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Incorporating Principles of Social Justice and Respect for Diversity

IN TRAINING COUNSELORS OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS

By Linda Risser Lytle, Cheryl L. Wu, and Danielle Thompson-Ochoa

One of the major concerns in the K-12 education systems today is that the ethnicity of school professionals does not reflect the ethnicity of the students. This is true for most school professionals, including school counselors, the focus of our training programs at Gallaudet University, where we try to reflect the diversity of the United States when we select our counselor trainees. Further, we work to broaden our students' worldview and to foster development of multicultural competencies. This is not only critical for them in our increasingly diverse world, but more important it is critical for serving deaf and hard of hearing students and the families with whom they will work.

From their very first semester, our counselors in training are asked to be mindful of our nature as cultural beings and to explore how they—and individuals from other cultures—engage in the world. Individuals enter our programs with ideas, concepts, and opinions; they think they know their own minds and know right from wrong, good from bad. They often know little about how, where, and from whom they assimilated their information and beliefs, however, or whether they learned these things consciously or unconsciously. They don't recognize how others, equally good people, may have very different and equally valid beliefs. While they are serious about wanting to help students, they know little about what "help" looks like through different cultural lenses, and this could reduce their effectiveness.

Photos courtesy of Mark Schwartz, Jody Olson, and Michele Heise



For this reason, we intentionally train our school counselors through a comprehensive multicultural/social justice curricular framework that highlights the following:

- **Social and cultural diversity.** We have two foundational courses that address diversity within the theoretical framework of American Deaf culture and community and identity development in deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing individuals.
- **Large- and small-scale diversity exercises.** With these, we don't teach about concepts; instead we illustrate them as we mindfully lead trainees through a variety of activities, including simulations that help them to develop their own knowledge, skills, and awareness.

Above: MSAD school counselor Lisa Wasilowski welcomes students, teachers, and staff back to school dressed as the school mascot as a way of making initial connections with them.

- **Cross-cultural dialogue.** We provide space to practice facilitation and engagement in difficult conversations across cultures.
- **Cultural encounters.** Our trainees leave the classroom and enter carefully chosen and unfamiliar communities with the goal of learning about other cultures through interacting with individuals. A white student might visit an African American church, for example, or a straight student might visit a gay cultural center. Students observe, converse, report back, and reflect on their conversations. This allows them to

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Left: Wasilowski (left, second row), in costume, with MSAD students.

learn about the culture of other people and to recognize and perhaps to address preconceptions and biases they may have held.

When they go into the field to do their internships, our counselors in training report seeing evidence for much of what they learned in class. For example, a recent school counseling intern was placed in a large mainstream program in a public school in Washington State. He reported that he became aware immediately of his advantage as a hearing white male. As he worked with mostly white hearing female colleagues and deaf students within a school in which the majority of students were hearing, he became aware of a respect directed toward him that he felt he had not yet earned. This began on the first day of his internship, he said. The dissonance between his own estimations of his counseling expertise and that of those around him was amplified as his direct supervisor, a deaf female, seemed only marginally accepted by her hearing colleagues while the same colleagues seemed not only to accept him but turned to him for experience and skill in counseling that he knew he didn't yet have. Especially stinging, he said, was an oppression that the school system imposed on the deaf and hard of

hearing students with whom he was working. He felt keenly aware that the needs of those students were ignored or misunderstood, and he credited his graduate training with this awareness. He was also aware that his gender and hearing status functioned as a privilege; he was awarded an acceptance and respect that females and professionals who are deaf or hard of hearing had to work harder to attain. Equally important, our trainee refused to take advantage of what was, in effect, a prejudice that worked in his favor. Rather than rushing in to impose his feelings on others, perhaps ruining relationships in the process, he concentrated on building relationships with colleagues. He was able to make deliberate decisions on how to approach the various community members, stay true to his own values, and advocate for deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the school. He was mindful that whatever he did or did not do, he was but a very small and transitory piece in a larger picture. He would leave when his internship was finished. The deaf and hard of hearing students and the supervisor about whom he cared would remain. For them, the school was *home*; they would need to find their own paths in dealing with this less-than-ideal environment.

School counselors are most effective when they understand their privilege and cultural identity. By becoming aware of others in this intentional way, compassion for and connection with others are much more likely. Brian Tingley, Class of 2015, who became a school counselor at the California School for the Deaf-Riverside, created signs to post in his office and on his door to convey a strong message of caring for his students as one of his first actions. Tingley understood that as a new counselor he needed to introduce himself and form connections using every opportunity he had. As he had learned from both instruction and direct experience in our program, no important counseling work could be accomplished without those first important steps in building relationships. He knew that it was important for students to feel safe and welcomed. Tingley was quick to embrace school counseling curriculums that are offered nationally, believing it is important to make connections with the broader educational community. He embraces his deaf and hard of hearing students as part of the diversity within the world, connected to a broader community of students. In that spirit, he brought to his school "Actively Caring," a curriculum that focuses on the concepts of kindness and "paying it forward." With this, students learn they have much to give as well as to receive.

At the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf (MSAD), school counselors establish connections with students through presentations and skits. In the elementary department, school counselors dress up as characters while they share stories such as *Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun* by Maria Dismondy (2008), about a girl who has the courage to be herself despite how others make fun of her. Lisa Wasilowski, MSAD school counselor and a 2005 graduate of our program, says one of her favorite

School Counseling: A New Model for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students?

By Linda Risser Lytle, Cheryl L. Wu, and Danielle Thompson-Ochoa

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has found that school counselors are most effective when they follow a comprehensive developmental model rather than provide individual services that tend to be responsive and not preventative. While the ASCA model offers important guidelines and represents a solid beginning, it does not suffice for school counselors who work with deaf and hard of hearing students.

For the past year and a half, the faculty of the Department of Counseling school program at Gallaudet University has worked to expand the ASCA national model to address the unique counseling and program needs of deaf and hard of hearing students. Our model would provide school counselors in general education settings with an orientation to the skills and knowledge necessary to work with deaf and hard of hearing students; it would provide counselors in schools for the deaf with the skills, knowledge, and training necessary to work with deaf and hard of hearing students and the skills, knowledge, and training to implement a comprehensive schoolwide counseling program for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Our goal is two-fold:

- to provide an orientation to practicing counselors who are not necessarily trained to work with deaf and hard of hearing populations (e.g., school counselors in general education settings who may occasionally work with deaf and hard of hearing students but who do not have the knowledge and skills about being deaf to work with these students effectively), and
- to provide training to counselors in residential schools for the deaf who know deaf and hard of hearing children and youth and who have the language skills to work directly with them through a comprehensive developmental model.

The ASCA model has four themes: leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. To make explicit the work needed to support deaf and hard of hearing students, we have added four additional themes:

1. **Access.** Access is important as it addresses maximizing participation in both formal and informal academic and social interactions for deaf and hard of hearing children in school as well as at home and in the community—a huge challenge due to the complex diversity in language and communication among our deaf and hard of hearing students.
2. **Integration.** Integration increases opportunities for students to fully participate in school events; it must be structured in carefully intentional ways to ensure deaf and hard of hearing students are engaging with their hearing peers in substantive ways as opposed to engaging in parallel activities.
3. **Inclusion.** Inclusion refers to ways to fully include deaf and hard of hearing students from culturally diverse backgrounds (e.g., those who are of color, those who have immigrated to the U.S., those who are the children of immigrants, those who are not from English speaking or signing homes, those with additional disabilities, those who live with gender diversity, those from economically and educationally disadvantaged families).
4. **Allyship and cultural responsiveness.** Allyship and cultural responsiveness involves understanding and appreciating diverse cultures and emphasizes consultation and collaboration with all who potentially impact the student's life. It means intentionally building alliances between those who are deaf or hard of hearing and those who are hearing, including students and professionals and the support systems that sustain them.

In addition, the model explores the unique challenges of school counselors in general education settings who have minimal or no background in working with deaf and hard of hearing students. We propose that in addition to issues within the ASCA model, training for counselors of children and youth who are deaf or hard of hearing addresses: a) language acquisition and communication fluency, b) diverse learning needs and cultural identities, c) life skills, and d) competencies to tackle discrimination and oppression.

While the ASCA has not yet embraced this model, the organization recognizes that equal access to all parts of the educational experience is key to students' success at school. Further the ASCA recognizes that this adapted model incorporates social justice and cultural awareness into the standards and principles of school counselors who work with deaf and hard of hearing students.

We continue to educate the ASCA about the unique challenges of working with deaf and hard of hearing students, especially challenges related to language access and the importance of counseling and eliminating barriers for personal, social, academic, and career success. The ASCA has agreed to publish and disseminate this model in the form of an ASCA resource manual. For more information, contact Cheryl Wu at Cheryl.Wu@gallaudet.edu.

duties is dressing up as the school mascot to welcome back students, teachers, and staff on the first day of school. Wasilowski and her fellow counselors know that initial connections made through presentations and interactions as a welcoming mascot may open doors to deeper work. These sorts of activities allow students to feel more comfortable in seeking help and managing their emotions and behavior.

Since our programs focus so heavily on social justice, it is no surprise that we graduate school counselors who are quick to notice students who are marginalized and work to support them within their schools. Our counselors help establish groups for these students—LGBT students, deaf-blind students, adopted students, and others who may feel isolated and alone. Group participation allows these students to both support one another and have a safe space to explore their identity. In each of these groups, counselors support students as they build confidence and

self-esteem; counselors expand the equity of educational experiences.

Training for school counselors includes developing skills in consultation and collaboration, and thus they are able to provide support not only to students but also to teachers and administrators. Making connections with teachers positively impacts changes in the classroom and supports students as well as teachers. School counselors work with principals and other administrators to support a healthy school environment and to implement policies that protect students and promote social justice.

Data shows that significant changes in individual development occur as our counselors in training progress through our programs. Furthermore, as these students complete their fieldwork experiences in schools throughout the nation, we clearly see their passion for helping students and working for social justice in both big and small ways. This may be especially important as surveys have shown that the primary service

provided to deaf and hard of hearing schoolchildren is individual counseling (Lomas, Nichter, & Robles-Pina, 2011). We graduate school counselors who are ready to work with teachers and administrators and work for social justice within their schools. We are proud that our graduates also keep a watchful eye on their deaf and hard of hearing students and are always ready to provide support.

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