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AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO HOUSING HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

**Nancy J. Kasinski and
John R. Felver, Jr.**

As opportunities increase for qualified hearing impaired students to enter programs of higher education, administrators face the question of appropriate housing for such students. Safety and convenience mandate facilities equipped with visual fire alarms and visual doorbell lights in rooms of hearing impaired individuals, but adapting all residence hall rooms on a campus would be both impractical and financially prohibitive. The desire for a "deaf community" might suggest housing all hearing impaired students together, but the idea of segregation defeats the purpose of many hearing impaired students who choose to attend an institution of higher education with the intention of interacting with hearing students.

Northern Illinois University (NIU) has developed what might be considered a practical and productive solution to the housing of hearing impaired students. A Hearing Impaired Interest Floor has been created and is offered to both hearing impaired students and hearing students who have an interest in living with hearing impaired individuals.

Definition and Description

The Hearing Impaired Interest Floor is a cooperative endeavor between the Office of Services for the Hearing Impaired and the Office of Student Housing Services to create and offer to interested students a unique learning experience utilizing as a catalyst a residence hall floor. It is believed that this learning experience cannot be obtained in

either the traditional academic curriculum or the typical on- or off-campus living environment. Such a joint venture strives to integrate the student's formal in-class scholarship with his/her informal out-of-the-classroom learning.

The general concept of the Program is delineated as follows: The Hearing Impaired Interest Floor is a co-ed floor designed for those students who are hearing impaired or for those who are majoring in areas that relate to hearing impairment. Examples would include such majors as counseling the hearing impaired, audiology, speech pathology, and teacher training of hearing impaired children or the multiply handicapped. The goals of the floor are to bring together those students who have common interests, to provide special recreational and social events including captioned films, to provide educational programs that pertain to hearing impairment, and to stimulate interaction between those students who are hearing impaired and those who are preparing for careers in working with deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Such activities will enhance personal and educational growth and will create a better understanding of all members involved with this floor. All students will have access to staff who are knowledgeable of hearing impairment and special equipment such as visual doorbells, visual fire alarm systems, amplified headsets for telephones, and an MCM.

A Resident Assistant is selected by the Office of Services for the Hearing Impaired and the Office of Student Housing Services for employment on the floor. As the student personnel staff member living on a residence hall floor, the Resident Assistant helps establish a living environment conducive to learning, assists students in their adjustment to the University, develops educational and social-recreational programs, advises floor officers, and assists in the enforcement of

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AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO HOUSING HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

standards necessary for group living. At the present time, the job description and responsibilities of the Resident Assistant at NIU requires a person with normal, or near-normal hearing. The Resident Assistant is responsible for hall-wide duties where he/she must interact with hearing students. Important duties such as checking on the audio pre-alarm fire alarms, floor noise control, and making emergency telephone calls require good hearing.

Ideally, the student selected possesses adequate sign language skills and is majoring in an area related to hearing impairment. An individual without adequate sign language skills is expected to develop minimum skills through classes and/or contact with the deaf community during the summer prior to the appointment and build on them throughout the term of employment.

Staff members of the Office of Services for the Hearing Impaired conduct an in-service training program for all staff members of the residence hall in which the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor is located. This training occurs prior to the opening of the residence hall in the fall and consists of a brief orientation to hearing impairment, a discussion of the goals of the special interest floor, and an overview of special needs or problems that may arise. Information is distributed about special services for hearing impaired students and resources available at the University. An effort is made to reduce any awkwardness that might occur in the staff members' first contacts with hearing impaired students.

Development and Effects

Publicity and active recruiting of students have been important factors in the development of the floor. An attempt is made to contact as many students as possible including currently enrolled, re-entering, transfer, new freshman, and graduate students. Upon admission to the University all students receive information from the Office of Student Housing Services delineating the various housing options available on campus including the above description of the Hearing

Impaired Interest Floor. In addition, all newly admitted students who declare as their major Education for the Hearing Impaired or Communication Disorders receive correspondence from the Office of Services for the Hearing Impaired explaining the option and the reasons why it would be to the student's benefit to reside on such a floor. Students in these majors who are already enrolled at NIU, but do not live on the floor, receive information in their major classes. "Word of mouth" from current residents is also an important recruiting tool.

Entering students who inform the University of their hearing impairment are notified of the floor by the Office of Student Housing Services and the Office of Services for the Hearing Impaired. While not all hearing impaired students opt for the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor, the majority elect to participate in the program.

The Hearing Impaired Interest Floor was created in the Fall of 1978. It was hoped that floor would attract hearing impaired students and various hearing students, particularly those majoring in deaf education and communication disorders. In its initial year of existence thirty-three students signed up for the floor; six hearing impaired college students, nine hearing impaired college preparatory students, thirteen deaf education majors, three speech pathology and audiology majors, and two graduate students majoring in counselor training with the hearing impaired. The remaining sixteen spaces on the floor were assigned by the Office of Student Housing Services to other college students. Five additional students, either hearing impaired or interested in hearing impairment, moved on to the floor at the beginning of the Spring Semester.

Effective with the 1979-80 academic year, the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor was permanently moved to a different residence hall to accommodate multiply handicapped students, a larger number of students interested in living on the floor, and summer school students.

Although several floor members chose to remain in the original residence hall rather

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO HOUSING HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

than move, forty students signed up for the floor. As was the case with the first year of the program, five additional students, either hearing impaired or interested in hearing impairment, moved on to the floor at the start of the Spring Semester. A high student return rate along with new students requesting the floor, resulted in a waiting list to obtain a room on the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor for the 1980-81 academic year.

The growth of the program can be attributed to a variety of factors. Evaluation forms that have been completed by the residents indicate they chose to live on the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor to accommodate their hearing impairment, to improve their knowledge of hearing impairment, and/or to meet others with similar interests. The students reported that the experience of living on the floor has met their expectations in these areas.

A variety of floor activities including social, academic, and service-oriented have provided impetus for the development of camaraderie by the residents. Members of the floor have been active participants in diverse all-hall activities such as blood-drives, recreational tournaments, and homecoming projects.

The floor has offered a variety of activities to stimulate knowledge of hearing impairment. Hearing impaired students teach non-credit sign language classes to residents. Faculty members from related departments have given presentations to students on pertinent topics such as "Early Detection of Hearing Loss", and have been available for special academic advising nights before each semester's class registration. A field trip to a residential school for the hearing impaired provided an opportunity for exposure to an environment not encountered previously by many of the floor members. A well-attended panel discussion by hearing impaired students on "What It's Like to be Deaf at NIU" proved to be a discussion stimulator that resulted in better understanding between floor residents.

An added attraction of the floor has been the unity which has developed as a result of the interactions among the residents. Stu-

dents have stated that residents appear to be much more willing to help each other and to do things together than on other "regular" residence hall floors. One resident summed up this feeling by stating, "needing each other on the floor has drawn us closer. We interact more than most other floors." This need relationship is a healthy one in that it is not paternalistic, but rather one that reciprocally aids each participant. Informal group discussions frequently revolve around such topics as the various cultures or environments in which the students interact and the physical, procedural, and/or attitudinal barriers that hearing impaired people encounter. Hearing students usually become sensitive to the barriers and assist their hearing impaired friends in overcoming some, while striving jointly to promote the elimination or modification of others. Their support can take various forms ranging from activities promoting the awareness of a need for the installation of a visual fire alarm system to simple assistance in making a telephone call.

A natural development for the hearing students living with hearing impaired peers is the improvement of sign language skills through everyday communication. Their skills, previously learned and used only in academic endeavors, develop more naturally in a social situation. Another manifestation has been improved acceptance of manual communication by some hearing impaired students. Although having no previous contact with or interest in sign language, these hearing impaired students commenced developing and utilizing some sign skills for social purposes and eventually expanded their application to academic settings.

By-Products

The primary purpose of the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor is to offer interested students a unique learning experience. To the best of our knowledge, this has occurred. In addition, several important by-products have evolved:

1. Many "regular" residents not living on the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor, but

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO HOUSING HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

residing in the same residence hall and therefore "exposed" to the students on the floor, have become concerned with or developed an appreciation for hearing impairment, or at least some aspect of it. An example of this interaction is the more than fifty students with normal hearing over the last two years who, because of their exposure to the deaf and hearing impaired residents on the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor, desired to learn sign language. A non-credit sign language course has been developed and is offered in the residence hall each Fall Semester. Last year, interest was manifested in an advanced class being offered during the Spring Semester.

2. As a result of participation in the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor and concomitant exposure to each other, academic faculty and student affairs administrative staff appear to develop an improved understanding of and appreciation for each other's roles. Various faculty members have indicated that not only have they become more cognizant of out-of-the-classroom student life and its implications on in-class performance, they also become aware of the approaches utilized by residence hall staff to meet both general student needs and individual student problems.

3. It is possible that the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor has a positive impact on participant grade point average and retention both in the University as a whole and the residence hall in particular. Research will be conducted in these areas in the near future.

4. Some students have indicated that the reason they enrolled at Northern Illinois University was because of the opportunity to reside on the Hearing Impaired Interest Floor, an opportunity which is not offered at other colleges and universities they considered attending.

Conclusion

The experience of hearing impaired students living in a residence hall on a college or university campus can be quite meaningful, particularly when they participate in a residential program created specifically for their needs and formulated through a cooperative effort by representatives of various campus offices and services concerned with maximizing the hearing impaired students' personal and educational development. Other residence hall students, particularly those majoring in academic curriculums related to hearing impairment, can also benefit from such a program which by design stimulates interaction with hearing impaired students. The continued increase in the number of applicants for the program, coupled with the evaluations from past and current participants, appears to indicate that the program meets the needs of various students which would probably not be satisfied as well if they resided elsewhere. The educational institution as a whole, and various components thereof, can also obtain positive benefits (by-products) from the presence of such a unique program.