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THE VALUE AND TRAINING OF PARAPROFESSIONALS

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Services for the deaf have always been in short supply. Consequently a need for the paraprofessional worker has developed.

What is a paraprofessional?

The paraprofessional is defined as that individual trained in certain skills areas and qualified to offer prescribed services through training completed at a lower lever than a baccalaureate program. The individual will be a "functional" paraprofessional who can operate as needed in many and varied environments where needs of the deaf can be met.

This person should work side by side with the professional

1. as a *teacher aide/interpreter* who functions directly in the classroom with the teacher.
2. as an *interpreter* who works directly with the social worker or the therapist.
3. as an *interpreter* in the college classroom.
4. as an *assistant* with multiply handicapped deaf children or adults.

This word is often misunderstood. One story goes as follows. A student was working as a paraprofessional at a large agency in Dallas. One day while she

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was busy at work, a group of students from another university were touring the facility. When the staff member, who was leading the tour, came around to the student and introduced her, the staff member said, "I would like for you to meet one of our newest staff members who is a paraprofessional." One of the students on the tour looked at the staff member in all seriousness and said, "I've heard of paraplegics and quadraplegics but I've never heard of a paraprofessional. What do you do?" Ever since then this student has shied away from being called a *paraprofessional*.

However there is a demonstrated need for paraprofessional personnel for the deaf and hearing impaired. Perhaps the best idea of what a paraprofessional is would be to describe their training.

The Dallas County Community College District has committed itself to providing services to enable each individual student to discover and improve his own special abilities and skills that help to provide services in meeting the needs of the community. The manner in which they fulfill this commitment is through the development of training programs that meet proven needs for such training within the community.

The initial study for this Training Paraprofessionals for the Deaf program was begun in 1970 at the administrative level with a task force composed of people from the community in fields relating to deafness. One of their findings and recommendations was that there was no such training program anywhere for technicians below the Bachelor's level who can work with the deaf.

An analysis of existing programs for the deaf, on which to base the recommendations for the setting up of this paraprofessional program, were undertaken. Studies were made of the findings of previous work groups, especially reports from the President's Committee on the Handicapped, known as the "Babbidge Report", and on the National Conference on the Education of the Deaf in 1967.

The National Conference on Education of the Deaf in 1967 stated that "The use of volunteer and sub-professional teacher aides should be considered and model training programs should be explored." This was thought of as a practical way of lessening teachers' burdens and relieving the critical shortage of teachers. Additionally, a search for other services for the deaf, concentrated in the North Texas area, disclosed that there were a few certified interpreters in the area and that sign language classes were being taught at the Callier Center for Communication Disorders.

Questions were also asked of the deaf community about the needs they saw for their fellow deaf citizens. Among those needs listed many times were the following:

1. More interpreters for the adult deaf in more situations, especially educational settings and vocational training programs.
2. A need for trained educational aides to increase potential for language development and free teachers for more direct individual teaching.

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3. Better trained houseparents for the residential schools.
4. Specialists in the use of auditory equipment and preparation of media materials to be used in the schools.
5. Individuals trained to serve in recreational programs for the deaf.
6. Individuals trained to work with the multiply handicapped, such as the deaf-blind.

Thus, the question: Is there a need for paraprofessionals to work with deaf children and adults in different settings?, Was answered with, "Yes, there is definitely an urgent need for people trained at this level."

Personnel who can be trained to do interpreting and bridge the communication gap between instructor and deaf student; personnel to serve as tutor/interpreter; personnel to assist in classroom activities; and personnel to add strength to existing services as well as additional services in the future.

The *American Annals of the Deaf* in the middle 1960's reported that approximately 730 teacher trainees were scheduled to complete their programs in 1971. In the 53 teacher training programs listed, continuing reference was made to the need for more trained teachers to work with the deaf, but the history of deaf education does not reveal the significant increase in the number of the total deaf population who are congenitally or prelingually deaf and therefore educationally handicapped to a greater degree than the postlingually deaf population.

A four-year training program in deaf education does not include training for such a broad range of services as trained houseparents in residential schools, people to work in supplementary educational services such as media, trained people to assist deaf infants and interpreters in the community.

Overall educational objectives for the T.P.D. trainees included such specific goals as:

1. Training individuals to acquire knowledge of the unique vocational, educational and social problems of the deaf.
2. Training them to acquire knowledge of the communication processes utilized by the deaf.
3. The development of skills in manual communication that are appropriate with the deaf, encompassing the philosophy of total communication.
4. Acquiring skills as an interpreter for the deaf in various vocational and community situations.
5. Offering supplemental aid to the teacher of the deaf and/or the multiply handicapped deaf, thus freeing the teacher from many of her non-teaching duties.
6. Gaining an understanding of life adjustment problems of the deaf and the need to bridge the gaps in communication and understanding between the deaf individual and the hearing community.
7. To provide supplemental training to those who are already teachers of the deaf as well as other professional personnel such as vocational counselors,

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social welfare workers, etc., to gain a better understanding of deafness and to utilize paraprofessionals to maximum effectiveness.

In keeping with the open door policy of the Dallas County Community College District, the same criteria for admissions to the program were followed. The total training program is a two-year program. However, provisions are made for the acquisition of possible employment after completion of 30 credit hours. Many students elect to receive a 30-hour certificate which is competency based or the Associate in Applied Science degree as a result of the full two-year program.

The actual curriculum for the training program was divided into two areas:

1. The theory, comprehension and understanding of deafness, the psychology involved with it and the various problems.
2. Laboratory experiences to validate what is learned in the classroom and expose the student to the type of situations he would be working in upon completion of the program.

Laboratory experiences provide one-to-one contact with the deaf, for example, volunteering in the schools' programs for the hearing impaired, socializing with deaf people at various clubs and functions for the deaf, etc.

The curriculum pattern provides a cluster of basic courses in both the one-year and two-year program levels. Students may elect to complete their study program through full or part-time work in accordance with their career plans. Strong emphasis is placed on skill development in all the communication methods for the deaf, emphasizing the concept and philosophy of Total Communication. The training program consistently emphasizes a full understanding of the role of the paraprofessional in the educational institutions and community agencies to obviate any conflicts in employment situations.

As a result of the curriculum philosophy and pattern, students observe theory that they have learned in the classroom in lab exposure and can apply many of the techniques they have been exposed to in class. An example of this is the course, "introductory Sign Language for the Deaf." This class meets for three class hours per week. The students then participate in a Silent Weekend where deaf people and hearing people gather together and nothing but sign language is spoken.

Other supervised laboratory experiences require the students to attend at least one to two hours per week viewing and listening to video tapes of sign language lessons using the Signed English, SEE method, teaching another person to fingerspell at the dinner table, meeting a deaf child, getting to know them, taking them out once or twice during the semester for ice cream or play activity. Hence, activities provide the students opportunity to participate in daily living situations necessary to relate to the deaf child and the deaf adult as a whole entity, a gestalt view.

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The course entitled, "Developmental Activities for the Deaf Adult," provides, in addition to lecture where the theory is presented and the life problems of the deaf adult are discussed, a requirement that the student meet deaf people individually, spend time at functions for the deaf such as attending the Dallas Association for the Deaf. Encouragement is given to students to attend social events and relax with deaf people.

Students can be required to make surveys. This type of project forces students to use the skills they learn in sign language classes as well as the other theory oriented classes and view the deaf person as a whole person.

Field work is approximately half of the training program and forces the paraprofessional student to get into the field observing students in the hearing impaired classes at Dallas Independent School District, other agencies and at the Deaf/Blind Unit at Callier.

Many students, as previously stated, will take 30 hours and then seek part-time employment. This type of a plan is excellent because the student can apply what he has learned in the classroom on the job; as a teacher's aide/interpreter in the public schools; as an assistant in the Deaf/Blind Unit at Callier, and local agencies.

Typically a student will report, "Aha! Theory that I learned in this or that course I can now see in operation." This really excites the students and the faculty because practical application of learned theory and skills is a reality.

The program is now in the fourth year of operation. Approximately 8 students have finished the two-year program. Many students who attend the community college system attend part-time, taking no more than 9 hours per semester in addition to a 40-hour work week. This is true with our students in the Training Paraprofessionals for the Deaf program.

Consequently, students are still enrolled in the program finishing their electives and basic courses with plans to graduate in the next year or year and a half. Some of the students obtain jobs after 30 hours in the program at a certificate level of competency. They work and increase their standard of living.

The Advisory Board for the program makes recommendations to the faculty, approves suggestions and ideas. This Advisory Board is composed of professionals who are top administrators in the field of deafness locally as well as throughout the state of Texas. Consultants who are nationally known are available should the need arise for us to procure their services. The curriculum is constantly under scrutiny to enable us to improve and revise it as new techniques develop.

What is the *value* of a training paraprofessional program? Has it accomplished what it set out to do? That is, does it help provide improved educational settings for the deaf and services to the deaf?

An employer of three of our students states that, "These persons have worked into our program easily and have been well received by the staff, not only in the audiology department, but throughout the clinic. It is the feeling

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of the staff that our treatment center should consider very strongly the hiring of paraprofessionals in the future. I think paraprofessionals are the only answer to the high cost of delivering medical and health services."

School administrators for the hearing impaired program in the Dallas Independent School System have reported that they have found our students to be a necessary tool in integrating deaf students into hearing classrooms, especially at the high school level where they are grouped in clusters. The teacher aide/interpreter is the deaf person's key to learning and understanding of what is going on in the classroom.

A further value of the program is that many of the students get a chance to whet their appetites, and to discover for themselves through actual experience whether they really want to get into this field. As a result, paraprofessional students do not go to four years of college, obtain a degree in education of the deaf, teach, and become frustrated because they are dissatisfied with their careers. Further, students who express a desire do go on to school and, accordingly, continue their upper division courses at the local institutions and work at the same time. This keeps them constantly in the field and seeing deaf education from both sides; the teacher's side as well as theory in the classroom. Other students have become more interested in Audiology and express a desire to go into Speech Pathology and/or Audiology for many of the same reasons and obtain Bachelor degrees.

The program has very definitely served as a stepping stone toward advanced degrees. In keeping with the value of the program, requests have been received from other community colleges across the country whose faculty are thinking of establishing programs to train paraprofessionals to work with the deaf, the blind or handicapped people in general.

Eastfield College has demonstrated that paraprofessionals can receive appropriate and adequate training to prepare them to function adequately in the number of service areas previously stated, and can be successfully integrated as a member of the educational community. Training Paraprofessionals for the Deaf Programs are of demonstrated value and are providing well trained individuals serving the needs of the deaf community.

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