hearing impaired girls in my class were above the age of eighteen, so they were already going to have a harder time than those implanted at a young age.

The names of the girls will be changed and I will refer to them as Jane, who is profoundly deaf, and Sara, who is slightly deaf. Jane began to sign quickly and the interpreter translated to the class. She said she was just implanted a couple of years prior and that sometimes she just didn’t feel like turning it on. Her family had mixed feelings about the implants but in the end they supported her decision to have the surgery. Sara interjected that her family was the same way. Her parents were divided on the subject but in the end they supported her. She had just been implanted the previous summer and said she loved having the implant. She still signs but her speech is very clear as if she isn’t deaf at all. She does not need the interpreter most of the time.
but says it is nice to have her in case she misses something. They both spoke about having note takers for some classes but that it is a challenge, like with most things, and you never seem to get the full lecture. Sara said she has a really hard time in math because she is trying to watch the teacher write the equations on the board and step by step directions but she also has to watch the interpreter to understand what the teacher is saying so she either gets one part and misses the other and vice versa. Jane signs that she agrees but she is upbeat and says “oh well! It always works out one way or another!” The topic then turns to peers and Jane gets even more excited signing about the deaf group that they have on campus and all the people she meets when attending. She says there are girls who are very fluent in sign and some that are not and she loves to help anyone that comes. Sara says she enjoys the club as well and that she likes the small feel of the group. There are only nine deaf students on campus and they are all very close to one another.

Then they were asked questions about their lifestyle. One student asked if their “home” life was any different than in the classroom as far as accommodations. Jane said her bed vibrated when her alarm went off and that lights flashed when someone was ringing the bell. Sara said she had the same things but that her house was a little “crazier” because they had different light patterns for different things. When the phone would ring the lights would flash like a strobe light and when the doorbell rang the light would flash one right after the other at a slow pace.

They answered a few more questions and then sat back down. The translator began to sign as the teacher started speaking and the fire alarm went off. The loud buzzer didn’t go off but the light started flashing and immediately the girls started signing to the interpreter. The interpreter asked the teacher what we should do. The rest of the class didn’t even notice that the light was flashing since we are so accustomed to hearing the loud blaring noise of the alarm. What was a frightening time for the girls was nothing to the rest of the students. It definitely puts things into
perspective for me. Most of us taking hearing for granted and these girls embrace their differences as unique and think of their impairment as a gift.

**Interviews**

I decided to interview one of the girls from my deaf cultures class, Sara. Since we didn’t have an interpreter on hand I decided to interview her via email. The first question I asked her was the basis for my entire project: How does being deaf affect your education? Sara said that for the most part, being deaf has just made some information harder to access. She has always had an interpreter in the classroom with her but never thought it negatively impacted the atmosphere. The only problems she ran into were when the instructors used videos/television or in math because she struggled to watch what the interpreter was saying compared to what her teacher was writing on the board or what was on the screen.

Going along with the first question, I then asked what affect being deaf has on her social life and/or activities. Sara said the biggest problem is the communication barrier. She said that sometimes she won’t be as social as she should due to the fact that she’s worried about communicating with someone. Like most hearing people I was never sure what people with hearing impairments wanted to be referred to. Were they just placed into the category “Deaf” no matter what or did they want to be known as disabled or handicapped? Sara was quick to answer that the deaf community ONLY considers themselves disabled in the sense that they need some accommodations for everyday living, but in general no. She wanted people to know that they are not “broken” or needing to be fixed or cured in any way. As far as what she wants to be called she said that it depends on the crowd she’s with. When she is with a deaf group, she will label herself deaf because legally, she is. However, when she is with a hearing group she calls herself hard of
hearing because it tends to lead to less confusion. She is deaf but she can talk and hear pretty well. She made a note to say that the deaf community thinks that the label “hearing impaired” is a touchy subject because it implies that they are “broken” or in need of being fixed.

Another big question I had for her was why she chose the University of Illinois rather than going to the well known Gallaudet University for the Deaf. Gallaudet is the world’s only university in which all programs are designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students. Sara said she chose the school because when she was a junior in high school, the cheerleaders from the school of the deaf in Jacksonville, were asked to sign the national anthem at one of the Illini basketball games. She was assigned to teach James Augustine and shortly after that she fell in love with the team. It was also a plus that the deaf services are amazing. I think it is funny that she chose the school not basing her sole opinion on the programs that they offer to deaf students but on the athletics. She took American Sign Language 2 and 3 for credit so I asked her what she thought about hearing students wanting to take the class. She said she thinks it’s great that hearing students want to learn their language. She feels that it should be a language taught in high schools because chances are, one day you’re going to run into a deaf person. She feels it is a valuable skill, as well as something fun to learn, so it is beneficial. I wanted to know how many students were deaf on campus and Sara told me that there are 7 undergraduate students and 2 graduate students that use sign language interpreters and have some sort of hearing loss.

Throughout the interview Sara, mentioned having an interpreter and other services so I asked her what accommodations the university makes for her. DRES has a long list of services that they provide but Sara only uses a sign language interpreter for classes and events, note takers for class, and extended time on tests if needed. With these accommodations I asked if she felt that it set apart from other students. “Only at times”, she said, “when I have an interpreter in class it’s
harder to get involved with group work.” Sara’s typical day is not much more different than it is for most students, other than a few minor adjustments. She gets up, goes to class, does homework, and hangs out with friends. The only difference is that she uses a special alarm clock that vibrates to wake her up, as well as having a hearing dog that stays overnight. If she takes off her implants she is completely deaf so her dog helps with alarms and strange noises. Our lives are very similar and there doesn’t seem to be any negative effect on her education or social life.

Then vs. Now

Earlier in the semester, I read a book called *Life after Deaf* by Jeannette Frederickson about her daughter Mandy. It is told from a hearing mother’s point of view. She wrote it for parents of deaf children because when her daughter was born deaf there wasn’t a book for her to read so she wanted to provide that for other parents. She wrote the book to offer hope and some perspective on new parents of deaf children to help them learn and teach their child. I think she also wrote it for deaf children or teens to read and understand what Mandy went through and how it relates to them. Jeanette mixed research in with letters she wrote to her friends and the notebook that was used to write back and forth between Mandy’s teachers and herself. You get to feel what Jeanette was going through as you read her letters to friends and family. She wanted parents to know that they can get through the hard times just like she did.

In this book, Mandy was born with a profound, bilateral, sensorineural loss, which means she had the worst, irreparable loss in both ears. There are different levels of hearing loss a person can have and she was on the worst end of it. Jeanette wrote once that she stood behind her 3 year old daughter and screamed at the top of her lungs and Mandy did not respond. She explains the levels of impairment there are and how they dealt with Mandy’s condition. A big issue in this book is how Jeannette tried to find the best school for Mandy to learn at and had to decide whether
she would go to an all oral school or be able to sign. For the first few years that Mandy was in
school they had to move around because deaf schools didn’t have the right amount of funding so
each one would close and they would have to go on to the next. When Mandy was eleven they
finally found a school that she could stay at permanently and learn sign language.

Early on, Mandy was very slow at learning and was at a level much lower than her own. After learning to sign, she was able to catch up and learn at the age range that she was in. I think this is interesting that all this happened about twenty years ago and that now there is an all deaf university that caters to their students. There are also many schools in each state that will take only deaf students or they can be mainstreamed and have the opportunities for an interpreter and note taker so they don’t fall behind. My deaf culture’s teacher said that when her parents were young they were shipped off for six months at a time by train to special schools because there just weren’t any available close to them. As time goes on I think that schools will start to offer sign language as a foreign language and that hearing people will be able to communicate well with deaf people.

In John Richardson’s study, he conducted a survey to compare the responses of 149 deaf students and 121 hearing students taking the same courses. In general, the impacts of deafness on approaches to studying were relatively slight, and deaf students appeared to be at least as capable as hearing students of engaging with the underlying meaning of the materials to be learned. They used factor analysis to identify eight scales, and the differences between the two groups were statistically significant on four of these scales. Discriminate analysis indicated that deaf students found it more difficult to relate ideas on different topics and that this was more marked in those who preferred to communicate using sign. However, deaf students were more likely than hearing students to adopt a critical approach and to analyze the internal structure of the topics studied.
Conclusion

My only limitation in this research project was, on occasion, trying to get my questions or points across since I do not know ASL. With help of an interpreter I was able to make myself clear. With the short amount of time I was limited in the interaction I could observe within the deaf club. They hold many events but none were available during the research process. I would have conducted more interviews with the performers at some of these events as well as the rest of the deaf students on campus. I also would have like to follow along with one of these students to get a real feel for how their lives work and the different ways they do things compared to hearing students. I would have also spoken with a representative from DRES to see how the University of Illinois stands compared to similar programs at different colleges and universities.

Being deaf at this university isn’t all that different after all. Deaf students are among many disabled and handicapped people as well as a largely diverse campus. Since no two people can be the same I think everyone’s college experience is going to differ in some way or another. Something as small as not having glasses to see the board puts you at a disadvantage from a person who can see just fine. My research has been built upon multiple findings that others have done to truly find out how deafness affects every day life. I think once the university starts to acknowledge the deaf community like they acknowledge other foreign communities there will be more opportunities to learn about their culture. Currently there are only three levels of American Sign Language equaling to twelve hours of credit compared to any other foreign language that requires over forty hours of credit. You cannot obtain a degree in ASL but you can obtain a degree in most of the other foreign languages. When equal treatment is given it will offer the university more as well as for deaf and hearing students. There is a need for sign interpreters and when more people can access the language there will be more opportunities for those jobs.
Observing as an outsider helped me compare what a classroom and life setting is like for a hearing student versus a deaf student. After linking up my observations, interview and articles I’ve read, I was able to understand the insider’s point of view as well as my own and how they fit together. When putting all the research together I realized that although deaf students may use some special services, their life is no more affected in college than anyone else.

**Works Cited**

Bartolone, Kara. The American Sign Language Program at the University of Illinois and What It Says About the University’s Views Towards the Deaf. 2009. Database. 5 April 2010. IDEALS. Retrieved at University Library at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. http://hdl.handle.net/2142/13177.

Bartolone looks at the way the University took a stand to acknowledge the deaf culture and make great strides to implement their language as a foreign language program. She discusses how they were put under fire when all students weren’t given credit for ASL as a foreign language but only some were. It is her goal to help students better understand the difference this language makes and how learning the “real thing” can help educate more people to get the university more involved. They demanded the University implement a program to have more ASL classes.
In 1949 the University of Illinois created a program with the hopes of aiding the disabled with becoming independent and eventually integrating into society. At first, the university's program only focused on physical independence at first. However, the country was beginning to shift into a mode of desegregation, specifically with the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Soon, the students were asking for more focus on social integration from the program as well. Her research paper hopes to answer the question of what effects these pressures had on the development of the program.


In the No Child Left Behind reform, deaf and hard of hearing students are required to participate in standardized assessments that are high-stakes. In 2006-2007 states added science and math to the test and the participants were given the proper test accommodations but teachers have few resources to look for accommodations. A total of 290 participants described their assessment practices with SDHH via an online and paper-and-pencil survey. Extended time, small group, and test directions interpreted were the most frequently used accommodations by SDHH, but there were some different patterns in science for accommodations that included changes to the test items. Teachers reported
both student satisfaction and test score validity epistemologies of accommodations’
effectiveness.

Frederickson, Jeanette (1985). Life after Deaf: Impact of Deafness on a Family. Silver Spring,
Maryland: The National Association of the Deaf.

Jeanette wrote this book to offer hope and perspective to other parents of children who
are deaf. She also discusses the struggles her family went through because of her
daughter’s deafness. She talks about finding the best education for her daughter and the
sacrifices it took to make that happen. There was never a book like this for her so she
made sure that in the future after reading her book that other parents didn’t feel the same
thing she once did.

Richardson, John T.E. Approaches to Studying in Deaf and Hearing Students in Higher

http://jdsde.oxfordjournals.org/content/5/2/156.full.pdf

They conducted a survey to compare the responses of 149 deaf students and 121 hearing
students taking the same courses to a shortened and adapted version of the Approaches to
Studying Inventory. In general, the impact of deafness on approaches to studying was
relatively slight, and deaf students appeared to be at least as capable as hearing students of
engaging with the underlying meaning of the materials to be learned.
Interview Questions

1. How does being deaf affect your education?

2. Why did you choose this school?

3. How do you feel about hearing students wanting to learn ASL?
4. Did you social life change when you came to a large University?

5. How many deaf students attend the U of I?

6. What accommodations does the University make for you?

7. Do you think it sets you apart from other students?

8. Does the deaf community consider themselves disabled or handicapped?

9. What affect does being deaf have on your social life and activities?

10. Do you have to take different general education class or prerequisite classes when you begin at the U of I?

11. Describe a typical day in your life.

12. What groups or activities are you a part of?

13. Do you prefer to be referred to as deaf or hearing impaired or hard of hearing?

14. Do you take ASL classes?

15. Do you think the University acknowledges the deaf community and does everything they can? Are their areas they lack?