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Denise Kavin
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Two-Year Postsecondary Educational Institutions in the Midwest Serving Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing Students: Technical Assistance Needs and Programmatic Changes

Denise Kavin

Abstract

In 1996, the Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) was formed to provide technical assistance services to postsecondary educational institutions in providing access and accommodations to individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. The Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach (MCPO), one of the four regional centers of PEPNet, offers consultation and training on services for such students through presentations and access to a network of professionals in the field. In 1997, PEPNet conducted a national needs assessment survey of postsecondary institutions to determine the status of support services available to deaf and hard of hearing students and to identify preferred strategies for information access and dissemination. This study is a follow-up to the PEPNet assessment to determine the impact of MCPO on provision of services to students in public two-year, non-profit postsecondary institutions in the 12-state Midwest region.

This study was designed to find if there were any changes in the numbers of students served or graduated, preferred topics or modes for training, level of support services (levels of services, funding, and staffing), and the relationships between any identified changes with the establishment of MCPO.

It was found that there was an overall decline in the number of deaf and hard of hearing students served and graduated, although a higher number of institutions were having contact with these students. The top five preferred training topics and modes for delivery were largely unchanged between 1997 and 2000, although there seemed to be lower rankings in the post data, which could be linked to MCPO's efforts, resulting in increased awareness and decreased need. The technical assistance services shown to have the most positive impact on level of services are the MCPO/ PEPNet website, PEPNet conference, PEPNet Resource Center, phone consultation, teleconference participation, and training modules on the PEPNet website.

In regard to service provision and staffing, there have been growths in the areas of sign language interpreting, C-print, real-time captioning, notetaking, and tutoring. The data shows that much of this can likely be credited to MCPO. On the other hand, level of funding for disability services has remained stagnant.

Several conclusions and recommendations pertaining to the provision of services to deaf and hard of hearing students in higher education arise from this study which falls in the areas of marketing, MCPO services, intervention, specialized programming, diversity, funding, and policy development.

Introduction

In the early 1950's, only a small minority of deaf and hard-of-hearing students had access to postsecondary education programs that could meet their unique communication needs. At that time, Gallaudet

College in Washington, D.C., the world's only liberal arts college for the deaf, had an enrollment of just 300 students. There were a handful of additional deaf students attending other programs in the nation, but not necessarily with specialized support services such as sign language interpreting and notetaking, the most commonly identified types of support services for such students.

During recent years, postsecondary educational opportunities for people who are deaf and hard of hearing have been expanding on college campuses across America. More programs are becoming accessible, and the number of such students enrolling in them is steadily increasing. "During the 1970's, the number of postsecondary programs for deaf students in the United States grew rapidly. Community colleges and special postsecondary programs began to take on increasing numbers of deaf students. A growing concern among professionals in organizations serving deaf people regarding unemployment and underemployment led to federal legislation to ameliorate the problem." (Lang and Connor, 1988, p. 26). This was legislation that called for federal support of several regional postsecondary programs for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, housed at already-established higher education institutions.

The purpose of establishing these programs was to demonstrate the feasibility of setting up model programs for deaf and hard-of-hearing students at existing postsecondary programs for the mainstream population (Moores, 1979, p. 15). These programs were initially supported by funds for vocational education at the state level, designed for students with disabilities.

In the 1992-93 academic year, there were an estimated 20,040 deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled in postsecondary education institutions nationwide, including an additional 2,500 enrolled at Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (Lewis, Farris & Greene, 1994, p. iii). The 1999 edition of "College and Career Programs for Deaf Students: 10th edition", lists two national programs and over 145 postsecondary programs, which shows an explosion of postsecondary programs for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. "Prospects for deaf people are considerably different than 20-30 years ago. Postsecondary education for the deaf is beginning to mature" (Nash, 1988, p. 9). With this increase has also come improved access and accommodations in postsecondary programs for such students.

As a result of federal legislation which shifted the focus of funding from direct service programs for deaf and hard-of-hearing students to outreach and training at the institutional level, the

Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) was formed in 1996 to create effective and efficient technical assistance services to postsecondary educational institutions in providing access and accommodations to such individuals. Colleges were ultimately responsible for the provision of support services to deaf and hard-of-hearing students; they could no longer depend on federal funding to provide accommodations.

The purpose of PEPNet is to promote increased and improved access and availability of postsecondary educational opportunities for individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. It is designed to facilitate more equality, consistency and uniformity in quality of support services. The four regional technical assistance centers of PEPNet are:

1. Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach, St. Paul College, St. Paul, MN (MCPO)
2. Northeast Technical Assistance Center, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY (NETAC)
3. Postsecondary Education Consortium, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN (PEC)
4. Western Region Outreach Center and Consortia, National Center on Deafness, California State University, Northridge, CA (WROCC)

While all four programs have different technical assistance delivery structures, the mission for all programs is the same: to enhance postsecondary educational opportunities for deaf and hard-of-hearing students through technical assistance services. MCPO offers consultation and training on services for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, presentations at workshops and conferences, and access to a network of other professionals in the field of higher education and deafness. Issues that can be addressed include, but are not limited to; interpreting services, notetaking, tutoring, real-time captioning and C-print, legal obligations required under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and teaching English as a second language to deaf and hard-of-hearing students. MCPO accomplishes its work through the funding of four outreach sites: Harper College in Palatine, IL; the

Center for Sight and Hearing in Rockford, IL; the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; a site at MCPO in St. Paul, MN.

In addition to technical assistance, consultation and training services, PEPNet offers teleconferences, on-line training modules, and regional and national conferences. PEPNet also has a Resource Center housed at WROCC; which offers a wealth of products including training packages, handbooks, books and booklets, tip sheets, videotapes, and curricula.

In 1997, PEPNet conducted a national needs assessment survey of postsecondary institutions to determine the status of support services available to deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and to identify preferred strategies for information access and dissemination. In 2000, a follow-up study to this assessment was done as a dissertation research project by the author to determine the impact of MCPO on provision of services to students in public two-year, non-profit postsecondary institutions in the 12-state Midwest region, since its establishment in 1996.

This study was designed to find if there were any changes in the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled, served or graduated, preferred topics or modes for training and information dissemination, level of support services (levels of service provision, funding and staffing), and the relationships between any identified changes with the establishment of MCPO. Information was also gleaned about various technical assistance services that have had the most positive impact on service provision, and where disability service providers felt they were most positively impacted by MCPO services in regard to services for deaf and hard-of-hearing students at their institution.

It was found that there was an overall decline in the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing students served and graduated, although a higher number of institutions were having contact with these students. The top five preferred training topics and modes for delivery were largely unchanged between 1997 and 2000, although there seemed to be lower rankings in the post-data, which could be linked to MCPO's efforts, resulting in increased awareness and decreased need for technical assistance and consultation services. The technical assistant services shown to have had the most positive impact on level of services to deaf and hard-of-hearing students are the MCPO/PEPNet website,

PEPNet conference, PEPNet Resource Center, phone consultation, teleconference participation, and training modules on the PEPNet website.

In regard to service provision and staffing, there have been growths in the areas of sign language interpreting, C-print, real-time captioning, notetaking and tutoring. The data shows that this can likely be credited in part to PEPNet and MCPO services. On the other hand, level of funding for disability services has remained stagnant, which fits in with funding being ranked as one of the top five training needs identified, and ranked as the lowest in areas positively impacted by MCPO. Generally, it seems that many programs do not have strong institutional commitment and support to increased funding for disability services, despite the growing need and cost for services.

Several conclusions and recommendations pertaining to the provision of services to deaf and hard-of-hearing students in higher education arise from this study, which fall in the areas of marketing, MCPO services, intervention, specialized programming, diversity, funding and policy development. There needs to be increased marketing of MCPO services, and MCPO needs to continue to provide services addressing the areas of funding/resources, technology for accessibility and learning, student retention, and improvement of support services.

It is clear that there is a need for further intervention at levels preceding higher education: with doctors and audiologists, with parent-infant educators, and within the K-12 school system. There is only so much that MCPO can do to impact the success of deaf and hard-of-hearing students if they do not have the academic preparation and skills necessary for the rigors of higher education.

Although the trend is towards deaf children attending one's local school district, the "clustering" of deaf and hard-of-hearing students at designated schools that provide specialized support services, which used to be a popular option, may still need to be considered a model of effective service delivery. "Availability of qualified service providers is dictated by a 'critical mass' approach, whereby a number of traditionally underserved deaf persons would be grouped in a way to receive the consistent attention of these professionals" (Long & Dowhower, 1991, p. 109). Specialized programs that serve a large

number of students also allow for more effective and efficient use of staff and fiscal resources, rather than the scattering of students and support service staff at a large number of institutions, all duplicating one another.

Additionally, there needs to be a new focus on deaf and hard-of-hearing students with secondary disabilities and of various backgrounds. It is clear that the student body is becoming increasingly diverse, with more hard-of-hearing students, more students of color, more with secondary disabilities, and more students with second, third or fourth language issues.

Funding for disability services is an ongoing concern, which the data clearly shows. The area of designing access services for students with disabilities, both physically and programmatically, has been receiving heightened institutional and public awareness, in part due to legal and advocacy efforts. However, administrators are under pressure to provide more services with less resources. The need for additional services goes back as far as the early 1980's. "There will be a clear need for (disabled student services) program staff to become better managers, but more pointedly, better managers able 'do more with less.' There is clear need to gather and bear the hard facts about accommodation needs and associated costs, changing patterns in the disabled student population, and the benefits of equal accommodations and access as a human resource investment." (Blosser, 1981, p. 83).

Finally, development of policy and guidelines and collaboration in regard to services for deaf and hard-of-hearing education are additional areas of concern. There is a widespread effort by many campuses to integrate services to disabled students. While the outcome has been positive, there has been some oversight of the political and programmatic need for central coordination of support services for students with disabilities. There needs to be overall campus coordination, less competition among departments for funds, systems for student referrals, development of cost-effective services, and overall monitoring and managing of resources.

In conclusion, careful analysis of the data has provided new information on how and where MCPO has made an impact since its establishment in 1996. This information can set the framework for planning future technical assistance and research activities by PEPNet,

policy makers, and researchers. While this particular research was limited to two-year colleges in the Midwest region, it can also be applied to various higher education institutions, including four-year colleges and proprietary schools.

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*Denise Kavin, Coordinator, Deaf/Hard of Hearing Services and
Assistant Director, MCPO
Access and Disability Services
William R. Harper College
1200 W Algonquin Rd
Palatine, IL 60067*