

Retention

Introduction

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students entering postsecondary education often begin their studies with a significant educational handicap that, lacking special support, will result in their dropping out of school without any form of certification. Estimates for deaf and hard-of-hearing postsecondary students show that between two-thirds and three-quarters of those who begin their studies never graduate. From the individual's perspective, the economic benefit of receiving certification is considerable. Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons with postsecondary certification report earnings that are more equivalent to those of their hearing peers and their earnings are significantly higher than deaf and hard-of-hearing persons with no college degree. Also, deaf students who leave college without any form of certification report earnings that are no higher than individuals who never attended college.

When many students share a common problem such as the failure or lack of desire to persist in college, it behooves an institution, both for its own sake and for that of its students, to learn as much as possible about the factors influencing the decision to withdraw from college so that strategies for intervention can be identified. This tipsheet will focus on understanding the factors that research has indicated are important for persistence to graduation and suggest some approaches to reducing attrition among deaf and hard-of-hearing students attending postsecondary institutions.

A theoretical model of persistence

Much recent attention has been devoted to understanding student withdrawal from college. A theoretical model presented by Tinto (1987), and tested in various environments, including deaf students at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, provides an explanatory theory of the persistence/withdrawal process that can be applied to deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The theory considers persistence to be, primarily, a function of the quality of a student's interactions with the academic and social systems of an institution. That is, students come to a particular institution with a range of background characteristics (e.g. achievement, communication, social-economic status, personality), as well as varying levels of commitment to acquiring a higher education. The background characteristics, along with commitment, influence how students will interact with other people in the institution's social and academic systems. When experiences are positive, students increase their sense of being integrated into the academic and social systems of

the campus community. When experiences are negative, commitment to the institution and likelihood of persistence decreases. The model also implies that students are continually modifying their sense of academic and social integration and their institutional commitments on the basis of their ongoing college experiences.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students and this model

Similar factors are important in the persistence of deaf and hearing students. Students who have academic skills and intellectual interests that match the requirements and orientation of the institution are more likely to experience academic integration than those whose skills and interests do not match.

What is different about deaf and hard-of-hearing students is that they most often require special social environments and modifications in the academic environment in order to experience social and academic integration. Many deaf and hard-of-hearing students regard contact with their peers as the best opportunity for friendship, dating, and interaction. In this way, deaf and hard-of-hearing students are similar to other ethnic groups. With respect to academic integration, many deaf students do not possess the mathematics, science, and reading skills to function effectively in traditional classes designed primarily for hearing students, even if sign language interpreting and notetaking services are provided.

Do not assume anything.

- *Do not assume that good speech means that students possess adequate English skills.* Many deaf and hard-of-hearing students can speak intelligibly but lack the fundamental English skills to read and write on a par with their hearing peers. Hearing, speech, reading, and writing, while sharing a mutual dependence, often develop at different levels in deaf and hard-of-hearing students. On the other side, do not assume that poor speech skills automatically equate with poor academic preparation.
- *Do not assume that an interpreter and notetaker solve the communication difficulties of deaf students.* While most programs provide support services of interpreting and notetaking, these services are built upon the notion that deaf students can be 'made equal' to hearing students if they are provided access to regular classroom communication through sign language interpreters, notetakers, tutors, or electronic

communication devices. When these services are provided, deaf and hard-of-hearing students are expected to compete successfully with their hearing peers. If students are not successful, failure is often attributed to a lack of preparation or effort rather than to the educational environment or method of instruction. Consideration is rarely made of the fact that the provision of lecture notes or sign language interpretation for classes does not necessarily mean that the "barrier" created by lower achievement and experiential levels has been breached.

- *Do not assume that students have a support network of other students.*

Hearing and speech problems of most deaf and hard-of-hearing persons make it extremely difficult for them to establish educational and social links with other students. Even though a deaf person has access to college, he/she may remain isolated both socially and educationally from the mainstream. Such isolation, or lack of integration into the educational community, may be an important cause of attrition among deaf persons attending college. Service providers must ask whether the academic and social needs of students are being met within the context of institutional environments where the typical hearing student to deaf student ratio is often 1000 to 1.

- *Do not assume that students have well-developed career goals.*

The theory of college persistence suggests that the absence of commitment to the particular institution is an important factor in the decision to leave college. In order for such commitment to happen, it is important that students have a sense of direction in their life, and a reason for going to college. Making such commitments often are especially difficult for young deaf persons because they may have limited knowledge about various career paths. Poor achievement in classes may be as much the result of undefined career goals as a lack of educational preparation.

- *Do not assume that deaf and hard-of-hearing students are using college-provided support services.*
Traditionally one thinks of providing for the ready

transfer of information in the classroom as the only area in which support services are needed by deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the college setting. However, when one considers that deaf and hard-of-hearing college students generally have little experience in other matters related to college life, there is a need for additional support. Areas such as financial aid, counseling, academic advising, health services, and extracurricular activities all demand support if deaf and hard-of-hearing students are to become integrated into the college environment. By not receiving support in all these areas, a deaf or hard-of-hearing student is put at risk of becoming isolated in the college environment and thus in danger of dropping out. As a classroom teacher, be sure the student is availing him/herself of these services through the disability support office.

For further reading:

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Gardner, J.N., and Jewler, A.J. (1998). *Your College Experience*, (Concise 3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Pascarella, E. and Terenzini, P. (1991). *How College Affects Students*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving College*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Uppcraft, M.L., and Gardner, J.N. (1989). *The Freshman Year Experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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