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## How A Special College Serves the Deaf

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**EDWARD C. MERRILL, JR., Ph.D.**

My objective here is not simply to describe a college for the deaf, but to present enough of a review of social values in the United States for you to see how Gallaudet College functions to meet some of the legitimate educational needs of our society and of the deaf people who are a part of it.

A school, college, or university is indigenous to its culture. Not only is it part and parcel of it, but it must serve some important purpose in that setting. It must make a contribution to society in order to justify its existence. The varied ways in which institutions serve the societies of which they are a part make up an interesting, even exciting, body of educational theory and practice. The first thing one learns when travelling from one country to another is that institutions of higher education may be founded on very different premises, may be structured quite strangely, may be responding to unusual public expectations, and at the same time they may be viewed as remarkably successful institutions within their particular context. For this reason, I should like to state a few premises or assumptions, but by no means

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all of them, which will assist you in grasping the role of Gallaudet College as an institution of higher education in America.

- . . . Americans generally value education and view it as an investment. They are willing to be taxed heavily for educational programmes, knowing full well that these programs provide important individual benefits. We do this because we feel that an educated individual can make an important contribution to the common good.
- . . . In the United States there is an awareness that education is essential for enlightened participation in government and that the kind of government we have will not work well without a reasonably broad base of literacy, knowledge, and understanding of individual worth.
- . . . Educational opportunity is increasingly viewed as a civil, if not a basic human, right in the United States. The United States has always had mass educational systems, but these systems, at the collegiate level, have had restrictive admissions and have been somewhat costly to attend. We are now undergoing changes which will enable most people who have the motivation and a commitment to educational objectives to have access to a programme in which he can progress. (An individual, of course, must qualify intellectually and academically for admission to a programme.)
- . . . Institutions of higher education in the United States, especially public institutions, are judged by standards that, once again, tend to be related to the utilitarian needs of our society. Our accreditation process involves focusing on how well an institution meets educational needs of people rather than the judgment of the institution in relation to fixed standards. This accounts for some of the differences which occur when we discuss higher education in the United States in relation to education in Great Britain.
- . . . In the United States education is seen as a process as well as a result. With schools starting earlier and programmes of continuing education attracting even retired individuals, we see learning as a function closely related to growth, development, and adjustment needs of both the individual and society. Of course, we encourage concentrated study to achieve personal or professional goals, but we know that the demands of life indicate that we will need to continue to learn in order to function in an increasingly complex society.
- . . . Although there are several other important premises, only one other will be mentioned now. Having a short educational history and few pervasive traditions, educational institutions in America are varied in kind and adaptable by nature. This diversity takes the form of institutions of higher education which reflect not only vocational, technical and liberal studies, but proprietary interests as well as ethnic causes. With a heterogeneous culture it should not be surprising to find heterogeneous institutions. We hope that such diversity will result in more motivation of individuals, useful specialisations, and a greater understanding of the differences in our culture.

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It is in this milieu that Gallaudet College functions. Perhaps you can see already how an accredited college for the deaf would seem not only reasonable but desirable in this setting.

The purpose of Gallaudet College is to offer young men and women who are deaf a liberal, higher education. The College offers its students intellectual development that can be acquired through a study of the liberal arts and sciences. The College seeks to produce men and women who have the power of sound, independent judgment, who are well informed about the world around them, and who can enter into the workforce as semi-professional or professional employees. For over 100 years it has offered a liberal education to college-age deaf students; well over 5,000 profoundly deaf people have an education at Gallaudet College and are now leading successful lives in communities across the country.

In discharging its responsibilities, Gallaudet College has the following major programmes:

(1) The undergraduate college of liberal studies (approximately 1,000 students);

(2) The graduate school (approximately 200 students preparing to be teachers and counsellors for the deaf or audiologists);

(3) The centre for continuing education (approximately 1,200 students);

(4) Pre-college programme (two demonstration schools of national significance serving approximately 300 students);

(5) The research programme (consisting of the Sensory Communications Laboratory, the Linguistics Laboratory, the Cued Speech Project and the National Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth);

(6) The public service programme.

Thus, Gallaudet College is a national centre on deafness with programmes that touch the lives of deaf people throughout the nation.

Gallaudet College is remarkably similar to the majority of the 2,600 colleges and universities in the United States. Its pattern of courses, its academic standards, its degree requirements, its faculty, its student life (Student Body Government, sororities, fraternities), its athletic teams (football, soccer, basketball, ice hockey, tennis, field hockey, swimming, golf, and baseball), and its traditions are much the same as those on any college campus from Maine to Florida and from North Carolina to California.

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Gallaudet College is different from other colleges in two major respects. The College endeavours to accommodate and to cope with the language deficiencies of deaf students by a preparatory programme, tutorial assistance, and a language sensitive curriculum throughout the four years of college. The normative scores of students entering Gallaudet College lag behind the normative scores of high school graduates from 12 to 15 percentage points in almost any language test (vocabulary, grammar, composition); yet the

normative scores of students entering Gallaudet College are equal to the normative scores of other college sophomores (third-year college students) in non-verbal intelligence. Thus, Gallaudet College accepts intelligent students with deficiencies in language and assists them in remedying these problems as they pursue a typical college education.

Secondary, Gallaudet College accepts the most natural mode of communication with deaf students — simultaneous (or total) communication. Instructors must speak, using the syntax, sign and fingerspell in the classroom and at all college functions. As 25 per cent of the faculty of Gallaudet College are deaf themselves, this policy also applies to deaf instructors. In the event a deaf instructor cannot use his voice, he must form the words with his lips, using the syntax, sign and fingerspell. A student at Gallaudet College is as well or better informed about college, community, and national affairs as a student on any other campus. All students feel that they are 'in' on everything and that they have as much information as any other person.

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The most important product of Gallaudet College are those young men and women who obtain their degrees here. With programmes adapted to their learning problems, the students major in their junior and senior years and pursue studies that will prepare them for employment. The Placement Office of Gallaudet College finds positions for approximately 85 per cent of the graduates within three months after graduation.

As a result of a degree from Gallaudet College, many deaf persons hold positions which have never been held by a deaf person before. In fact our graduates take pride in 'breaking into' new fields and proving their competence. Today, our alumni are librarians, teachers, ordained ministers, chemists, mathematicians, businessmen, researchers, counsellors, specialists in government service, rehabilitation coordinators, and more than one is a principal or superintendent of a school for deaf children.

Twenty-five per cent of Gallaudet College graduates now enter a graduate programme in another college or university for more specialised professional training. As a matter of fact, ten universities now have special services available for deaf students entering graduate school.

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Forces within each individual and within each culture result in attitudes toward handicapping conditions. The tendency in most cultures is to minimise the effects of the condition and to strive to obtain normality. This is wholesome and good as a direction or a goal. Yet this motivation, no matter how noble, can result in a forfeit of opportunities to learn, to grow as a person, to contribute to society, the latter goal being perhaps the greatest

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human satisfaction of all. If the deaf individual and his society permits the desire to appear to be normal to deprive the deaf individual of an effective way to learn, then the individual is not only deaf but may be an educational cripple as well. By providing higher education which not only acknowledges and respects the deaf individual but develops a learning environment in which he can succeed, Gallaudet College has offered to those deaf persons who come to it an opportunity to succeed in some fundamental way as human beings.

Deaf young men and women who come to Gallaudet College are willing to say 'I am deaf. I cannot learn the way most people learn. Nevertheless, I can and will learn.' And they have. The ground swell for better educational programmes, for equal civil rights for deaf people, for higher levels of professionalism in the United States is being led by deaf persons — graduates of Gallaudet College. This argues strongly for providing a wide variety of opportunities in higher education for deaf students, including a college that speaks to their special needs, one with which they have a special identity, and one in which they take pride.