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Kay Fletcher Schriener
University of Arkansas

Richard T. Roessler
University of Arkansas

John Raymer
Gallaudet University

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EMPLOYMENT CONCERNS OF DEAF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

KAY FLETCHER SCHRINER

RICHARD T. ROESSLER

University of Arkansas

JOHN RAYMER

Gallaudet University

Abstract

In response to a questionnaire distributed at a university-sponsored job fair, 661 students of Gallaudet University responded to questions regarding their employment concerns. Respondents identified employment strengths in two areas—college life and self-efficacy. Students identified three aspects of career preparation—training, resources, and career selection—as problems. The findings emphasize the importance of assisting students with hearing impairments or deafness to address career-related concerns.

The employment picture for deaf individuals is a mixed one. On the one hand, they encounter substantial difficulties in acquiring the educational and training experiences required for successful employment, in accessing information and technology required for employment, and in responding to the social demands of the workplace. On the other hand, more diverse jobs are open to deaf individuals than ever, and deaf persons are benefiting from more favorable social reactions, the application of technology to the workplace, and increased civil rights protection in legislation.

One indication of the potential for career-related difficulties of deaf students is their experience in secondary schools. The 1985-1986 Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth estimated that only 52% of deaf students receive a high school diploma, with another 19%

receiving a certificate. Receipt of a diploma was found to be highly correlated with ethnic background, additional handicap status, and residence in a state requiring deaf students to pass minimum competency tests to qualify for a diploma (Allen, Rawlings, & Schildroth, 1989). The certificate option for students with disabilities is an outgrowth of the excellence in education initiative and underscores the extent to which special education students are seen as not benefiting from a more rigorous academic program (National Council on Disability, 1990).

Inefficiencies in school-to-work transition services also have a detrimental effect on the lives of deaf students (Wright, 1989). The lack of interagency agreements for transition services, confusion about transition responsibilities, and various legal and administrative details hampering effective service delivery, have all been mentioned as factors having a negative impact on the transition process (Allen et al., 1989).

Deaf individuals must also cope with traditional public stereotypes maintaining that people who are deaf can hold only certain kinds of jobs. These stereotypes appear to have had considerable impact on occupational choices and placements. A 1974 study (Schein & Delk, 1974) found an overrepresentation of deaf people in the crafts and manufacturing areas, with few represented in professional, technical, or managerial positions or in the clerical, sales, and service industries. Occupational outcomes are also

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affected by limited English skills (Allen et al., 1989; Danek & McCrone, 1989). As Allen et al., noted: "American society requires this ability for its high-status occupations; this society requirement is the source of [a] *handicap*" (p. 220, emphasis in original).

In contrast to the difficulties just described, many recent developments affect employment of deaf people positively. Over one-third of deaf students ages 12-20 are in mainstream education settings (Danek & McCrone, 1989), with "widespread collaboration between special education program...and rehabilitation agencies" (Allen et al., 1989, p. 204-205). A number of institutions provide education and training to deaf students at the postsecondary level, and the number of programs is increasing. Postsecondary programs grew from fewer than 10 in 1964 to more than 100 in 1984 (DeCaro, Karchmer, & Rawlings, 1987). Six of these programs are federally funded, reflecting the federal commitment that postsecondary education be available in every region. Most of these are small and provide vocational/technical training (DeCaro et al., 1987). The availability of support services in these programs is closely correlated with program size, with programs serving larger numbers of students providing more support services.

Postsecondary institutions are increasingly recognizing the importance of career issues to young people who are deaf or have severe hearing loss. This study reports data gathered at Gallaudet University regarding the employment concerns of undergraduate students. The study was conducted as part of a larger effort called the National Agenda for Employment of People with Disabilities, co-sponsored by the Arkansas Research and Training Center on Vocational Rehabilitation (ARTCVR) and the Employment Preparation Committee of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.

Method**Participants**

Six hundred and one (N=601) Gallaudet University students responded to a questionnaire regarding employment concerns. The questionnaire was distributed at a university-sponsored Job Fair. The group of students completing the questionnaire represents a convenience sample which limits the external validity of the data. Nevertheless, the opinions of such a large number of students are valuable for the insights they provide into career development needs at the postsecondary level.

The sample was almost equally divided between men (49%) and women (51%). Forty-nine percent (49%) were from 18 to 22 years of age, with another 34% from 23 to 25 years of age. Most (84%) were white; 8% were African-American, 4% were Hispanic, and 4% were Asian. Two-thirds (67%) of the sample reported being deaf from birth. Another 23% reported becoming deaf before age 6.

Concerns Report Method

The Concerns Report Method was used to collect data regarding the employment concerns of deaf students. Operationalizing a consumer involvement philosophy, the Concerns Report Method enables users to specify issues to be considered and how those issues will be judged (Schriner & Fawcett, 1988a; 1988b). Previous research demonstrates that the Concerns Report Method is a reliable and valid measure for identifying strengths and problems from the perspective of consumers. The approach has been used successfully with residents of low-income neighborhoods (Schriner & Fawcett, 1988b), clients of human service agencies (Seekins & Fawcett, 1987), patients and staff in psychiatric institutions (Fawcett, Seekins, Whang, Muiu, & Suarez de

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Balcazar); and persons with disabilities (Roessler, Schriner, & Troxell, in press; Schriner & Roessler, 1990).

Elements of the Concerns Report Method are (a) an Employment Concerns Index (item pool) used by an institution and consumers to develop a unique questionnaire, (b) an Employment Concerns Questionnaire created by consumers that includes items formatted for importance and satisfaction ratings, and (c) an Employment Concerns Report identifying strengths and problems of respondents. The Employment Concerns Index consists of 100 items which integrate core human values such as security, justice, self-esteem, and freedom in statements related to employment. One item, for example, "You are treated fairly in college admissions procedures," relates the notion of equality to procedures for gaining admittance to institutions of higher education.

The second element, the Employment Concerns Questionnaire, results from the activities of a working group. In this study, the working group consisted of four students with disabilities at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. One student had a learning disability, one a hearing impairment, one a visual impairment, and one had a physical disability.

Initially, each student was sent the Employment Concerns Index and asked to select approximately 30 items. Then, in a group meeting, the authors assisted the group in making the final selection of items for the questionnaire. The group was encouraged to edit or combine items when necessary.

The questionnaire was then formatted to allow respondents to rate each item along two dimensions, importance and satisfaction, on a 5-point scale. The questionnaire contained demographic questions, the 28 employment items

selected by the working group, and a final item addressing the usefulness of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to members of the Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Post-secondary Education (AHSSPPE) for their distribution to students with disabilities. Completed questionnaires were returned to the ARTCVR for data analysis. Data gathered from other colleges and universities are presented in another report (Schriner & Roessler, 1990).

An Employment Concerns Report was prepared for Gallaudet University. The report describes the data in two ways: (a) mean importance and satisfaction ratings transformed to a 0 to 100 scale and (b) a summary of employment strengths (items with high importance and high satisfaction ratings) and problems (items with high importance and low satisfaction ratings). To determine strengths and problems, a strength score and a problem score were computed for each questionnaire item for each respondent. Mean strength and problem scores were then computed for each item.

Results

Table 1 presents the 28 employment items with mean importance and satisfaction scores expressed in a percentage. Table 2 displays employment strengths and problems. The relatively high importance ratings across all items in Table 1 indicate that the working group selected employment items regarded as important by Gallaudet University students. This finding is of consequence because not all students who participated in the working group were deaf. Data in Table 2 address the relationship between individual importance and satisfaction ratings.

TABLE 1
SURVEY ITEMS RANKED BY IMPORTANCE WITH SATISFACTION RATINGS BY GALLAUDET STUDENTS

	MEAN IMPORTANCE RATING	MEAN SATISFACTION RATING
You can get and keep a good job.	92	74
You are encouraged to have confidence in your future.	88	70
You are encouraged to develop career plans.	87	68
You are encouraged to develop all your skills.	86	67
You are encouraged to prepare for a wide range of jobs.	85	64
You are well-trained for a career.	85	60
You are encouraged to stay in college.	85	72
You are encouraged to take control of your life.	85	72
You have access to regular education courses.	84	67
You are encouraged to train for the professions.	83	62
You can get help with the costs of college.	83	62
You are treated with respect by service providers who understand the needs of people with disabilities.	83	67
You have your needs considered in the design of career training programs.	83	63
You are helped to develop job seeking skills.	83	61
You are encouraged to participate in interviews with employers.	82	63
You are viewed as an equal by other students.	82	69
You are expected by faculty to succeed in college.	82	65
You have adequate health insurance to recover from an accident or injury so that you can return to school.	82	65
You are helped to select a career that is appropriate for you.	82	61
You have easy access to campus and campus buildings.	81	76
You are welcomed on college and university campuses by faculty and other students.	81	67
You have access to good career counseling.	80	63
You have your needs considered in the design of instructional/educational programs.	80	60
You receive the same benefits from education as nondisabled students.	80	60
You are treated fairly by faculty members.	80	65
You have access to aids and services necessary to succeed in education (reading services, Brailled materials, transportation, etc.).	77	66
You are not discriminated against in college and university procedures (admission, activities, etc.)	77	68
Your needs are considered in the development and implementation of Social Security regulations.	77	59

Employment Strengths

Students identified employment strengths in two areas—college life and self-efficacy. All five of the top strengths appear to validate the generally accepted notion that Gallaudet University represents an exceptional educational environment for people who are deaf. Students reported easy access to campus facilities and programs, referred to their belief that they would find quality employment, and stressed that others encourage their development of personal control and optimism about the future.

Employment Problems

Despite their sense of personal control and general optimism about the future, students identified several specific aspects of career preparation as problematic. These concerns were grouped into three categories—training, resources, and career selection. Students expressed concerns about being well-trained for a career that has been chosen carefully following careful consideration of a wide range of career possibilities. They also stressed the need for resources to pursue college training.

TABLE 2
EMPLOYMENT STRENGTHS^a AND PROBLEMS^b IDENTIFIED BY GALLAUDET STUDENTS

STRENGTHS	PROBLEMS
You can get and keep a good job (Ss=70).	You are well-trained for a career (Ps=24).
You have easy access to campus and campus buildings (Ss=65).	You can get help with the costs of college (Ps=22).
You are encouraged to stay in college (Ss=64).	You are helped to develop job-seeking skills (Ps=21).
You are encouraged to take control of your life (Ss=64).	You are encouraged to prepare for a wide range of jobs (Ps=21).
You are encouraged to have confidence in your future (Ss=63).	You are helped to select a career that is appropriate for you (Ps=21).

a Strength scores are computed using this formula: $Strength = 100/16 \times [\sum (I_j - 1)(S_j - 1)/N(m - 1)2]$ where I_j is I th category of the importance rating scale circled by the j th respondent, where S_j is the S th category of the satisfaction rating for this item circled by the j th respondent, and where m is the number of response categories in the scale of importance and satisfaction ratings for this item.

b Problem scores are computed using this formula: $100/16 \times [\sum (I_j - 1)(S_j - 1)/N(m - 1)2]$ where I_j is the I th category of the importance rating scale circled by the j th respondent, where S_j is the S th category of the satisfaction rating for this term circled by the j th respondent, and where m is the number of response categories in the scale of importance and satisfaction ratings for this item.

Discussion

The data described in this study suggest several general conclusions. First, students at Gallaudet University appear to regard their institution as supportive of their plans for higher education and of their personal ambitions and capabilities. This finding is consistent with other research findings indicating general satisfaction with teachers, counselors, interpreters, and other campus personnel and services at postsecondary institutions for the deaf (Schroedel, 1988) and literature-based recommendations that educators set high expectations for students who are deaf and hearing-impaired (e.g., Martin, 1988).

Second, these students seem to have pronounced concerns about having sufficient resources to stay in college. This finding is of interest, since students at postsecondary institutions for the deaf attend school full-time at a much higher rate than students attending other institutions of higher learning (DeCaro, Karchmer, & Rawlings, 1987), perhaps indicating that deaf students have more financial resources. Nonetheless, the present finding suggests that deaf students, like nondeaf students (Schriner & Roessler, 1990), still experience anxiety over the costs of postsecondary education. One possible reason is suggested by a recent study which indicated that "the most frequently provided vocational rehabilitation service to deaf students was financial assistance for postsecondary education" (Allen, Rawlings, & Schildroth, 1989, p. 223); students may be concerned about the continued availability of such support.

Similarly, Gallaudet students express concern about the continuum of career planning and placement service ranging from vocational preparation to job seeking skills training. Student concerns about the career choice, preparation, and

job acquisition aspects of their college programs have life-long implications. First among these is whether their educational experiences constitute adequate training for a career, not an unexpected finding given current economic and labor market factors and the concerns reported by other college students (Schriner & Roessler, 1990). Possibly reflecting their sense of personal control, students feel the need to learn job-seeking skills training so that they can manage their own job searches. The concern about job-seeking skills may also reflect an awareness that college placement services are not always sufficient to ensure an appropriate placement. Finally, the importance of vocational counseling, i.e., assistance in considering a wide range of career options and making a suitable career choice, indicates that students would appreciate the opportunity to consider a variety of options and feel the need for assistance in choosing from the alternatives available.

The employment concerns expressed by students in the current study strongly imply an agenda for colleges and universities serving deaf students. First, educators should ensure that faculty and other personnel are prepared to respond to the needs of deaf students in all aspects of college life, and that they display expectations that deaf students will succeed both in college and in post-college employment and social situations. Second, colleges and universities should strengthen their emphasis on career counseling and placement and provide job seeking and career management skills training to students. Together, these basic recommendations would appear to result in increased student confidence. These recommendations reflect the data collected in this study and are consistent with those made by other researchers (Martin, 1987; Rawlings, Karchmer, King, & Brown, 1985; Schroedel, 1988).

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