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PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR THE POSTSECONDARY DEAF: STRATEGIC PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE 1990'S

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Abstract

The Nineties will be a time of fundamental change. The battle cry for this change will be "diversity." Change will be driven by demographic forces and recently enacted statutes such as the Americans With Disability Act. Together, these forces will require that the postsecondary community rethink the assumptions on which it currently operates and demand that it restructure the way it does business. It is likely that more resources will be diverted to the growing portion of "low achieving deaf," a disproportionate number of whom are minority. The more selective postsecondary programs will likely suffer some degree of enrollment decline. The extent of decline will depend, in large part, on how responsive these programs are to demographic insistence that they find creative ways to accommodate students who, at time of admission, cannot meet the literacy requirements for admission, and how effective these programs are in working with secondary schools to increase the pools of deaf persons qualified for postsecondary education.

vocational and transition services under the sponsorship of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Goodwill and other agencies. These initiatives emerged, especially during the late 70's and early 80's, as a direct response to the needs of the Rubella population. During this growth period administrators tended to focus on questions such as "How does one design an appropriate curricula?," "Where does one find a sufficient number of skilled staff?" and "How does one assure a smooth transition from secondary to postsecondary program?."

During the decade of the 90's leaders of postsecondary programs will face more fundamental issues such as "Will there be enough students to assure this program's survival?" and "How must this program change if it is to keep and graduate these students?." Demographically speaking, the Seventies and Eighties were the time of plenty. In contrast, the Nineties will be a time of relative scarcity. This dramatic shift, evident to college admission officers across the nation, is tied to the recent and accelerating population changes; changes which are irrevocably altering the size and character of the traditional pool of secondary school leavers.

Introduction

Since 1965 a network of programs and services has evolved to support deaf students as they exit secondary school. The current postsecondary community includes more than one hundred and fifty postsecondary programs (Rawlings, et al. 1988) plus an extensive array of

The purpose of this paper is to consider the strategic implications of these demographic changes on the nation's community of postsecondary programs and services. This paper considers four interrelated strategic trends that will shape the size and nature of the pool of deaf 18 to 21 year-olds¹ through the year 2000; trends that will drastically affect admission policies, transform

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curricula, and challenge many of the basic philosophic assumptions about the purpose and organization of postsecondary programs and services for the deaf. These trends include: 1) the impact of a long term decline in market size, 2) the effect of very high secondary school drop out rates, 3) the influence of low reading comprehension levels, and 4) the consequence of major growth in the proportion of the market which will be minority. The paper will close by discussing the opportunities and challenges these trends offer the nation's community of services and programs on behalf of postsecondary age deaf students.

Decline in the Pool

The 18 to 21 year old group represents the basic "pool" from which the postsecondary community draws the majority of its new students. In 1982, this pool was estimated at 13,500 nationally (Nash, 1990). By 1991, the pool is expected to have dropped 32%, to about 9,200. This decline is due to two major factors: the large number of individuals who became deaf due to the Rubella epidemic of 1962-1965 and have now passed through the 18-21 age range; and the fact that the national population of all young people has been declining. By the end of this decade the pool is expected to drop another 15%, to 7,762. Most of that decline will occur by 1995. It is important to note that any significant increase due to the recently reported "baby boomlet" of the late 1980's will not be reflected in the 18-21 year age group until almost the end of this decade. When the upturn does occur it will be modest.

What does the projected decline mean for the nation's community of postsecondary programs and services? It means that programs can expect a far smaller pool from which to draw students. A smaller pool suggests that, from a strategic perspective, programs will need to address essential questions such as: "How many applicants will seek admission?" and "What kind of curricula will attract and keep students?"

To answer these questions it is useful to consider the three basic groups for whom services and programs have been developed: 1) the *college bound* (those who have the potential to attend a postsecondary program at the college or junior college level), 2) the *vocational bound* (those who, after additional vocational training, have the potential to be employed and self supporting), and 3) the *welfare bound* (those most likely to be in need of continued, indefinite support in the form of sheltered employment, SSI, and independent living arrangements.). This paper will consider these "market segments" in light of three dynamics which are influencing the size and character of each segment. These dynamics include 1) the very high secondary school drop out rates, 2) the reading levels of 17 year old deaf students, and 3) the increase in the proportion of minority students within the 18-21 population.

Drop Out Rates

Table 1 compares four studies that address the issue of hearing impaired high school "drop outs": Wagner, (1989), U.S. Department of Education, (1990), Butler-Nalin, (1989) and Allen, Rawlings & Schildroth, (1989). Even though these studies differ significantly in definition of high school "drop-out," definition of hearing impairment, and methodology, collectively they show a very clear, but disturbing and often overlooked fact: *hearing impaired youth are at great risk of dropping out*. Taken together, these four studies suggest that about three of every ten hearing impaired students will drop-out, about five will earn high school diplomas and the remaining one or two will be given certificates. Certificates are often more an indication of "aging out" than a recognition of achievement; an award for attendance rather than an acknowledgement of competency.

To put these figures in perspective, consider this fact: *Twice as many hearing impaired students drop out as compared to their hearing peers*. The national drop out rate among all hearing students

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is about 15% (Bureau of the Census, 1987). The drop out rate among their hearing impaired peers is 28% to 32%. The only group in the nation with a higher reported drop out rate is hispanic youth at 38.6%. In other words, a significant portion of the hearing impaired youth is leaving school without the skills needed to gain admission to many of the nation's vocational and most of its academic postsecondary programs. What happens to these deaf youth? Some transfer from school to welfare, and maintain a welfare status; many take entry level jobs; jobs with few benefits, little security, and no future. (Allen, Rawlings and Schildroth, 1989, and McLeod-Gallinger, 1989).

From a strategic perspective, these data mean that a very large portion of the postsecondary market is lost even before consideration of the many barriers which can and do affect prospects

for admission, such as academic ability, financial resources and service availability. At a time when the market is declining due to national demographic forces the postsecondary community is losing 30% of the existing pool. Such attrition is especially frustrating when, over the last decade, programs for hearing students have developed a range of sophisticated initiatives to combat attrition and foster postsecondary enrollment. The "adopt a school" movement is one practical example. It combines the interests of elementary and secondary schools, the commitment of local communities, the fiscal support of regional businesses and flexibility on the part of postsecondary programs and services. Self interest as well as strategic considerations requires that postsecondary education for the deaf enter the critical battle to stem secondary level attrition,

TABLE 1
ESTIMATES OF HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS EXITING
WITHOUT CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA

	n	Dropped Out/Aged Out/Other
Annual Report To Congress (US Department of Education)		
- hearing-impaired	4489	32.1%
High School and Beyond (Butler-Nalin and Padilla)		
- hearing-impaired	371	28.3%
National Longitudinal Study Transition (Wagner)		
- hard of hearing	249	27.7%
- deaf	354	28.2%
Work-to-School Transition Study (Allen, et al.)		
- deaf	6196	29.0%
Bureau of the Census		
- all races (20 to 24)		15.2%
- white		14.6%
- black		19.0%
- hispanic		38.6%

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thereby investing in its own future. The forfeiture of one out of every three students represents too high a loss, especially when it is clear that there are a variety of strategies and models which can help to substantially reduce the loss.

Reading and Growth of the Minority Pool

Perhaps the most important predictor of academic success is reading. An applicant's reading competency is carefully scrutinized by admission committees. A significant portion of severe and profoundly deaf 17 year olds have very low reading skills. While poor readers can be found among all the race/ethnic groups, the problem is most acute among the black and hispanic groups. This fact is of increasing importance to postsecondary programs because, as is discussed in the next section, the portion of minority students in the pool will increase dramatically during the 90's.

Many of the nation's trade and vocational programs require at least a 4th grade reading level in order to benefit from instruction (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1986). Only 19% of deaf hispanic, 22% of deaf black and 52% of the deaf white population read at or above the fourth grade level. In other words, for all practical purposes many deaf school leavers are illiterate. (Allen, 1991).

Allen's study may be an underestimate. The source of his data was the *Stanford Achievement Test Norming With Hearing Impaired Students*. The norming was based on students who were enrolled in school at the time of the 1989-90 *Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth*. In other words the study included only those youth who were in school. Dropouts, by definition, are no longer enrolled. As a result, they were not included in the study. Frustration over continual academic failure is one of the major reasons students drop out. Such failure is often tied to poor academic performance. It is likely therefore that, had dropouts been included in the study, the estimates of average reading comprehension would have been even lower. Such conclusions suggest the programs and services for the "low functioning deaf" are likely to remain in great demand. Such findings also have important strategic implications for programs with higher entry requirements (seventh grade and above) such as CSUN, NTID, and Gallaudet. These programs may find that, due to their higher academic admission standards, their market segment may decline even more quickly. This may be especially true for schools which draw a major portion of their students from the Northeast and Midwest since these regions of the country are likely to experience some population decline among the 18-21 year old pool.

TABLE 2
AVERAGE READING COMPREHENSION SCORES OF
SEVERE AND PROFOUNDLY DEAF 17 TO 21 YEAR OLDS ON
STANFORD ACHIEVEMENT TEST: 1990 (ADAPTED FROM ALLEN, 1991)

Grade Level	4.0	7.0
White	52%	18%
Black	22%	3%
Hispanic	19%	5%

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Rehabilitation programs, which over the past fifteen years have sent a small but growing contingent of students directly into mainstream programs, thanks in part to Section 504, may find the size of that contingent beginning to shrink.

It is an unfortunate expectation that, in spite of the projected growth in the proportion of minority youth in the pool, relatively few are likely to reach a 7th grade reading level, i.e. reach the minimum necessary to qualify for some of the more advanced special postsecondary programs designed explicitly for deaf students. Allen (1991) found the only 3% of the black and 5% of the hispanic population read at the 7th grade or above (Table 2). This means that, even though the minority deaf population is expected to grow very quickly during the 90's, a relatively small portion of black and hispanic applicants will find their way into postsecondary programs. Given such a scenario how will postsecondary programs with relatively high admission standards accommodate the minority community? What programs can they offer which, over time, will help to offset this social and educational dilemma?

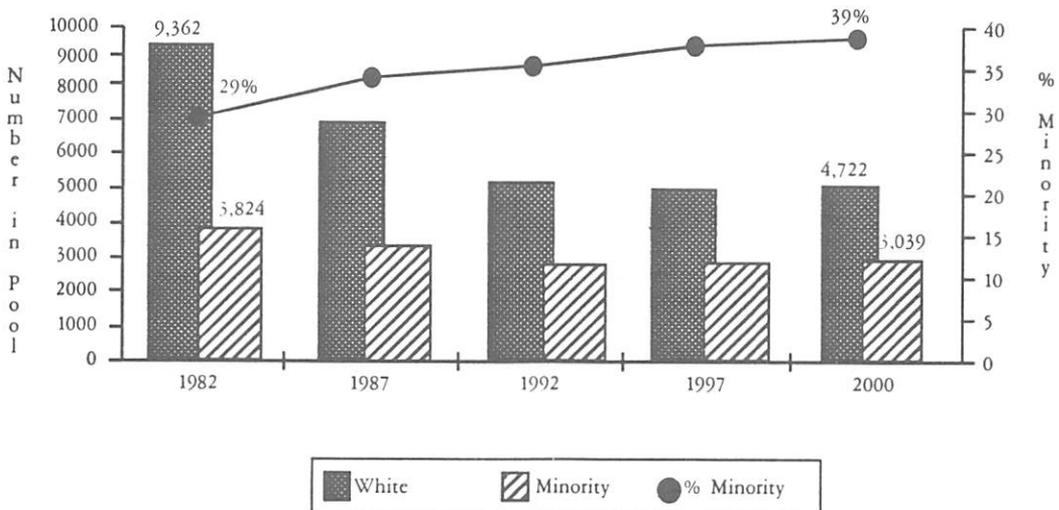
Conclusions

Diversity and Change

Diversity is the demographic theme of the 90's. Change is its hallmark. Consider these facts: the portion of minority deaf 18 to 21 year olds grew from 29% to 35% between 1982 and 1990, and the proportion is expected to reach 40% by the year 2000.

Figure 1 illustrates this strategic trend. While the portion of white youth drops, the proportion which is minority will grow. Demographically, socially, and politically the classic notion of an "average" student is changing. "Average" has meant "mostly white, mostly middle class, mostly high school graduates, mostly prepared for some form of postsecondary experience." By the end of the decade such assumptions will not be valid. Indeed, in many large cities and certain states such as California, Texas and Florida such assumptions have been invalid for almost a decade. This means that postsecondary programs must rethink the assumptions on which they operate. The new assumptions will be driven by accommodation to

Pool of Deaf White and Minority 18-21 Year-Olds and Percent Minority in Pool 1982-2000



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diversity; diversity in ethnic background, diversity in educational achievement, and diversity in cultural expectations.

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) will serve as a legal catalyst, generating greater accommodation by all public entities, especially schools, thereby fueling the idea of a "postsecondary entitlement." As activists take aim at the postsecondary sector their goal will be rather different than that which guided the generation of the Sixties. In the Sixties the issue was "equality of opportunity." In the Nineties, the assertion is "equality of result." This philosophy will lead to

fundamental challenges: demands for multicultural curricula, pressure to expand access, calls for more minority faculty, and insistence on instruction in "first languages." Such challenges, driven by the population changes and bolstered by legal mandates, will require that postsecondary programs not only adjust their admission criteria and their recruitment strategies but also that they revise their instructional approaches and retrain their personnel. During the Nineties, the notion of "accommodation" will take on a new, more substantive meaning.

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Notes

1. "Deaf student" is operationally defined as an 18 through 21 year old who has a hearing loss of 71dB or greater in the better ear. The focus is on this group because these are the students who require the most intense, sophisticated, and costly support after leaving secondary school and because it was for these more severely handicapped individuals that the academic and vocational programs were primarily created during the late sixties and seventies.