

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE EXPERIENCES OF NON-SIGNING DEAF AND  
HARD-OF-HEARING STUDENTS AND THEIR  
ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION INTO A  
PRIMARILY SIGNING DEAF UNIVERSITY  
ENVIRONMENT

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What is the value of a predominantly signing Deaf University such as Gallaudet University for an oral deaf or hard-of-hearing non-signing student who grew up in the mainstreamed or inclusive educational settings? This study sought to explore the experiences of ten non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing university students as they integrated, both academically and socially, into a predominantly signing d/Deaf university environment and the subsequent impact on their identity development. Using a qualitative grounded theory methodology to focus on the individual meaning that these students ascribe to their experience using their own words, codes, categories, and themes emerged in an inductive process that created a substantive theory describing the experience of these students. The final key category that embodied the overall emerging theory is the participant's *process of developing a positive identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual*. The support categories for this key category are:

- Diagnosis: Setting the stage for 'self as different'
- On the margins of the mainstream: Passing for Hearing

- Catalyst: Gallaudet University as a gateway to a new community and language, ‘meeting others like me’.
- Transitions: Finding a sense of place and self
- Moving from the margins to the center: Developing a positive and affirmative identity as a Deaf or Hard-of-hearing person

What emerged out of this transitional experience is a transformative and life changing story of individuals who enter a new community, meet others like themselves, learn American Sign Language (ASL), and in the process develop a positive and affirmative identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. Overall, the emerging substantive theory based on the participants experiences is one that embodies the participants process of developing a positive and affirmative Deaf or Hard-of-hearing identity.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Gallaudet University, a small private liberal arts university for d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, promotes the use of American Sign Language (ASL) and written English as its primary methods of communicating on campus and in the classroom (Gallaudet University, 2010). The university community takes pride in the fact that, in addition to the bilingual ASL and English environment, the university is considered to be the ‘heart of deaf culture’ (Gallaudet University, 2010, p. 1). With these distinctions, Gallaudet University is considered an attractive option for many d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who communicate primarily in both ASL and English. However, the university also attracts a number of non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who know English but do not know ASL, the primary communication modality used on the campus. In many cases, these individuals were raised in predominantly hearing and oral communication environments in which their primary mode of communicating and learning has been through speech reading, relying on residual hearing, or using assistive hearing devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants (Scheetz, 2004). What prompts these particular non-signing oral deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals to choose to attend a predominantly signing Deaf university? What is their experience integrating into the academic and social culture of the signing Deaf university environment? How does that experience inform the development of a Deaf identity?

### **Population Demographics of deaf/Deaf and hard-of-hearing youth**

To provide a sense of context, it is important to understand the college-going behaviors among deaf and hard-of-hearing students by reviewing demographic data on the population of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth. This helps to provide a sense of the

numbers at a national level and the college attendance patterns of this population of students.

Mitchell and Karchmer (2006) describe the challenges of gathering demographic data on d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students. In the K-12 educational system, two data sources are currently used to gather annual demographic data on students receiving special education services: the federal *Child Count* published by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs and the *Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Children (Annual Survey)* published by the Gallaudet Research Institute (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). Mitchell and Karchmer (2006) acknowledge that while the *Annual Survey* provides more detailed demographic descriptions of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth specifically, the federally mandated *Child Count* totals are more likely an accurate representation of actual numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing students receiving services in the K-12 educational system.

**Child Count data.** The *Child Count* data only reports the number of students receiving special education services in the K-12 system, categorizing this data by type of disability and age (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). Unlike the *Annual Survey*, the *Child Count* data does not account for individual differences such as gender, age of onset of hearing loss, degree of hearing loss, types of assistive devices used and preferred communication modality used by the individual (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006).

For Mitchell and Karchmer's (2006) report, the 2003 totals of the *Child Count* report were the most readily available and indicated that at that time just over 70,000 students in the K-12 educational system were receiving special education services due to being deaf or hard-of-hearing. Of these students, almost 65 percent were educated in the



inclusive or mainstreamed educational environment (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006).

Mitchell and Karchmer (2006) also noted that 80 percent of the schools that reported providing services to deaf and hard-of-hearing students reported that they provided these services to three or fewer students, with almost 50 percent stating they provided services to only one student. This gives an indication of the dispersion of deaf and hard-of-hearing students throughout the nation, and highlights the very real evidence that one in five deaf or hard-of-hearing students were most likely the only student in their school receiving special education services because they are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

From the 2007-2008 *Child Count* data, 79,000 d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students received special education services for hearing impairment in the United States, an increase since the 2003-2004 *Child Count* report. At the time of the survey, 3,211 deaf or hard-of-hearing students, or 4% of the total in K-12 education, graduated with a diploma (NCES, 2009).

**Annual Survey data.** The *Annual Survey*, unlike the *Child Count* data, collects data on gender, age of onset of hearing loss, degree of hearing loss, types of assistive devices used and preferred communication modality used by the individual (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). For this reason, the *Annual Survey* is more reliable for providing data that demonstrates trends in the population. While this survey provides a helpful resource for assessing the general trends among deaf and hard-of-hearing youth, collecting the data is problematic due largely to the voluntary nature of the survey as well as to the fact that because of changing laws, d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students are dispersed more widely throughout the educational system (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). The *Annual Survey* also only documents data about student's that receive services in the school

systems, as voluntarily reported by the schools, and may not include those students who elect not to use services at the schools (GRI, 2005). Due to the voluntary nature of the *Annual Survey*, researchers compared the data of the *Annual Survey* to that of the federal *Child Count* data and estimate that the *Annual Survey* coverage is around 65 percent to 75 percent of the deaf or hard-of-hearing students receiving special education in the K-12 educational system (Allen, 1994).

From the 2007-2008 *Annual Survey*, 36,710 deaf and hard-of-hearing youth were receiving special education services in the K-12 educational system (as compared to the 79,000 reported by the 2007-2008 *Child Count*). Approximately 6,297 or 28% of the *Annual Survey* students are high school age (grades 9-12), with 1,622 or 7% in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade at the time of the survey.

What is interesting to note when examining this data of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth is that 56% of the total number of youth reported the age of onset of their hearing loss as occurring before the age of 2, when language development generally begins (GRI, 2008). Therefore, just over half of these students have been deaf or hard-of-hearing throughout their entire educational experience. Regarding degree of hearing loss, the percentage of youth described as hard-of-hearing, with a hearing loss up to 70 dB, account for 59% of the population. Those described as deaf, with a hearing loss greater than 70 dB, account for 41% of the population.

When considering family environment of these deaf and hard-of-hearing youth, 77% were born to hearing parents and 77% were the only deaf or hard-of-hearing child in the family. Therefore, many of these youth were being born into and raised by hearing family members, whom most likely have never had any experience or awareness of issues

surrounding deafness and the needs of deaf children and youth, and also most likely do not use ASL as their primary mode of communicating in the home. Using this data, it is clear that most students currently in the K-12 education system are defined as hard-of-hearing, a vast majority are born into primarily hearing families, and most of these students most likely do not know ASL and are being educated in an oral non-signing inclusive or mainstreamed school environment.

**College Attendance.** Data on the specific number of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students attending postsecondary institutions is almost non-existent. However, a 1994 study by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) on *Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Students in Postsecondary Education* offered a potential understanding of these population demographics. Data was collected from support service providers at two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions. This data only captured those students who identified themselves as d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing and received services from the support service providers at their college or university. Therefore, it is important to note that a student with a mild hearing loss may not be counted in the survey if he or she feels that he or she is capable of functioning without services.

In addition, this survey chose to exclude information from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), a technical vocational college in New York that serves d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students through a special arrangement with the Rochester Institute of Technology (Hochgesang, Dunning, Benaissa, DeCaro, & Karchmer, 2007). They also chose to exclude information from Gallaudet University (GU), a liberal arts university in Washington, D.C. that primarily serves d/Deaf /hard-of-hearing students (Hochgesang et al., 2007). Together, these two institutions are the only institutions in the

United States that are designated primarily for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (Hochgesang et al., 2007). In 1990, both of these institutions (GU and NTID) together served 3,079 d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students (NCES, 1994).

From the NCES data, not including students attending GU or NTID, 20,040 deaf and hard-of-hearing students were identified as receiving disability support in institutions of higher education. Of the 20,040 students, 18,600 (or 93 percent) identified as undergraduates, enrolled in both two-year and four-year postsecondary programs. Also of the 20,040 students, 7,700 (or 38 percent) including graduate students, attended four-year postsecondary institutions as compared to 62 percent who attended two-year programs.

From this data in 1994, deaf and hard-of-hearing students in postsecondary education were predominantly undergraduate students attending public and private two-year colleges. As this is the only survey that collected data on postsecondary deaf and hard-of-hearing students from over fifteen years ago, there is not a clear sense of population numbers of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students attending colleges and universities in the United States today. At present, the numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in postsecondary education vary yet a number of studies point to a population that does exist and that needs to be understood in order to ensure equal access and opportunities in education. For the purposes of my research, I focused only on those students who elected to attend Gallaudet University and the factors that contributed to this decision as well as explored how the experience of integrating into the predominantly Deaf university environment was meaningful for these students.

## **Background of the Study**

With the passage of several laws in the last 40 years, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), education in the broader society has become more accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing students (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). Consequently, an increasing number of d/Deaf and hard-of hearing students have integrated into the mainstreamed or inclusive educational settings (Allen, 1994; Gallaudet Research Institute, 2008; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). In light of this access and increased integration, research on deaf and hard-of-hearing students and how they negotiate the inclusive or mainstreamed educational environment, including higher education, is indeed relevant and needed.

**d/Deaf education.** To provide a sense of context, it is important to understand the educational experience and background of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. As mentioned earlier, education for the deaf and hard-of-hearing has seen a shift with the implementation of several laws, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Prior to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, most deaf or hard-of-hearing students either attended residential or day schools for the deaf or navigated the mainstream educational environment on their own, without any formal support structures or legal obligations in place (Leigh, 2009).

With the enactment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, particularly Section 504, all programs receiving federal financial assistance, including public schools, were required to provide accommodations to individuals with disabilities (Disability Rights Education

and Defense Fund, 2012). The ADA, a civil rights law like the Rehabilitation Act, further applied this access to all state and local government programs. Both of these laws prohibited discrimination on the basis of disabilities (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund). The IDEA, an education act, focused specifically on providing assistance to schools in the education of children with disabilities, and requiring schools to provide a “free, appropriate public education” to all children with disabilities (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund). The IDEA also established procedures, such as developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) identifying specific services that the individual child will receive for support in the school program he or she is attending (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund). Simply explained, these laws require educational institutions receiving federal and state funds to formally provide accommodations and support tailored to the needs of each disabled individual (including deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals) in order to give them equal access to education. With the passage of these laws, all educational institutions must provide access to disabled individuals. Where previously only a few opportunities existed for deaf and hard-of-hearing students to have equal access to education, now there existed a much larger range of opportunities for deaf and hard-of-hearing students to access education, including higher education.

Prior to passage and enactment of these laws, a large number of deaf and hard-of-hearing students attended schools for the deaf (Leigh, 2009). These schools were a primary option for educating deaf or hard-of-hearing students. Students attending the school all had a degree of hearing loss and the mode of instruction and communication used in the school was tailored to a more visual learning environment, often through the use of ASL or, in the case of oral deaf schools, speech and lip-reading. These schools for

the deaf were a valued artifact of Deaf culture as this is where students learned in an environment of peers like themselves using a language, such as ASL, that was more accessible for them (Goodrich, 1988; Moschella, 1992).

Moschella (1992) studied the impact of sign language versus oral upbringing on the emotional well-being of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and found in her research that self-concept, emotional well-being, and identity formation were generally better for deaf and hard-of-hearing students educated in schools for the deaf than for deaf and hard-of-hearing educated in the mainstream. Moschella attributes these findings to these students being raised in a similar peer culture using an accessible language and learning approach.

Since the passage of the laws, there has been a noticeable decline in enrollment at the schools for the deaf as more deaf and hard-of-hearing students access public education . (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). With diminishing enrollments, a number of schools for the deaf have consolidated or closed in recent years. While there has been a great deal of debate about whether or not mainstream or inclusive schools can truly provide a “free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment” for deaf or hard-of-hearing children, the fact remains that more and more deaf and hard-of-hearing children are becoming dispersed throughout public education (National Association for the Deaf, n.d.).

Mainstreamed deaf or hard-of-hearing students are those students who are attending regular educational programs along with hearing students. These students may use a variety of services or strategies in the classroom in an effort to be included as they learn along with their hearing peers, a process known as inclusion. These services or

strategies for inclusion vary depending on the student's degree of hearing loss and mode of communication. Often these students may be the only deaf or hard-of-hearing student at their school, often defined as 'solitaires' (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006; Oliva, 2004). Most of these students will have some form of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if they meet IDEA criteria or some form of access established according to Section 504 regulations. An IEP is a written document that outlines the accommodations and services the school will provide for a child who needs special services in order to receive access to an education (National Association of the Deaf, n.d.). Common types of access or accommodations made for deaf or hard-of-hearing students include preferential seating, use of closed captioning, use of FM systems, provision of interpreters, use of note-takers, provision of speech/language therapy, and/or auditory training, among others.

**D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students in higher education.** Of studies on deaf and hard-of-hearing students in higher education, a number of them have explored the experiences of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, who communicate using ASL and/or oral communication methods, and their experiences attending predominantly hearing university settings (English, 1993; Liversidge, 2003; Martin, 2009; Menchel, 1995). These studies focus on a variety of aspects of these student's experiences including their use of college support services to support their academic and social integration into college (English, 1993; Martin, 2009; Menchel, 1995), exploring the factors that contribute to their academic success (Liversidge, 2003; Martin, 2009; Menchel, 1995); and understanding how they develop and manage their social relationships (English, 1993; Liversidge, 2003; Martin, 2009).



In addition to research on d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in postsecondary settings, several research studies also explored the phenomenon of deaf identity development (Glickman, 1993; Goodrich, 1988; Melick, 1998; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004). All of these studies reported findings that explained the significance of exposure to the d/Deaf community and ASL as being a key part of the process of developing a culturally affirmative Deaf identity. Each of these studies outlined at least one narrative by participants who explicitly stated that their introduction to other deaf individuals and ASL occurred through their experiences attending a higher education institution that serves predominantly deaf and hard-of-hearing students and communicates using ASL and English. What is critical about these studies is the role of higher education environments in addressing identity development needs, particularly when these individuals are exposed to the Deaf community and ASL in these environments.

Although these studies explored the experience of non-signing d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in the predominantly hearing education environment and also touched on the influence of higher education experiences on identity development, there has not been any research that focuses explicitly and in-depth on understanding the experience of the non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing student as he or she integrates into a predominantly signing Deaf university. This research study addresses this gap and focuses on the academic and social integration experiences of these particular students. It was anticipated that from this research, issues regarding their sense of self and formation of their d/Deaf identity would emerge.

**Purpose of the study**

This study turned the question around: What is the value of a predominantly signing Deaf University such as Gallaudet University, particularly for the deaf and hard-of-hearing non-signing oral student who grew up in the mainstreamed or inclusive educational settings? This study explored the experiences of this select population of non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing university students as they integrated both academically and socially into a predominantly signing deaf university environment.

The population of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the K-12 educational environment being raised in hearing families, using primarily oral means of communicating, and being educated in an inclusive or mainstreamed educational setting is rising. In contrast, the population of Deaf students being raised in Deaf families and being educated in the deaf residential schools is rapidly declining (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). Of the total percentage of these groups combined, a relatively small percentage of this national population of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing college students attends Gallaudet University, and of those that do, an even smaller percentage within the university population are non-signing deaf or hard-of-hearing students.

As it is estimated that this population is growing based on the K-12 demographic data that indicates a larger percentage (65%) of deaf and hard-of-hearing students are coming from the oral non-signing backgrounds, there is a need to study the current experiences of this population of students attending Gallaudet University. In essence, what is the value of attending a Deaf predominantly signing university, as opposed to a predominantly hearing university, for deaf and hard-of-hearing students? In a rapidly changing economical, technological and communication environment, the viability of a

Deaf university depends on the ability to know and understand and capitalize on the population that is expanding: the non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

### **Research Question**

The primary research question is: how do oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrate both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment, and how does this process influence their deaf identity? It was expected that in this research study, these students' search for identity was one of the factors that influenced their decision to attend a predominantly deaf signing university.

### **Definition of Terms**

It is important for the reader to have a contextual grasp of the terms used in this study as well as of factors affecting the educational experience of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

**Deafness.** First, deafness from an audiological medical perspective is often considered in terms of hearing loss. In this perspective, the various degrees of hearing loss range from mild to profound.

***Mild to moderate hearing loss.*** Mild to moderate hearing loss is defined in the 25-65 decibel (dB) loss range (Scheetz, 2004). Individuals with mild to moderate hearing loss often benefit from the use of hearing aids or other assistive hearing devices and auditory training. With this assistance and their residual hearing, they may be able to understand conversational speech (Scheetz, 2004). In addition, these individuals are more likely to benefit from speech therapy and are able to converse in spoken language (Scheetz, 2004). Because of these communication strategies, they are often more comfortable accessing the larger hearing society and are most likely able to function

as hearing individuals (Scheetz, 2004). These individuals with mild to moderate hearing loss and effective communication strategies are often labeled as hard-of-hearing.

***Severe to profound hearing loss.*** Severe to profound hearing loss is described as a hearing loss of more than 65 dB up to as high as 120 dB (Scheetz, 2004). For individuals with this degree of loss, they may be able to hear noise but may not be able to identify or understand the sounds, even with the use of hearing aids (Scheetz, 2004). Developing speech is difficult and their speech is not always intelligible (Scheetz, 2004). Their primary means of communicating is through visual means, such as lipreading/speechreading or a visual gestural signed communication. Individuals with this range of hearing loss are often labeled deaf, with a lowercase “d” to connote an audiological medical definition of deafness.

**Culturally Deaf.** On the other end of the spectrum from viewing deafness from an audiological and medical perspective, Padden and Humphries (1988) are credited with bringing recognition to the experience of being Deaf as a cultural phenomena rather than just as an audiological or medical diagnosis. Deafness from a cultural perspective focuses on a shared set of experiences, beliefs and values and in the case of Deaf culture, the shared language of ASL (Padden and Humphries, 1988). Culturally Deaf individuals seek out and develop a strong community of social relationships based on these shared experiences (Leigh, 2009). Within this framework of Deafness as a socially constructed cultural phenomena, the audiological definitions are insignificant. An individual who has a moderate hearing loss but has been raised in a culturally Deaf environment, uses ASL, socializes with other d/Deaf members of the culture, and embraces the values and

traditions of the community is considered Deaf, with a capital “D” to signify the cultural concept of deafness.

Deaf culture also focuses on the bond that develops from the shared experience of living as a Deaf minority in a predominantly hearing world (Leigh, 2009). Members of the Deaf culture reject the hearing majority’s perspective of deafness as a medical and audiological disability that must be fixed. Culturally Deaf individuals instead embrace the perspective that deafness is a different way of being with its own language, stories, rituals and values that are normal and do not need to be ‘fixed’ (Leigh, 2009; Scheetz, 2004). From these shared experiences evolved the concept of the deaf experience as a different version of normality. (Leigh, 2009).

**deaf/Deaf.** When discussing individuals who identify with the cultural lens of deafness, the term “Deaf”, with a capital “D” is used, as is appropriate when defining individuals from a distinct cultural group (Padden & Humphries, 1988). When discussing individuals who identify with an audiological medical lens of deafness, “deaf” with a lowercase “d” is used to signify this difference. An individual can be audiotically deaf with a severe to profound hearing loss, yet not culturally Deaf because he or she does not have any social relationships or connections to other members of the Deaf community nor use ASL. These individuals may choose to identify themselves as hard-of-hearing rather than deaf, even though their degree of loss may indicate that their loss is in the severe to profound range of being deaf (Scheetz, 2004). These individuals may also identify more with the cultural hearing majority rather than with the cultural Deaf minority (Scheetz, 2004). In addition, deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals who were raised in predominantly oral environments, which emphasize

spoken languages and a reliance on residual hearing and assistive devices, are more likely to identify with the cultural hearing majority than with the Deaf minority, primarily because they do not use ASL nor have access to or contact with the Deaf culture (Scheetz, 2004).

### **Significance of Study**

Legally, access for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in predominantly hearing higher education institutions primarily focuses on providing academic accommodations and ensuring needed support and services to students so that they have equal access to the academic and cognitive components of their education (Drezner, 2008; Stinson & Walter, 1992, 1997). The educational system has no legal obligation to address the social or non-cognitive aspects of integration into the educational environment (Drezner, 2008; Stinson & Walter, 1992, 1997). Whereas students are guaranteed access to learning, they are not guaranteed access to every aspect of the college environment, particularly the social environment (Drezner, 2008; English, 1993; Stinson & Walter, 1992, 1997). Various studies on college impact, student involvement, persistence, and retention have consistently found that a key influence on student development and student learning is the level of student engagement and involvement in both the academic and social experiences of the institution (Astin, 1993; Braxton, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). For d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in regular predominantly hearing higher education programs, the degree of their hearing loss and their ability to effectively communicate and self-advocate clearly influences their ability to become actively involved in the life of the institution (Stinson & Walter, 1997). This has implications for both the rationale for the existence of deaf-serving programs and institutions as well as

for the kinds of support these students receive in the broader arena of higher education (Drezner, 2008; Stinson & Walter, 1997).

In the continuum of hearing loss, from the less severe to the more severe, Martin (2009) found that those with less severe hearing loss are more likely to navigate and succeed in the hearing educational environment, partly because they are able to rely on more effective communication skills that allow them to adapt and assimilate with the hearing communication modality (i.e. they have enough residual hearing or are able to effectively use hearing aids or have the ability to communicate with speech). Whereas students who have more severe hearing losses and less effective communication strategies exhibit greater difficulty integrating into both the academic and the social environment and consequently are less likely to establish a sense of belonging and more likely to struggle academically and feel isolated (English, 1993; Goodrich, 1988; Martin, 2009; Moschella, 1993; Oliva, 2004). However, it is important to note that even though hard-of-hearing with less severe hearing losses students are more likely to succeed and navigate the environment, this does not by any means indicate that their experience is easier.

Regardless of degree of hearing loss, research has found that deaf or hard-of-hearing students who have access to the availability of support in the form of a social network, or connections with other deaf and hard-of-hearing family and/or friends, are more likely to have higher self-esteem, to feel a sense of belonging, and to succeed in the predominantly hearing higher education environment, lending credence to the need for a level of social support to enhance the integration experience (English, 1993; Goodrich, 1988; Martin, 2009; Moschella, 1993; Oliva, 2004). These findings are consistent with

the work of Astin (1993) who found that one of the strongest factors influencing a positive college experience is that of the peer group culture. Clearly, institutions with a critical mass of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, including primarily deaf serving institutions, will more likely be able to address this need.

Research has shown the critical importance of both academic and social integration as being central for student involvement, retention, and success in college (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Stinson and Walter (1997) note that persistence models, as applied to d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, need to be used with caution due to the large variance in academic and communication ability in this population of students. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in general enter postsecondary education with a huge educational deficit, and this, combined with difficulty communicating, results in a 75% attrition rate in the predominantly hearing higher education environments (Stinson & Walter, 1997). However, of these students who are academically ready, many d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals with a wide range of hearing losses ranging from mild to profound have acknowledged that their access to education and academic integration is not a major issue in the predominantly hearing educational setting when compared to their lack of integration into the social environment (Menchel, 1995; Oliva, 2004; Stinson & Walter, 1997). This lack of access to the social environment has a more detrimental impact on their involvement in the collegiate experience. This is evidenced by their inability to develop friendships, to participate fully in everyday conversations with their peers and faculty, or to engage in co-curricular opportunities, ultimately contributing to their feelings of loneliness and isolation as a



minority in a majority hearing environment (English, 1993; Martin, 2009; Oliva, 2004; Stinson & Walter, 1992; Stinson & Walter, 1997).

This phenomenon is not unique to d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students when viewed from a broader minority student perspective. Research on minority students in predominantly white institutions has demonstrated the critical role of finding a strong peer group and establishing a sense of belonging before individual students are able to effectively focus on the task of academic integration into the institution (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1997). With larger percentages of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrating into the larger inclusive or mainstreamed education environment (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006), and therefore more likely to attend predominantly hearing universities, research on both the academic and social integration of deaf students into the institution is indeed relevant and needed, from both a predominantly hearing institutional perspective and from a deaf-serving institutional perspective.

### **Proposed Methodology**

Considering these questions and the nature of the study, I used a qualitative methodology to conduct this study. My rationale for this decision was multifold. Creswell (2009) explains that the qualitative approach focuses on individual meaning that humans ascribe to their experiences and in the process allows the researcher to share the richness, depth, and complexity of the experience. In addition, the qualitative approach allows the researcher to explore the socially constructed experiences of individuals in their own words. By seeking to understand the experiences of these individual students, this study made personal the impersonal and brought an element of depth and understanding that is lacking in more positivist and empirical research studies. The

qualitative approach lends itself well to capturing the experiences of those individuals who are marginalized or overlooked in the research.

Merriam (2002) explained the qualitative research paradigm as understanding “the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). Key characteristics of the qualitative research paradigm include the following:

- Researchers strive to *understand the meaning* people have constructed about their world and their experiences.
- *The researcher is the primary instrument* of data collection and data analysis.
- The qualitative research process is *inductive*.
- The product of a qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive* (Merriam, 2002, p. 4-5).

Using Merriam’s description, I sought to *understand the meaning* of the experiences of non-signing, deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrating into the signing, Deaf culture environment of Gallaudet University. I collected and analyzed data through interviews with these individuals in order to elicit and document their experiences in their own words. From these interviews, I gradually built a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of their experience grounded in the data using inductive methods of analysis. The resulting product of this research was based on the descriptions provided by the participants as they shared their experience. In sum, this research was based on the meaning that has been constructed by deaf and hard-of-hearing students as they shared their experiences integrating into the signing, Deaf world – a qualitative approach.

**Grounded theory.** More specifically, this study elected to use a grounded theory methodology, in which I gathered data through interviews with individuals in an effort to

capture in depth the experiences of these individuals and to formulate a substantial theory grounded in the data (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2009). Grounded Theory methodology emphasizes the creation of theory grounded in the individuals' experience (Charmaz, 2006). Essentially, grounded theory allows for the creation of a socially constructed theory based upon the interpretation and analysis of the individuals constructed realities as explained in their own words (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006).

Using grounded theory methodology, the researcher enters the field with no extant framework or *a priori* expectations of the experience being researched (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). The researcher gathers the stories or data from the participants about their experiences through interviews (Creswell, 1998). After each interview, the researcher analyzes the data looking for emerging themes or codes, a process known as coding (Birks & Mills, 2011; Creswell, 1998). As the interviews accumulate and more data is gathered, the researcher compares the findings across the various codes to create categories and uses these findings to continue to gather data, a process known as constant comparative analysis. These categories are then examined and reassembled into broader themes that emerge from the data, an inductive process (Creswell, 1998). These themes are used to create and build a substantive theory (Creswell, 1998). Merriam (2002) described the “end product of a grounded theory study as the building of a substantive theory -- theory that emerges from or is ‘grounded’ in the data” (p. 142).

Fassinger (2005) described “the ultimate aim [of grounded theory] is to produce innovative theory that is ‘grounded’ in data collected from participants on the basis of the complexities of their lived experiences in the social context” (p. 157). As Jones (2002)

describes, when sharing her use of grounded theory research in her study on multiple identities, “a grounded theory approach assures close proximity between theory and the experiences of those involved in the study” (p. 175-176). Jones (2002) further shared that “theory is grounded because it is anchored in the words, experiences, and meaning making of participants” (p. 176).

**Conclusion.**

Considering the dearth of research on the experiences of non-signing hard-of-hearing and deaf students integrating into a predominantly signing Deaf university environment and the impact of this experience on their formation of identity, I believed that the development of a substantive theory describing the experiences of these individuals would best inform understanding. This study elicited a substantive theory of the experiences of non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their academic and social integration into a predominantly signing university environment and how that influences their Deaf identity formation. The next chapter expands on literature relevant to this study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Because this study was a qualitative study using grounded theory methodology in which theory emerges from the data, scholars recommend that the researcher delay a formal review of the literature until after the data collection and analysis “to prevent the researcher from imposing existing theories or knowledge on the study processes and outcomes” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 22). However, a “limited and purposive review can be used in the early stages” as a means of informing the study from a methodological position (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 22). Therefore, the review of the literature for this study sought research that informed the methodological approach.

First, I reviewed the literature regarding student integration, involvement, and retention at both dominant culture and minority serving higher education institutions to establish a framework to guide my methodological approach regarding student integration into college. Then, I investigated the available literature regarding integration experiences of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students accessing postsecondary institutions. This research provided information about prior studies that have been conducted on this population and provided ideas for how to construct this study in order to elicit desired data. Lastly, as identity development is defined by as a key defining experience of college students (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), I explored the process of Deaf Identity Development in order to situate the reader in understanding the identity development of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students. Each of these approaches lent an important lens to the planned study of non-signing d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students and their experiences integrating into a predominantly signing university environment.

## **Dimensions of College Integration**

Tinto (1993) provided a much cited and referenced theoretical model of student departure, in which he used a primarily sociological lens to explore the interaction between the individual student and the institution as a means for explaining student persistence or departure. In his model, Tinto postulated that an individual student's decision to persist or depart from an institution is dependent on his or her pre-college characteristics, his or her level of commitment and intention towards a goal, and as his or her ability to integrate academically and socially, both formally and informally, into the institutional culture. When considering academic and social integration, Tinto projected that academic integration is dependent on a student's levels of academic preparedness and readiness as well as their ability to meet academic expectations; whereas social integration is dependent on the students ability to become involved in the community of the institution as well as connect to the peer culture and engage in the social life of the institution. While academic integration is a requisite of continued persistence, social integration is not (Tinto). Yet both academic and social integration have a potential influence on student involvement and persistence (Tinto). Tinto also hypothesized about levels of integration, noting that a student may integrate academically through strong academic performance yet not be involved in the social climate of the institution. On the other hand, students may have a high social involvement in organizations and extracurricular activities but have a mediocre academic experience. Depending on characteristics of the individual student, these levels may be sufficient for continued persistence or serve to drive departure decisions. Regardless of levels of integration, both factors serve at some level to influence student's persistence decisions. What drives

integration on both domains is the concept of involvement (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2000). Tinto (1993, 2000) discussed involvement in both the academic and social realms as being a key factor driving learning and development. The more involved a student is in their learning and development, the more likely they will become integrated with the academic and/or social culture of the institution, and therefore the more likely they will persist and graduate from the institution (Astin, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2006; Tinto, 1993, 2000). From this theoretical framework, questions for the study were designed around exploring the student's integration experiences, both formally and informally, into the academic and social life of the institution, particularly in light of their communication modality and identity.

Critiques of Tinto's (1993) theory noted that he used a primarily sociological lens that focused on the interaction of the individual with the institution's academic and social climate. Bean and Eaton (2000) stated that integration cannot be explored only from a sociological lens, but must also be explored using psychological factors that drive integration and involvement prior to student entrance, or pre-entrance characteristics of the individual student (Bean & Eaton). Particular factors that these researchers felt are critical to integration are the individual student's attitudes and beliefs, coping strategies, self-efficacy beliefs, and attributional locus of control perceptions (Bean & Eaton). Bean and Eaton believed that psychological theories are as critical as sociological theories in explaining individuals and their interaction with the institution and that interaction will occur in the context of psychological processes.

Using Bean and Eaton's (2000) model, it appeared that before deciding to attend a specific institution, students must first be aware of the existence of the institution. From

this awareness, they develop a belief about the institution that drives their attitude regarding their decision to apply or not to apply. Upon acceptance to the institution, a student's self-efficacy belief about his or her ability to succeed or fit into the life of the institution shapes their decision and motivation to attend. Upon arriving at the institution, the individual student must implement various coping strategies that may either help or hinder their integration into the academic and social life of the institution. Their ability to cope then determines their involvement and therefore subsequent integration and persistence into the life of the institution. Therefore, in designing the study, questions were developed that explored pre-college experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing students and how this affected their beliefs and attitudes in terms of college selection and related coping strategies, locus of control perceptions, and self-efficacy beliefs, and their influence on involvement and integration.

Another critique of Tinto's (1993) model comes from a cultural lens. Tinto's model assumed a level of access to cultural and economic capital resources (Berger, 2000). The dominant cultural group in institutions of higher education tends to be students with access to cultural and economic capital, and institutions often operate from an ethos that has long-served the needs of this dominant group (Berger, 2000).

Individuals who are not members of this dominant cultural group do not have the same level of cultural and economic access; this includes individuals from minority cultural groups, various disability statuses, as well as those who have lower socioeconomic status. These individuals tend to enter higher education with a deficit that creates a disadvantage not only in their level of access to a cultural ethos but also in their ability to effectively become involved and to integrate into the life of the institution. This disadvantage can



impede the process of integration both academically and socially, as demonstrated by academic under-preparedness, lack of knowledge about the expectations of higher education, and higher attrition rates.

When it comes to d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in higher education, Stinson and Walter (1997) noted that d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in general enter college with a huge educational deficit, clearly due to a lack of access to cultural and educational resources due to their deafness and communication skills. This lack of access to resources early in their educational career has potential to impact student's ability to effectively integrate academically and socially into their selected institution. Therefore, this study investigated the pre-college educational experiences of these students, and how they integrated academically and socially in prior educational institutions, as a potential framework for exploring student's reasons for selecting to attend a predominantly Deaf university setting, focusing on students self-perceptions of access to the academic and social capital of the education system.

**Minority Students at PWIs.** Often, minority students entering an institution in which they are clearly not a part of the majority culture are automatically on the margins in terms of finding a fit with the institutional culture. This body of literature typically refers to race. Tinto (1993) addressed this by stating the critical need for minority students to find and connect with a student sub-culture that they can relate to as a means of integrating into the institution. Indeed, Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino (1997) found that for minority students, the social integration needs of these students attending predominantly White institutions are critical for ensuring minority student success, particularly as students cite the need for establishing supportive social environments

through student sub-cultures and formal systems of the university early in their academic career. Establishing these needs early on helps these students feel that they are more prepared to tackle the academic challenges of higher education.

Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) both noted the importance of peer culture in shaping student involvement and persistence in college, and this may be particularly true of minority students faced with the prospect of attending a dominant cultural institution in which they may be marginalized. Astin noted the critical role of faculty and peer engagement as an early need for most students, not just minority students, in terms of achieving positive outcomes of college attendance, however Padilla et al's (1997) work reinforces this as an important component of ensuring minority student success. This required that the student sub-culture consist of a critical mass of students, be visible, and be readily accessible in both formal and informal ways. Again, this work was informative, as in the earlier literature, for exploring student's reasons for why they sought out and elected to attend a predominantly Deaf serving institution. This also provided impetus for exploring the identity development aspects of this work.

**Minority Students at Minority Serving Institutions.** Minority serving institutions (MSIs) provide access to underserved populations. Because the literature on d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in higher education focuses primarily on their experiences integrating into predominantly hearing institutions, I decided to explore the literature on minority serving institutions and the impact of choice on minority students. This literature looked into the experiences of other culturally oppressed minority students and their college attending behaviors, particularly among African American/Black

students attending Predominantly White or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed the literature on the impact of educational attainment among minority serving institutions such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU's). Pascarella and Terenzini found that minority students entering higher education at predominantly White institutions (PWI) are often entering an environment in which they "confront significantly more social isolation, alienation, dissatisfaction, and overt racism" (p. 393).

Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, and Clarke (2009) explored reasons why Black students chose to attend a HBCU. Student's primary reasons for selecting an HBCU included seeking to be around other Black students like themselves and seeking opportunities for racial identity development.

Berger and Milem (2000) studied the impact of attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU) on black students' self-concept. While noting that, in general, the literature has demonstrated that attendance at HBCU's is beneficial to African American student's growth and development, particularly in areas of "cognitive development, academic achievement, educational aspirations, degree attainment, and college satisfaction," Berger and Milem also found that attendance at HBCUs was positively correlated with promoting the development of self-concept among African American students. While this study came from a sample of 67% African American college women and focused on African Americans attending primarily small private church-affiliated HBCU's, it did raise some interesting findings in terms of the positive impact of the environment on improving African American student's self-concept in

three areas: psychosocial wellness, academic ability, and achievement orientation. Of these three measures, increases in psychosocial wellness and academic ability were more likely predicted based on input characteristics of the students while achievement orientation was determined to be largely influenced by the college environment and attendance at the HBCU (Berger & Milem). Berger and Milem's study also found that the social self-concept of African American students attending HBCU's was found to be higher than their peers attending predominantly White institutions (PWI's). This finding was attributed to the increased likelihood that African American students at HBCUs were more likely to interact with faculty and participate in student organizations and leadership organizations than their peers attending PWI's.

Pascarella and Terenzi (2005) noted that the indirect advantage of HBCU's is not so much in the academic environment as it is in the more supportive social environments, in which "the institutions' faculty and staff, mission, student orientation, peer climate, and general culture provide a more supportive and effective educational experience than is available to African Americans at PWI's" (p. 393). From these findings, it is apparent that HBCU's provide a climate in which access to cultural and economic capital becomes less of an issue as students enter a population that levels the playing field and creates equal opportunities. Again, this helped to frame the methodological approach exploring the reasons students decide to attend a predominantly Deaf serving institution and subsequent impact on identity, including sense of belonging and self-concept as framed in the studies mentioned above.

**Deaf-serving Institutions as Minority Institutions.** Understanding the role of Deaf-serving institutions and how they relate to minority serving institutions provides a

useful frame for this study. Drezner (2008) asserted that higher education institutions for the deaf, while not primarily serving a racial or ethnic minority, do represent a traditionally oppressed and marginalized population with a similar history to other marginalized groups such as African Americans and therefore should also be considered a minority serving institution (MSI).

Comparing persistence rates, Drezner (2008) justified the existence of deaf-serving institutions as necessary because they are more successful at educating deaf students than traditional predominantly hearing colleges and universities. Comparing graduation rates of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students, Drezner noted that deaf-serving institutions are able to report higher persistence and retention rates of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students (41 percent at Gallaudet) than traditional hearing institutions (at 25 percent). Drezner also drew on Tinto's (1987, 1993) research on college student attrition and the importance of both academic and social integration as being a key aspect of college student persistence. Using this framework, Drezner reviewed research that found that d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students at traditionally hearing institutions often are unable to effectively integrate academically and socially into the college environment. While d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students are able to integrate academically with provision of support providers, they have more trouble with social integration depending on various factors such as degree of hearing loss, and effective communication skills (Stinson & Walter, 1997). Most colleges and universities provide access and attend to the academic needs of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students but stop short at providing services when it comes to addressing their social needs (Drezner; Stinson & Walter, 1997). Drezner stated:

Deaf-serving institutions successfully attend to the entire student, providing not only classes and lectures that can be fully comprehended, but also affording the student with co-curricular activities, social interactions, and more access to student services than at traditional colleges and universities.  
(p. 63)

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that similar arguments regarding access to social capital are given when espousing the advantages of minority-serving institutions. The literature on the value of minority serving institutions addresses issues around sense of self and identity, and once again, reinforces the need to explore the impact of choice and subsequent integration on identity concepts.

### **Dimensions of the d/Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing) College Student Experience**

Reviewing the literature regarding d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students and their experiences in predominantly hearing higher education institutions, several studies were found that highlighted various aspects of their college experience. Menchel (1995) interviewed 33 primarily oral deaf students (hearing loss >70dB) from mainstreamed or inclusive K-12 educational backgrounds about their choice to attend a hearing college or university and their experience of academic and social integration into their chosen college or university. Menchel's study provided some insights into the college choice decision making experience based on the individual student's K-12 experience and also provided a good framework for asking about the individual student's academic and social integration into their chosen institution. For this proposed study, I incorporated several elements of Menchel's framework to guide the methodology. First and foremost, Menchel was interested in the rationale for why these students selected a hearing university setting as opposed to attending a deaf-serving institution or one that had access to special programs for the deaf. The responses highlighted the students earlier K-

12 educational experience as being an influential factor in determining college choice. Therefore, this study sought to explore individual students' rationale for selecting a predominantly signing Deaf culture university. The researcher asked about why they selected to attend a culturally deaf university in light of their own lack of sign language acquisition. Questions in this line of reasoning drew upon their K-12 experience, both academically and socially, as well as elements of support from schools and family, as well as elements of fitting in or belonging in the K-12 environment.

Menchel (1995) asked about his participant's level of satisfaction with their college choice after attending for a year. And then he asked about their academic and social integration, and what coping strategies the individual students employed in their environment in order to succeed. Menchel framed his questions by asking about the reasons for their choice first, their satisfaction with that choice, and their experiences. For the purposes of my study, I also asked about the reasons for their choice first, then their experiences, and lastly their satisfaction with the choice. I believe that by asking about their experiences integrating and their coping strategies, this encouraged a level of reflection that more readily lead to discussing satisfaction or dissatisfaction since they have arrived at the institution.

It is interesting to note that Menchel (1995) selected students who had completed at least one year of college or were at sophomore class standing. His rationale was compelling in that after one year, the individual students are more likely to persist, since most attrition occurs in the first year, a claim supported by Tinto's (1993) research. In addition, Menchel believed that by the second year, the student had sufficient experience with integration into the life of the institutions to be able to reflect upon his or her actual

experiences. However, he also noted in his limitations that perhaps having the first year students in the sample may provide additional information, particularly from students who may not be satisfied or who may not be integrating in a positive way, and therefore more likely to make a decision to eventually depart. In light of his research, my study incorporated a broad sample of students from freshmen to seniors in order to capture the various levels of experience at different points in time.

Stinson and Walter (1997) used Tinto's (1993) framework to propose a theoretical model of persistence for d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in postsecondary education. Stinson and Walter cautioned that any general model of student persistence be applied carefully with d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students as these students enter the higher education field with a wide variation in academic ability as well as in their ability to communicate effectively, which affects their involvement and subsequent social integration into the life of the institution. Stinson and Walter found strong support for Tinto's model as it applies to d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in both hearing and deaf university environments. In general, academic integration into an institution, regardless of type, is dependent on the academic achievement levels of the student and how well these match the academic climate of the institution (Stinson & Walter). Students who have academic skills are often able to persist in the institution, regardless of their level of hearing proficiency or social capability, and this is true of both hearing and d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students. By receiving appropriate accommodations in predominantly hearing higher education settings, d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students are often able to access the formal academic culture of the institution and to be successful in this culture (Stinson & Walter). Menchel's work (1995) also demonstrated this finding.



However, challenges emerge for d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students when integrating into the informal academic culture of the institution or the formal and informal social culture of the institution. By the nature and severity of their deafness, as well as the level of communication skills, students across the range of the deaf experience report overall involvement and social integration as being more challenging, lonely, and/or isolating (Stinson & Walter, 1997). Stinson and Walter (1997) noted that for institutions of higher education to best serve the needs of these students, they must address the student holistically by providing services that allow these students to integrate and be involved in the both the formal and informal academic and social cultures of the institution.

Pre-college characteristics also influence a students' persistence, particularly their levels of academic achievement and their levels of goal and institutional commitment (Stinson & Walter, 1997). These pre-college characteristics and psychological/attitudinal concepts can serve as a key driving influence on any interactional experiences students may face upon entering the collegiate environment (Stinson & Walter, 1997). In addition, once the student enters the institution, these pre-college characteristics coupled with effective communication abilities, previous success in mainstreamed or inclusive educational environments, and psychological and physical energy needed to succeed, these students can become involved in positive ways with the institutional environment. Like Astin (1993), Stinson and Walter (1997) found that another factor affecting persistence was the level of faculty and staff engagement with the student and their willingness to work with the student. This resulted in higher satisfaction with the quality of their experience leading to stronger likelihood of persistence. Stinson and Walter

(1997) found that students who came into the collegiate environment with clear expectations about their experience were more likely to become involved in ensuring these expectations were met, a clear indicator of locus of control as a predictor for student involvement. The research on d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in institutions of higher education thus far has pointed to not only addressing the issues around academic and social integration, but also addressing the psychological issues on attitudes, beliefs, self-efficacy, and coping strategies and how these influence choice. Not only that, the whole aspect of a sense of belonging and the impact of identity politics is also noted.

### **Deaf Identity Development.**

Moschella (1992) studied the K-12 educational experiences of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing individuals and how this affected their identity development in relation to their hearing loss. Her qualitative study examined 28 individuals, five of whom were raised in a deaf signing environment and 23 whom were primarily oral and raised in a hearing or oral deaf environment. Of these 23 oral individuals, about half (11) of them were diagnosed with a severe-profound loss. Her research explained the contextual experiences of these different groups of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing individuals: those who were raised in primarily oral hearing environments and those who were raised in primarily deaf signing or oral deaf environments with peers like themselves. The results of her study are informative in exploring aspects of identity development, particularly as the population being studied for the proposed research study focuses on deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who were raised in oral non-signing environments. Consequently, the impact of K-12 experience potentially has an influence on a student's college choice. Moschella examined the impact of sign language versus oral upbringing and the resulting

impact on the deaf or hard-of-hearing individual's identity development and emotional well-being. She found that a predominantly non-cultural oral upbringing, in which the individual did not have any exposure to sign language or other individuals like him or herself, had a profoundly negative impact on deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals' emotional well-being and self-concept, particularly if their hearing loss was labeled within the more severe to profound ranges. While the study seems skewed in favor of the non-cultural oral mainstreamed or inclusive upbringing, her research did highlight key issues impacting identity development and emotional well-being of this group of individuals. These key issues pointed to the concepts of loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem among all the oral hard-of-hearing participants in their early years and demonstrated the impact of finding a sense of belonging later in life when these individuals purposefully sought out others like themselves and learned sign language. In her qualitative study, every individual who later learned sign language and found a sense of community reported enhanced well-being, sense of esteem, and identity formation. Moschella's (1992) work also mentioned the college impact experiences on deaf identity development of some of her participants as they entered predominantly deaf or deaf serving college environments.

Menchel (1995) found in his study of 33 deaf students attending regular hearing four-year colleges and universities that his participants were used to and comfortable with their K-12 mainstreamed or inclusive experience in a predominantly hearing environment and therefore they considered it only natural that they continue their postsecondary education in a hearing university as opposed to a Deaf-Serving institution or a university with a special program for Deaf and Hard-of-hearing students.

Menchel (1995) had similar findings as Moschella regarding his participants' experiences in the predominantly hearing high school environment yet his research indicated that their issues with loneliness, depression and isolation were apparently resolved by the time they began attending the regular four-year college, primarily due to the participant's self-efficacy and locus of control beliefs. It is important to note that Menchels participants were unique in that they were predominantly White, from upper-middle to upper socioeconomic statuses, and had an unusually high achievement record in high-school, within the gifted and honors range of students, and were attending highly selective higher education programs.

Moschella (1992) noted that the historical context of deaf education at the time of her research may have had an impact on the more mild to moderate hard-of-hearing individuals choices to stay within their current life experience in the hearing world, she stated that this may also have been due to their ability to adapt and function more readily based on degree of hearing loss, despite a milder level of impact on self-esteem and sense of belonging in fitting into the larger hearing community. These findings resonated with Menche'sl (1995) study as well, even though his participants were in the severe to profound range of hearing loss. It is interesting to note that despite the audiological definition of the hearing loss as being severe to profound, Menchel's participants identified themselves as functioning more like hard-of-hearing individuals with more moderate hearing losses.

**d/Deaf Identity Development: Glickman.** Prior to 1993, no specific research specifically addressed the formation of identity for deaf individuals, most significantly due to the fact that deaf culture has only been recently recognized as a valid construct

beginning in the 1970's (Padden, 1989; Padden & Humphries, 1988). Glickman (1993) was the first researcher to develop a formal theory of d/Deaf identity development based on a hypothesis using racial and minority identity models as a theoretical foundation. This hypothesis suggested the development of Deaf identity ranging from a 'culturally hearing, medical' perspective to a 'bicultural cultural perspective' (Glickman). Glickman hypothesized 4 identity stages: culturally hearing, marginal, immersion, and bicultural. He also hypothesized that individuals will move through each stage in a developmental process.

***Stage One: Culturally Hearing.*** In the first stage of identity development, Glickman (1993) believed deaf individuals who identify within this stage are often late-deafened adults who grew up Hearing or those individuals who consider themselves hard-of-hearing, i.e. they have enough hearing and are able to benefit greatly from hearing aids and are able to use most of their residual hearing. Very often individuals in this stage will not call themselves deaf, often preferring to be viewed as 'hard-of-hearing' or 'hearing impaired' (Glickman). In this stage, deafness is considered solely from a medical-pathological perspective and is not considered a cultural construct (Glickman). Efforts are made to fix the deafness in order to fit more effectively into the hearing culture through medicine or technology, such as through cochlear implants, hearing aids, speech training, and other methods. He asserted in this stage, hearing people are considered the norm and deaf individuals strive to fit into the hearing culture norm. Deafness is considered a loss and a disability. Individuals who are culturally hearing do not consider their deafness an important valued part of their identity (Glickman). There is a lack of awareness or desire on the part of the culturally hearing deaf person to be

identified and to associate with the Deaf culture (Glickman). Oralism, speech training, lip reading, use of hearing aids, and mainstreaming or inclusion are all positive values of the culturally hearing while sign language, residential schools, deaf education, and the deaf community are devalued (Glickman, 1993).

***Stage Two: Marginality.*** Glickman (1993) stated that the experience of marginality is an important and distinct component of his developmental theory on deafness, and unique when compared to other identity development theories. He proposed that most deaf children born into hearing families will identify with the marginal stage of development. These children are often born into a Hearing cultural norm in which they are marginalized as being different from a very early stage of their development (Glickman). These individuals will often be exposed to oralism or other communication methods which reinforce the development of speech skills and lip reading for effective communication (Glickman). Mainstreamed or inclusive programs in which the individual is integrated into the hearing classroom environment are often the primary educational experience for those with a marginal identity. They often do not develop good communication skills in either English or Sign Language and often have difficulties fitting into the social norms of either Hearing or Deaf communities (Glickman). They are unable to establish close relationships with either hearing or deaf friends and often may feel lonely and isolated (Glickman). They may feel 'stuck between two worlds' and not sure which world they most want to belong to much less will be accepted in (Glickman). This creates confusion and they may shift between feeling comfortable with one community over another and then later feeling the opposite. Often they strive to be part of

the hearing community and experience anger over their experiences of oppression as a deaf person, often struggling with what it means to be deaf (Glickman).

***Stage Three: Immersion.*** Glickman (1993) defined the third stage of immersion as very similar to the immersion stage in the racial identity development models. Individuals who reach this stage fully reject the hearing culture and fully immerse themselves into the Deaf culture (Glickman). They value everything within the Deaf culture and reject all things that are valued or defined by the hearing culture as the norm. This includes embracing American Sign Language and rejecting English, speech training, and oral methods of communicating, including total communication of signing and speaking at the same time (Glickman). Hearing people are not welcome in the Deaf community and individuals at this stage may be very confrontational with hearing individuals (Glickman). There is a great deal of anger towards perceived oppression by the Hearing culture, including toward those deaf individuals who identify with hearing cultural values (Glickman). Often members of this stage of development are considered as having strong militant ‘pro-Deaf, anti-Hearing’ worldview (Glickman). As the individual moves through this stage, they may become less focused on an anti-hearing worldview towards a more internal deaf-affirmative worldview, an important shift that precedes movement to the next stage of development, biculturalism (Glickman).

***Stage Four: Bicultural.*** Glickman (1993) hypothesized that most Deaf individuals born into Deaf families with early exposure to Deaf cultural values of American Sign Language as well as early exposure to positive Deaf role models often will either start at this level of identity or quickly grow into this stage of identity at an early age. The bicultural Deaf individual takes pride in their Deaf identity while

recognizing the importance of being able to interact positively within the Hearing culture (Glickman). They are able to value and respect individuals of both cultures regardless of their identity as long as these individuals are not oppressors. They feel comfortable in both the Deaf and Hearing culture and have an appreciation for ASL and English as well as the diversity of conversational modes within the community (Glickman). They are able to advocate for themselves as Deaf individuals and for their Deaf culture in fighting paternalism and oppression while cultivating allies within the Hearing culture. These individuals accept their deafness and strive to achieve balance through advocacy for the equal rights of Deaf individuals as well as through recognition of advocates within the Hearing culture who believe in these rights as well (Glickman).

**d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing Identity Development: Melick.** Melick (1998)

conducted a qualitative study on identity development among d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing individuals. Melick focused primarily on d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing adults who were born into hearing families, had early onset hearing loss, and were primarily educated in the mainstreamed or inclusive education setting with their hearing peers. Melick's study generated an Identity Development framework around this population that was similar to Moschella's (1992) and Glickman's (1993). Melick undertook a qualitative study with the goal of creating a sequential and developmental model of deaf identity development by specifically studying a group of deaf individuals who were born into hearing families with early onset hearing loss and educated or mainstreamed in the inclusive education setting along with their hearing peers. She then compared her findings with Glickman's theory. Her results showed a strong similarity to Glickman's theory with a stronger



support for and focus on the process of development in a sequential process through various stages.

Melick's (1998) stages of development involved a "process of developing a Deaf identity, in which the person moves from trying to fit in with the Hearing culture to identifying him/herself as being part of the Deaf community and obtaining a level of self-acceptance" (p. 84). Her stages included: Being an Outsider, Encountering/Connecting, Transitioning from Outsider to Insider, and Self-Definition (Melick). Her model is specifically linear and developmental in nature with an understanding that individuals may loop back through various stages depending on their experiences.

In comparing her model to Glickman's (1993) model, Melick (1998) noted that her model is designed for a specific group of deaf individuals while Glickman's model was designed to incorporate the wide range of diversity within the deaf community. In addition, Glickman's model is unique in that individuals, depending on their circumstances and early life experiences, may have different starting points and therefore he was unable to provide proof that these stages are necessarily sequential and developmental in nature. Melick's (1998) model has only one starting point and she was able to show a movement and progression through the various stages that are progressively sequential in nature.

***Stage One: Being an Outsider.*** Melick (1998) noted that her initial stage of 'Being an Outsider' corresponded with both the Culturally Hearing and Culturally Marginal components of Glickman's model (1993). Melick also found that her model differed from Glickman's in that she believes individuals born deaf into hearing families are capable of having a culturally hearing identity due to lack of exposure and therefore

identification with the Deaf community and Deaf culture. In addition, Melick believed that this impacts the concept of marginality as explained in her theory as opposed to the concept as explained in Glickman's theory. In Glickman's theory, marginal status applied to the experience of being on the margins of both the hearing and deaf culture whereas Melick's theory interprets the initial deaf experience of marginalization for her subjects as applying to the experience of being marginalized only within the hearing culture due to the fact that her participants had no exposure or very little exposure to the deaf culture and therefore their experience of marginality did not apply to the Deaf culture at this point of their development. However Melick believed that once they encountered the Deaf community and were exposed to Deaf culture, this experience of marginality within the deaf community may occur, albeit at a later stage of their development.

***Stage Two: Encounter.*** This brings about another important component of Melick's (1998) theory regarding the significance of an 'encounter' similar to what is espoused in similar racial and minority identity development models and which she noted is conspicuously absent in Glickman's (1993) theory. For Melick's model, the encounter experience came from an exposure to the Deaf community and Deaf culture and initiated the process into stage two of her model: Encountering. According to Melick, the encounter stage is a critical in the process of identity development as this stage pushes participant's awareness of and connection with the Deaf community.

***Stage Three: Moving from an Outsider to an Insider.*** With this exposure, Melick's participants began the process of identification with and immersion into the deaf community and move into stage three: Moving from an Outsider to an Insider (Melick).

For Melick, this initiated the process of marginalization as explained by Glickman in which the individual would feel torn between two different worlds and yet not a member of either. She noted that in comparison with Glickman's model, this stage corresponds with both the Culturally Marginal and the Immersion stage of his model.

***Stage Four: Self-Defining.*** Lastly, Melick's (1998) final stage of 'Self-Defining' corresponded with Glickman's (1993) Bicultural definition. At this point, Melick states that individuals became comfortable with what it means to be Deaf and feel a sense of pride and comfort with their identity in both the Deaf and Hearing World.

**Summary.** Glickman (1993) and Melick (1998) both did research on the identity development of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals using Black and minority identity development models to frame their study. Both Glickman and Melick hypothesized that the similar experiences of being members of an historically oppressed and marginalized cultural group would result in similar and parallel identity development processes. Glickman's Deaf Identity Development Model (DID) emerged as a result of his quantitatively validated development of a measurement scale he created from the research on Black identity development and applied to d/Deaf individuals. Melick's identity development theory emerged as a result of a qualitative study of 10 deaf and hard-of-hearing participants with an early onset hearing loss raised in a primarily hearing family and educational environment. Melick used Glickman's model and two models of Black and Minority Identity Development as a way to frame and understand the experiences of her participants.

It is interesting to note that Moschella (1992) framed a qualitative model of deaf identity development prior to Glickman's (1993) quantitative and validated model and

there are many similarities between the frameworks. Moschella's qualitative work, like Glickman's work included a wide variety of d/D/hoh with diverse communication and educational backgrounds. Melick's (1998) later qualitative work focused on deaf and hard-of-hearing raised in primarily oral non-signing environments. Of interest, all of the studies delineated the access to a visual language and importance of affiliation with others like themselves as critical to developing a healthy sense of self. I will use caution not to treat these as a priori theory; though they do inform this study primarily as Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) provided a theory of college student development that defines identity development as a primary developmental goal of college attendance. With various studies indicating this to be true of d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students in higher education, it is important to understand the various models pertaining to this identity development framework. In addition, with identity development being a key developmental goal, it's only natural that the study explored this process and how it unfolds in this particular student experience, particularly as they are electing to attend a predominantly Deaf serving institution, an educational experience in which they have never been integrated into in their educational backgrounds. Asking the participants to reflect on their sense of identity prior to and since attending the institution provided enlightening information. It was interesting to note where these student's experiences and stories were reflected in the various models of Deaf Identity Development.

### **Conclusion.**

In light of all the literature above, my study sought to develop a theory about the experiences oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing student's integration, both

academically and socially, into a predominantly signing university environment, and how this process influences their deaf identity. Clearly, Tinto (1993) and Stinson and Walters (1997) models of persistence provided a framework around the concepts of pre-college characteristics, goal and intentions, and most significantly, academic and social integration. Bean and Eaton (2000) and Berger (2000) provided a rationale for exploring the pre-college experiences in terms of psychological constructs and access to resources that may have shaped the college choice process and provided subsequent constructs that shape the integration strategies of the student participants. Understanding minority-serving institutions and deaf-serving institutions and their impact on the student experience helped to provide a framework for developing questions around students rationale for selecting this particular minority and deaf-serving institution. Lastly, the deaf identity frameworks of Moschella (1992), Glickman (1993) and Melick (1998), all provided support for framing questions about identity development in the context of a key defining purpose of the college student experience.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods**

The purpose of study was to develop a substantive theory of the experiences of non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing undergraduate students as they transitioned and integrated both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, and the subsequent impact on their identity development. In order to explore these experiences in depth, a social constructivist qualitative approach was used. A social constructivist qualitative research paradigm operates from the worldview that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world [and consequently] there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). The constructivist qualitative approach emphasizes “learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). With this understanding of the world, qualitative research promotes methods that elicit data from the participants themselves as they share their reflections, thoughts, and experiences, thereby bringing a level of richness and depth to the research (Creswell, 2009). It is essential to recognize that even within the Deaf community, multiple identities and realities exist and the non-signing oral deaf or hard-of-hearing identity is one of several. This study focused on only this particular identity, that of the non-signing oral deaf or hard-of-hearing student as he or she entered into the signing Deaf community and sought to integrate academically and socially into a new community and way of life. By encouraging the participants to share their experiences in their own voice, I, as the researcher, brought their perspective to the forefront.

Because the purpose of this study was to delve deeply into a nuanced understanding of the non-signing oral deaf and hard-of hearing student experiences as

shared by these students, the qualitative research paradigm offered the best approach for collecting and analyzing data about their experiences. While this approach allows for an in-depth and complex understanding of the students' experiences, it is not the intent of this methodology to generalize the findings and therefore caution must be taken in assuming that the findings reflect the experiences of all non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing undergraduate students. The findings from this study provide useful information to staff, faculty, and administrators at Gallaudet University in helping them to promote successful transitional and integration experiences for this population of students and may transfer to other settings.

As noted in Chapter One, in undertaking a research study using this approach, key characteristics of qualitative research include the following:

- Researchers strive to *understand the meaning* people have constructed about their world and their experiences.
- *The researcher is the primary instrument* of data collection and data analysis.
- The qualitative research process is *inductive*.
- The product of a qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive* (Merriam, 2002, p. 4-5).

Using the above criteria as a guide, this study sought to explore and understand the meaning of the experiences of non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrating into the signing, Deaf culture environment of Gallaudet University and the impact on their deaf identity development. As the researcher, I collected data through interviews with these individuals in order to capture their experiences in their own words. From these interviews, I analyzed the data and gradually built an understanding of their experience using inductive methods of analysis. The resulting product of this research

was based on the descriptions provided by the participants as they shared their experience. In sum, this research was based on the meaning that has been constructed by non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students as they shared their experiences integrating into the signing, deaf world – a qualitative approach.

## **Methodology**

In the qualitative research paradigm, there are several methodologies. The methodology selected for this research was the grounded theory methodology, which seeks to build substantive theory about a specific experience grounded in the data that emerges from the experiences of the participants (Birks & Mills, 2011; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002).

**Research Question.** The research question guiding this study is: how do oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrate both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment, and how does this process influence their deaf identity? Grounded theory is not based on a priori theory but is informed by related scholarship. Based on a review of the literature, the following themes regarding the experiences of non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their experiences integrating into a predominantly Deaf signing university environment informed this study and were explored in order to elicit an in-depth and rich response to the research question from the participants:

- Menchel (1998) and Stinson and Walter (1992,1997) all noted the significance of pre-college experiences and expectations in influencing participants' decisions to attend a particular institution. Therefore, participants were asked



how they decided to attend a predominantly signing Deaf university and their academic and social expectations prior to their arrival at the university.

- Tinto (1993), Astin (1993), and Stinson and Walter (1992,1997) all noted the importance of pre-college characteristics as an important indicator of college student persistence and they also reported similar findings regarding the impact of involvement and integration into the academic and social realms of the institution as key indicators for persistence, particularly in the first 6 weeks of life at the institution. Therefore, participants were asked to describe their experience upon arriving at a predominantly signing Deaf university and their subsequent experiences of integrating into the academic and social culture of the university.
- Tinto (1993) noted that the academic and social spheres of university life consist of both formal and informal processes, those that are formally structured and provided by the university in the form of classes, organizations, and activities and those that evolve informally as a result of interactions between community members. Menchel (1995) and Stinson and Walter (1992, 1997) all reported findings in both the formal and informal spheres of the academic and social life of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in postsecondary education. With this in mind, students were asked to describe both the formal and informal aspects of academic and social integration during their interviews.
- Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that establishment of identity is one of the key developmental outcomes of the

college student experience. Several researchers studying Deaf identity development among diverse members of the d/Deaf community found, as part of the overall deaf identity development process, that the impact of having access to a similar community of other deaf and hard-of-hearing peers and being exposed to ASL is influential on the development of a Deaf identity (Glickman, 1993; Goodrich, 1988; Melick, 1998; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004). Therefore, participants were asked how they would describe their identity prior to attending a predominantly deaf university and how they described their identity at this point in time in an effort to elicit information about identity development from the college integration process.

## **Methods**

This section provides an overview of the methods used in the study. Data in grounded theory are collected in the form of interviews, focus groups, field observations, or documents (Merriam, 2002). This research incorporated structured open-ended interviews designed to elicit a thick, rich description of the participant's experiences as a means of data collection (Birks & Mills, 2011; Merriam, 2002). Participants for this study were selected based on their ability to provide this thick, rich description, a process known as purposeful theoretical sampling. Specific criterion for the sample was used to identify and recruit the participants. Interested participants were evaluated briefly in the form of a background questionnaire to ensure compliance with needed criterion and to determine the participant's capacity for providing the essential data. The number of participants depended on theoretical saturation of categories that emerged in the data in which interview data collected is no longer able to elicit new categories of information in

the data analysis process (Birk & Hills, 2011). Interviews were conducted using structured open-ended interview questions, following a set of interview protocols to ensure consistency across interviews and in the data collection process. Once sufficient data was collected, or saturation had been determined, the researcher began the process of building theory from the categories created from the data, with the final result being the creation of substantive theory about the experiences of non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their experiences integrating academically and socially into a predominantly Deaf signing university.

### **Site and Sample**

The site of this study was at the four-year private university, Gallaudet University, a bilingual university for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, in which the primary mode of communication used in daily discourse and in the classrooms is American Sign Language (ASL). From the literature, there are two types of institutions that are available to deaf and hard-of-hearing students (Menchel, 1995). One is the regular university by which students have access, by virtue of legal requirements, that allow them to be integrated, included, or mainstreamed into the regular learning environment of the university (Menchel, 1995). One is the special programs university which includes the following characteristics:

- 15 or more deaf and hard-of-hearing students are enrolled in the university.
- The university has an established academic support unit for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.
- The university provides a coordinator whose responsibilities include oversight and provision of services to deaf and hard-of-hearing students (Menchel, 1995).

According to Menchel (1995), Gallaudet University was categorized within the special program criteria. However, unlike special programs, which are often connected to host institutions and essentially provide a more specialized level of accommodation and access as well as socialization opportunities for deaf and hard-hearing students in the regular university environment, Gallaudet University primarily serves a population of approximately 900 deaf and hard-of-hearing undergraduate students with the primary mission of educating deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals using both American Sign Language and written English in an inclusive and independent university setting not connected by any means to a primary host institution (Gallaudet University, 2010). This distinction emphasizes a uniquely independent educational climate that embraces deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, American Sign Language and the culture of the Deaf as core components of the mission and vision. The only other institution in the United States with a similar population is National Technical Institute for the Deaf, an associate degree serving institution affiliated with the Rochester Institute of Technology. With this understanding, this research focused primarily on undergraduate non-signing oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their experiences integrating into the unique university climate of Gallaudet University.

Participants were non-signing oral students from primarily mainstreamed or inclusive educational backgrounds in which they learned in the regular hearing classroom environment. The grounded theory approach lends itself to purposeful criterion based sampling in which participants are selected based on their ability to provide rich, thick data regarding the experience under study. Therefore, initial sampling criterion required the following:

- **Traditional Undergraduate Students:** This study elected to focus only on undergraduate students, as college is a key defining time in an individual's life and one of the outcomes or processes of the undergraduate college experience is one of developing identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Stinson & Walter, 1992, 1997.) For deaf and hard-of-hearing students attending a deaf-serving institution, this aspect of identity development may be a crucial aspect of their undergraduate experience (Stinson & Walter, 1992). This study also purposefully sought students in the traditional age range of 18-24 as this group tends to be the most dominant age group enrolling in college directly from high school.
- **Predominant mode of communication:** As this study focused primarily on oral non-signing students from mainstreamed or inclusive educational backgrounds who did not know American Sign Language, or who had limited exposure to American Sign Language but did not use it as their primary means of communication, it was important that selected students fit this profile. Students at Gallaudet University take the American Sign Language Placement Exam upon entrance to the institution and on the basis of their scores, are assigned to an appropriate level ASL course. Students who were placed in ASL 101 or 102 were among the primary groups that were studied for this research. This research specifically sought to understand the common experiences of students who were raised in the oral method, in which they depended upon use of residual hearing; use of hearing aids or cochlear implants; and/or speech-reading as their primary means of understanding spoken communication. One would assume that this particular population, having been raised in the oral method, and most likely

attending hearing schools, would continue to seek to learn in hearing postsecondary educational environments (Menchel, 1995). However, for this study, these particular participants elected to attend a postsecondary environment that promotes a different method of communicating and learning using American Sign Language. This research sought to understand what influenced their decision to deviate from their accustomed educational experiences and how they have integrated both academically and socially in light of these differences.

- Age of onset of hearing loss: For the purposes of this study, I looked for students who were diagnosed with a hearing loss at an early age, preferably prior to entering the educational setting. The reason for this decision was due to seeking a population that has dealt with issues surrounding their hearing loss throughout their lifespan, including experiencing learning in predominantly hearing mainstreamed or inclusive educational settings. Often these individual experiences are quite different from a population who has become hard-of-hearing or deaf at a later age (Moschella, 1992).
- Family Status: Almost 80% of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth are raised by hearing parents and are the only deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in their family (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). Research has shown that deaf or hard-of-hearing youth who are raised by deaf or hard-of-hearing parents or have other members of the family who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, often have a different experience in developing their sense of self and identity through having a common shared experience with another individual within the family (Moschella, 1992).

Therefore, for this study, I looked for students who were born into hearing families and were the only member of their family who had a hearing loss.

- Educational Background: Sixty percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth are educated in the mainstreamed or inclusive educational environments, as opposed to attending schools for the deaf or being educated in self-contained classrooms for deaf or hard-of-hearing students (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). For this study, I purposefully recruited students who had been integrated into the predominantly hearing educational environment and were the only or were one of a few deaf or hard-of-hearing students in their school.
- Enrolled in ASL 101 or 102: Upon acceptance to Gallaudet University, students are evaluated to determine their levels of sign language proficiency. Students determined to need more instruction in ASL are placed into ASL 101 or 102 during the fall of their first year. Some of these students attend JumpStart: New Signers Program. The JumpStart: New Signers Program identifies accepted students who are not fluent in ASL or as being non-signers and intentionally and purposefully recruits them to attend the program based on their self-reported ASL skill level and their educational background (primarily mainstreamed, inclusive or oral programs) as well as based on Admissions Counselors assessments of their interactions with the student. This approach has proven effective in capturing most non-signers as evidenced by the very small number of those who participate in Orientation having not been identified. The JumpStart: New Signers Program (now called JumpStart: American Sign Language (ASL)) is offered free to students who attend and is essentially a 5-week immersion program teaching the

students the fundamentals of American Sign Language (ASL) while helping them to adjust to the university culture and the signing deaf community that exists on the campus. At the end of JumpStart: New Signers Program and during Orientation, all students took the ASL placement exams and those who had no sign language background or very little exposure or fluency in ASL were assigned to ASL 101 courses. This evaluation also helped capture students who were overlooked for recruitment into the JumpStart: New Signers program. I recruited participants from ASL 101/102 classes seeking students who both did and did not participate in JumpStart: New Signers.

While the sample will be theory and criterion based, I ensured that the sample was representative of the diversity of the general non-signing student population in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and therefore documented the background/input/demographic variables of the participants. Initially, interested participants were predominantly White and female, therefore the recruitment letter was resent to all males who fit the criteria as well as students of diverse racial backgrounds in an effort to bring in more diversity. This was an effective strategy as this drew in additional participants who provided more diverse perspectives. In addition, in order to gather rich data, students across a range of class standings, from freshmen/first-year students to seniors/graduating students, were invited to participate. It was anticipated that the length of the student experience may lend different levels of reflection and insight.

## **Procedures**

To begin recruitment processes, I asked the Director of the JumpStart: New Signers program to email a letter from me introducing myself, the purpose of the



research, and asking for interested participants to contact me (Appendix A). She also emailed the same letter to students who enrolled in ASL 101 and 102 classes during their first semester from the past 4 years to capture any potential participants who did not participate in the JumpStart: New Signers program. When a need for more diverse participants was apparent, she sent a follow-up email to males as well as to all diverse students.

When interested participants contacted me, I conducted a brief interview to ensure they met the stated criterion and then we reserved an interview time online at a video lab to begin the data collection process (Appendix B). A total of 16 participants responded to the initial and follow-up recruitment letters, with 15 of these participants being granted interviews. One participant was turned away as his hearing loss was relatively recent, within the past year, and the criteria for this research specifically focused on those participants who became deaf or hard-of-hearing at an early age, grew up hard-of-hearing or deaf in the K-12 mainstream or inclusive school setting, and decided to attend Gallaudet University. Of the remaining 15 that were interviewed, five of these interviews were not used in this study. Two of the five participants were immigrant students and their stories are fascinating and compelling. Their experiences are also quite different from the experiences of U.S. born students. Because this study focuses on the experiences of participants born and raised in the United States, in order to keep a tight focus on a specific population, these interviews were not used in the final coding and analysis process. The experiences of these participants with immigrant backgrounds is a potential and needed area of future research, particularly in light of increasing numbers of immigrants accessing higher education, and it will be recommended as an area for future

research. Three of the five participants are older students who grew up in the K-12 educational system before laws such as IDEA and ADA were enacted and their K-12 experiences, while similar in many respects to the 10 final participants, are also tempered by the different context of the time in regards to access and technology. While this study initially sought traditional college aged students in the 18 to 24 year old age range, these participants wanted to share their stories, and the interviewer granted the interviews to ensure saturation and inclusion of diverse experiences. However, it was determined that their experiences, while similar in some ways to the target population, were also unique based on different contexts of education, law, and historical-social events of the times. Therefore their stories warrant a separate study. The three older participants, all women, did not enter higher education until later in their life experience, choosing instead to pursue careers and families, before pursuing higher education. All of them, upon initially deciding to enter higher education, also elected to attend a hearing college. All of them learned about and entered Gallaudet University later in their lives. Their stories are rich and deeply reflective and deserve to be shared.

**Data Collection.** In terms of gathering data, grounded theory relies on interviews, focus groups, and observations in the field as a means of collecting data (Merriam, 2002). For this study, I used videotaped interviews with the participants as a means of data collection. Prior to beginning the interviews with the selected participants, I gathered demographic data in order to develop a profile about key characteristics of the participant (Appendix C). Background data included various aspects of the student profile, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, age of onset of hearing loss, degree of hearing loss, educational background, and communication methodologies.

Once the participant filled out the background data, I reviewed it to ensure information was clear and then explained the interview process, obtained informed consent for the interview, and scheduled the interview with the student in a campus video lab. When the student and I met for the interview, I used structured interview protocols to guide the interview process to ensure consistency in eliciting responses from the participants (Appendix D). Using the protocols, I asked the student to initially explain how he or she became deaf or hard-of-hearing, their academic and social experiences growing up in the mainstream or inclusive educational environment with their hearing peers, how he or she decided to attend a predominantly signing Deaf university, their experience integrating academically and socially into the Deaf university climate, and how this experience has influenced their identity development. These interviews used structured open-ended questions with the goal of encouraging the participants to provide thick, rich description of their experiences with prompting from the interviewer to elaborate as needed. Each student was interviewed one time. The interviews lasted an average of one-hour, with the shortest interview being thirty minutes as the participant was late for the interview and the longest interview lasting an hour and a half. Each of the participants received compensation for their time after the interview was completed.

**Data Analysis.** During a grounded theory study, data collection and data analysis are simultaneous (Merriam, 2002; Birks & Mills, 2011). After each interview, the video tape was uploaded and converted to a media file for analysis. The video tapes were secured in a locked drawer in my office and the media files were saved in a password protected file on my computer and backed up on a password protected external hard drive. While the videotapes were being converted to media files, directly after the

interviews, I recorded fresh impressions and noted important points that were retained from the discussion. These became important data audit trails for noting potential themes, similarities, and differences in the participant's stories and proved helpful as the analysis process unfolded.

Once the media files were ready, I began the process of transcribing them from visual ASL to written text, a challenging and time consuming process. Transcribing a visual language to a written language presents a challenge in ensuring visual context and visual concepts that have meaning in ASL are not lost in the translation to English. In addition, a few of the participants were still learning ASL so speech-reading was also a necessary skill for communicating when the participant lapsed into spoken English. One of the strengths of this research is that I am fluent in ASL and also a skilled speechreader, therefore I was able to follow the participants and their preferred communication modalities as the interviews progressed. Because of this skill, I was able to effectively capture meaning and nuances due to having a similar language framework as the participants.

While it was possible to consider hiring a transcriber to transcribe the interviews, I preferred to respect the participant's confidentiality and also found that transcribing the videos was an excellent opportunity to begin the data coding and analysis phase of the research process. By transcribing the videos, I was forced to pay attention to concepts, nuances, and meaning in the participants stories and therefore to become immersed in the data.

Upon completing the initial transcription, I reviewed the videos again and cross-checked the ASL and English meanings to ensure that the participants stories were

accurately reflected in the written transcription. This first transcription became the basis for the initial coding processes. I repeatedly cross checked the video data with the written data throughout the data collection, data coding, and data analysis phases to ensure meaning was consistent between codes, a process known as cross comparative analysis.

The first step of the coding process is identifying the initial codes that emerge from the interview data (Birks & Mills, 2011). These codes were created from the transcripts and organized using HyperResearch software. This initial coding essentially fractured the data and enabled me to begin creating categories from the codes (Birks & Mills, 2011). This data coding process was an ongoing process throughout the interviews and transcribing process, and I was constantly going back to previous data to compare findings, and note discrepancies or new findings as new information emerged. This is consistent with grounded theory methodology (Birks & Mills, 2011). Throughout the entire process, I documented the coding processes, the challenges, emerging findings, and observations through the use of memo-writing and journaling, which then become part of the data (Birks & Mills, 2011). These memo's and journals were saved as a form of an audit trail to document the process.

As the research continued, I compared codes and categories across the data, looking for similar themes and paying attention to emerging themes, going back into earlier interviews to see if similar themes were apparent. This process is known as constant comparative analysis and is an ongoing process throughout the data collection phase (Birks & Mills, 2011). This process continued until I started noting that no new

themes or categories were emerging in the participant's stories, a process known as theoretical saturation (Birks & Mills, 2011).

The second phase of the data analysis process began when I began to connect the data into categories, which for this study became a sequential process of growth and development across their experiences, and this eventually illuminated the core category, the development of an affirmative deaf or hard-of-hearing identity, and the theory began to emerge from the data (Birks & Mills, 2011). At the end of this process, I integrated all the data into a substantive theory that illuminated the experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing non-signing oral students and their experiences integrating into a predominantly signing university environment.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness emphasizes ensuring the ethical conduct of research (Merriam, 2002). Means of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research includes using triangulation, member checking, peer review, and the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher (Merriam, 2002). To ensure reliability in qualitative research, Merriam (2002) suggests that while the findings of a study may not necessarily be replicated, what is more important is that the findings be consistent with the data collected, in other words, when others review the data, the findings from the data as shared by the researcher make sense. In this sense, it is important that the researcher collect enough data to saturate the findings and also provide rich, thick description that ensures that sufficient data is shared that supports the findings (Merriam). The researcher must document the process of the research by maintaining an audit trail in which they describe the data collection and analysis process, usually through maintaining memos or a journal of the analysis process

as a means of documenting decision-making (Merriam). In keeping memos, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on his or her own assumptions, experiences and challenges in interpreting the data as a means of documenting how he or she reached interpretations of the data.

In this study, I recognized that my own background could potentially be seen as creating a potential bias in the interpretation process, especially in terms of selectivity; therefore, I utilized several strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in this process. One strategy I incorporated was through use of a peer debriefer who was familiar with the issues in this study and could provide a level of external objectivity and a critical eye in ensuring researcher bias or selective interpretation is not an issue. For this study, a professional doctoral level professor of psychology and social sciences researcher and educator in the field of deaf research was recruited to act as a peer debriefer. Upon completing initial coding processes, I redacted the transcripts of any identifying characteristics to protect the participant's confidentiality, and shared the redacted transcripts with the peer debriefer, along with the codes that were generated from the transcripts. The peer debriefer read through them and verified that my general coding processes were reflective of the participant's experiences. She proved invaluable in noting some potential codes that the researcher did not capture in the initial phase of coding and these eventually became part of the coding process. The peer debriefer also helped the researcher identify appropriate conceptual codes to best reflect the meaning needed in the codes. For example, the researcher noted the amount of 'work' that these participants were putting into understanding their environment as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in a predominantly hearing environment, and after discussion with the

peer debriefer, this became ‘attentional effort’ to best reflect that the ‘work’ was due to their need to constantly attend to their environment, a different and more explicit understanding of the meaning of ‘work’.

Another means of developing trustworthiness is through peer review from the dissertation advisor and/or committee that helped to guide this research process (Merriam, 2002). By sharing the drafts of the proposed methodological process, methods used, and results of the research, the advisor was able to provide guidance and feedback on the process.

Memo writing was also a critical aspect of this process. Not only did I frequently engage in the process of reflecting and discussing with colleagues my role in the research process, but I also kept notes on observations or processes that occurred as part of the research. For example, during the interview process, I noted if the participants were naturally comfortable with telling their stories, providing rich, thick description or if I had to do more work to elicit descriptive responses from the participants. I also noted the emotions of the participants, from one participant who appeared to be minimizing her own very valid feelings, to another participant who became openly emotional and teary-eyed (and my own response to this in kind!), to several participants expressing, both verbally and non-verbally, a clear, confident, and emphatic sense of finding ‘home’ and a sense of ‘self’ in the deaf community. Memo writing clearly became a large part of the data collection process as well as a means of leaving an audit trail, which “describes in detail how data is collected, how categories are derived, and how decisions are made throughout the process” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27).

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, all interviews were videotaped. This videotaping



process was a means of recording and storing data and was kept confidential through locked files and pass-word protected computer files. These videos provided data for review numerous times throughout the process to assess interpretation of the data in light of new findings or categories that emerged in the process. These videos were viewed repeatedly at various intervals as they were the ‘original’ source of the data and by reviewing them, I verified that I was staying true to the original stories. Clearly, multiple methods of ensuring validity of the data provided a strong sense of triangulation in the research findings. Next steps will be sharing the final research findings with the participants and gathering their feedback and thoughts on the findings. While this was intended in the original study, time did not permit however I am still committed to pursuing this means of trustworthiness as it is the one that is most significant, after all, it is their story that is being told.

### **Researcher’s Background**

It is important in this method to understand the positionality of the researcher. I am a White deaf female who works as a staff administrator at Gallaudet University. I am also an alumni of the institution and, like the participants in this study, came from an oral non-signing background learning in a hearing classroom environment. I not only have access to the university community from which these participants are recruited from but also have a shared experience with the students who participated in this study. This proved to be a strength of this study as I was able to share and connect across a general shared background while recognizing the uniqueness of their experiences as well.

Growing up, I was diagnosed as severe to profoundly deaf, with a hearing loss in both ears of above 85+ dB that progressively worsened. Despite this audiological

diagnosis of deafness, I was labeled as hard-of-hearing or hearing impaired and never identified myself as Deaf, primarily as I believed that to be d/Deaf meant that I had to know sign language. I wore hearing aids in both ears and relied mostly on speech-reading to understand what was happening in my environment. My main means of communicating was through speech-reading and spoken English, and I participated in years of speech training lessons to maintain my skills.

As a student growing up in the mainstreamed educational environment, I excelled academically, graduating at the top of my class in high school. However, socially, I was profoundly lonely and isolated, having few friends while being actively involved in the after school activities such as cheerleading (for one year), drama club, Honors Society, and the Honors program. I learned about Gallaudet University in my junior year of high school when our history teacher assigned an assignment in which we were to explore the history of a subject of our choice. I elected to explore the history of Deaf education, as I had always been curious about the state school for the deaf in Virginia. From my research, I learned about Gallaudet University and found that it was actually quite close, in Washington, D.C., to my home in Virginia. Talking with my counselor of the hearing impaired, a special education teacher who was assigned to meet with me weekly to help me deal with my experiences, she suggested we visit Gallaudet and learn more about the history. That visit changed my life. Prior to the visit, I never considered myself eligible to attend Gallaudet University as I identified as hard-of-hearing (and even then, often tried to pretend I could hear more than I actually could!). I also did not know sign language, which in my mind, was the key criteria for being identified as deaf and for being eligible to attend the institution. During my visit to Gallaudet, I learned that there

was a program, the New Signers Program, offered during the summer prior to beginning classes, in which I could begin to learn ASL and be ready to begin classes in the Fall.

When I arrived home from the visit to Gallaudet, I was determined to apply at the institution. My family had mixed feelings as we had long been discouraged by doctors and audiologists from pursuing the path of ASL and schools for the Deaf. My parents grudgingly agreed to allow me to try at least one semester, clearly expecting that at the end of the semester, I would be ready to transfer to one of the other 'reputable academic programs' that had invited me to enroll. For me, at this time in my life, I was also desperately seeking a place where I could belong, and while both terrified and excited about the opportunity, I needed to at least try this option. Like these students in this study, I elected to attend a predominantly signing university environment, learning ASL after arriving at the institution and becoming immersed in the academic and social life of the institution.

For me, my time at Gallaudet was a life changing experience. Not only did I find a sense of place, but I met many friends who were just like me, and I was able not only to integrate into the institution academically, but I was very much able to become fully involved in the social life of the institution. Gallaudet became my home. Thanks to my experience at Gallaudet University, I developed a strong and proud sense of identity while being able to 'put aside' my difference as a deaf person and focus on my learning and development, something I had never been able to do while growing up in the hearing educational environment. I truly believe that if I had continued in a predominantly hearing learning environment, I would not be who I am today.

Because of this experience, I often meet with the new non-signing oral students

and their families when they arrive to Gallaudet and share with them and their families that I was once like them and can understand and relate to their new experience here and offer myself as a resource for them if they need to talk or simply to feel a sense of connection towards a potential mentor. After many years of meeting these students, I thrive on seeing them find their sense of self and blossom. This research seeks to explore exactly what this experience is like for these students, especially in today's era when technology is advancing dramatically in regards to communication and hearing technologies. I also recognize that not all of our new non-signing oral students have this profoundly life-changing experience.

In terms of my own personal identity, prior to my enrollment at Gallaudet, I identified as hard-of-hearing despite being audiologically identified as severe to profoundly deaf. Currently, in my life experience, I identify as deaf with strong cultural leanings towards the Deaf experience. I do not consider myself at the center of Deaf culture by virtue of the fact that I was not raised in a Deaf family, did not learn sign language until my late teens and early twenties, and consequently, ASL is not my native or first language. In addition, while I embrace many of the values of Deaf culture, I do not embrace all values. Recently, I have also been the recipient of a cochlear implant, a somewhat controversial practice within the Deaf community, and I anticipate a continuing exploration as to what it means for me to be deaf. I recognize that many of our oral non-signing students arriving at Gallaudet are also recipients of cochlear implants, and I was curious as to how this factors into the theory that emerged in this study as well.

Often these students know who I am because of my initial experience meeting

with the students and their families during the JumpStart: New Signers Program. While I did know some of these students for this study, none of them were my current students nor were they employed in my office. Fortunately, I do not coordinate or lead the actual programs in which they are participating as that role requires a level of authority over the students and students may not be comfortable with opening up and revealing information as readily if they perceive that I am in a position of power or influence within the program. In my current role, I present myself to them as a resource they can see to discuss and share experiences and one who can provide guidance and feedback while also being more attuned to their own experience by virtue of similar identity backgrounds. Those who did know me were eager and delighted to participate and were among the first to sign up, encouraging some of their friends to sign up as well. By knowing I was doing this research and being comfortable with me, they felt more at ease with sitting down and sharing their experiences in an interview format. I do feel that those who knew me were able to provide information-rich interviews due to the comfort level, yet I also feel blessed to have met several new students who had amazing stories to share as well and they have stopped by to check in on the research process from time to time and update me on their lives since we last met. Essentially, the students are familiar with me yet did not associate me with any authoritative power structure based on their participation in the program.

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, this qualitative grounded theory study aimed to develop a substantive theory describing the experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing non-signing students as they integrated academically and socially into a predominantly signing Deaf university

environment, and the subsequent impact on deaf identity formation. The qualitative grounded theory methodology ensures that the experiences of this unique population provided the foundation of this theory through rich, in-depth, descriptive interviews.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This study explores how oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrate both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment, and how this process influences their deaf identity. The methodology for approaching this question is grounded theory, an approach that seeks to build substantive theory about a specific experience grounded in the data that emerges from the experiences of the participants (Birks & Mills, 2011; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002).

As appropriate for this methodological approach, data was collected through interviews, coded, and analyzed through a method of constant comparison as the interviews, coding, and analysis unfolded. All ten participants were interviewed individually on video over a period of two months in the Spring of 2012, with the interviews lasting approximately one hour each. This section will provide an overview of the theory, introduce the participants, share their stories, and describe the emerging theory found in their stories.

### Overview of the Grounded Theory

To provide a framework for reading the participants stories, it is helpful to have an understanding of the final theory. For this research, the final key category that embodies the overall emerging theory is the participant's *process of developing a positive identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual*. The support categories for this key category are:

- Diagnosis: Setting the Stage for 'self as different'
- On the Margins of the Mainstream: Passing for Hearing

- Catalyst: Gallaudet University as a gateway to a new community and language, ‘meeting others like me’.
- Transitions: Finding a Sense of Place and Self
- Moving from the Margins to the Center: Developing a Positive and Affirmative identity as a Deaf or Hard-of-hearing person

The study aimed to explore the transitional process of these oral deaf and hard-of-hearing non-signing students from mainstreamed or inclusive educational backgrounds as they entered a predominantly deaf signing university. What emerges out of this transitional experience is a transformative and life changing story of individuals who enter a new community, meet others like themselves, learn American Sign Language (ASL), and in the process develop a positive and affirmative identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. Overall, the emerging substantive theory based on the participants experiences is one that embodies the participants process of developing a positive and affirmative identity as a Deaf or Hard-of-hearing individual.

Early in these participant’s life experiences, their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in a predominantly hearing environment was a salient and everyday presence in their lives, one that required a great deal of attentional effort in order to process, understand, and fit into their environment. Attentional effort is defined as “allocation of resources to specific cognitive or perceptual aspects of the environment” (Anderson, 2004, p. 519). For these deaf and hard-of-hearing participants, large attentional demands were constantly required to process the cognitive aspects of learning and understanding the environment, particularly depending on using the perceptual components of the visual system rather than the auditory system to understand their



environment (M. D. Clark, personal communication, October 12, 2012). These participants, in an effort to fit into the predominant hearing culture, tried to ‘be hearing’ or ‘pass for hearing’. Given their hearing loss, this experience often resulted in a sense of being marginalized and alone in their experiences, even when surrounded by supportive family and friends.

Upon transitioning to a predominantly deaf environment where the primary language modality is ASL, embodied by Gallaudet University, these participants were able to connect to a shared experience with others like themselves and in the process, the effort ‘to be hearing’ became less salient and they were able to focus on the process of living, learning, and discovering who they are in a visual, accessible, and generally welcoming academic and social environment. This environment eventually required less effort, created a sense of normalcy in their lived experiences, and helped them realize they were no longer alone in their experience. Becoming grounded in a community of others like themselves served as a key catalyst for shifting from an identity framework of denial, shame, and isolation to one of acceptance, pride, and belongingness.

The stories are shared chronologically, as their life experience unfolds. Their stories demonstrate a sequence of experiences along their life path, beginning from being diagnosed with a hearing loss, which sets the stage for their difference, and continuing with navigating their early life experience in a predominantly hearing living and learning environment. The theme throughout these early experiences is reflective of the experience of perceiving oneself from a disability framework, and trying to fit into, belong, or assimilate into the norms of the dominant hearing majority. This experience is often defined within the literature as ‘passing for hearing’ as hard-of-hearing individuals

strive to overcome their hearing loss and fit into hearing cultural norms (Leigh, 2009).

The experiences of the participants in their early years, framed by their K-12 educational experiences, provides some context of their lives prior to their subsequent decision to attend Gallaudet University, a predominantly deaf environment in which the primary language modality is ASL.

Research has shown that most deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals who are raised in the mainstreamed or inclusive educational environment are most likely to continue their post-secondary education in a similar environment, electing to attend pre-dominantly hearing colleges and universities (Menchel, 1995). However, these particular participants, in spite of the fact that they had little to no exposure to others from the deaf community nor did they use ASL as a means of communicating, made the choice to attend a predominantly deaf university. This study documents their experiences transitioning into the predominantly deaf university, which served as a catalyst for an identity shift in which the participants meet others like themselves, feel a sense of belonging with their peers in the deaf community, and begin to feel a sense of pride and acceptance as they transitioned into a socially constructed and affirming deaf identity framework. The next section introduces the participants and then describes the various categories that emerged from their stories.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through theoretical sampling using an email, sent by the Director of Student Success, specifically recruiting current students who entered Gallaudet University as non-signers (Appendix A).

### **Selected participants**

The ten participants selected for this study are U.S. born students in the traditional college age range from 18 years old to 24 years old and all of them were either born deaf or hard-of-hearing or became deaf or hard-of-hearing at a young age. Their degree of loss varies from a self-described mild hearing loss to a more severe to profound level of auditory deafness. Of those with mild hearing losses, some of the participants experienced a progressive degree of continued loss over time, and this will be noted in their stories, starting out when very young either as hearing or mildly hard-of-hearing and progressively becoming more hard-of-hearing or deaf as they grew through adolescence into young adulthood. All of them have used or currently use some form of assistive hearing devices such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, or bone conduction implants. All of them discuss receiving some level of accommodation in the predominantly hearing learning environment as they grew up, a level of accommodation that is rather similar across their experiences. Most of the participants entered Gallaudet University directly from high school, with some of the participants transferred from a community college, four-year college, or a dual enrollment high school program. A brief summary describing each of the participants follows. Pseudonyms were assigned for each student.

**Anna.** Anna is a Hispanic female who progressively became hard-of-hearing between birth and 3 years of age. She grew up mainstreamed in an inclusive learning environment and in her early years of education, she was enrolled in special education, eventually stopping special education as she transitioned fully into high school. Upon graduating from high school, she attended a community college and graduated with an associates degree before transferring to Gallaudet to continue her education towards a

bachelors degree. She is the only hard-of-hearing individual in her family, has a moderate hearing loss, identifies as hard-of-hearing, and wears hearing aids in both ears. She participated in JumpStart: New Signers Program (JS: NSP) prior to entering Gallaudet and enrolled in ASL 101 her first semester at Gallaudet. She was completing her first year at Gallaudet University at the time of the interview.

**Bethany.** Bethany is an African American female who was born hearing and became progressively hard-of-hearing, with diagnosis at age 4. She grew up completely mainstreamed as the only hard-of-hearing student in her school and entered Gallaudet directly from high school. She comes from a lower income family, most of whom have not graduated from high school. Bethany is a driven individual and while her story focuses on her experiences as a hard-of-hearing student in the mainstream, it is important to note the underlying challenges of her family background and her clear desire to break out of the family cycle of poverty and lack of education. She identifies as hard-of-hearing, and when she can afford them, she wears hearing aids in both ears. She did not participate in JS: NSP but did enroll in ASL 102 her first semester at Gallaudet in 2007. She was a senior and graduated in May of 2012.

**Chase.** Chase is a White male who was born deaf, grew up mainstreamed as the only deaf student in his school, and entered Gallaudet University directly from high school, attending JS: NSP in the Summer of 2009. As the only deaf person in his family, he identifies as oral deaf and believes his hearing loss is genetic due to having distant relatives who are deaf on his father's side. He is completely deaf in both ears and prefers not to wear hearing aids, though when he is around hearing family members, he will use

his hearing aids to help him with communicating. He was completing his third year at Gallaudet University.

**Hayley.** Hayley is a White female who was diagnosed as hard-of-hearing at 3 months of age, grew up mainstreamed as the only half-deaf (self-identified label) student in her school and entered Gallaudet directly from high school, with transfer credits from taking dual enrolled courses at a local college while in high school. She identifies as hard-of-hearing/half deaf, with a profound hearing loss in one ear and recently, a mild hearing loss in the other ear. She currently wears hearing aids in both ears. She participated in JS: NSP in the Summer of 2011 and took ASL 101 her first semester at Gallaudet. She is completing her first year at Gallaudet University.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer is a White female, who was born hard-of-hearing/deaf and has one deaf sibling. She grew up first attending an oral program for deaf and hard-of-hearing students during her early elementary school years and then in her later elementary school years transferred to a mainstreamed school as the only hard-of-hearing student in the school. She enrolled in a community college after high school and then transferred to Gallaudet after two years of community college coursework. Jennifer did not start learning ASL until just before she entered Gallaudet, taking an ASL class at her community college during the Spring semester before she enrolled at Gallaudet. Jennifer attended the JumpStart program in the Summer of 2009 and enrolled in ASL 101/102 during her first semester at Gallaudet. She identifies as hard-of-hearing and deaf, both, depending on social context, and has a severe to profound degree of hearing loss, wearing hearing aids in both ears. She graduated after three years at Gallaudet in May of 2012.

**Kim.** Kim is a White female who grew up mainstreamed as the only hard-of-hearing student in her school and entered Gallaudet directly from high school. She was diagnosed with a hearing loss in the second grade and wears a hearing aid in one ear and has a cochlear implant in her other ear. She joined JS: NSP during the summer of 2011 and enrolled in ASL 101 her first semester at Gallaudet. She has completed her first year at Gallaudet.

**Maryann.** Maryann is a White female who grew up mainstreamed and entered Gallaudet directly from high school. She was born hard-of-hearing and wears an implant in one ear. She has an older hard-of-hearing sibling who was also mainstreamed and raised orally like Maryann. She and her sibling were the only hard-of-hearing students in the school. The siblings are five years apart in age and despite having a shared experience as being hard-of-hearing, they are not close. Maryann entered Gallaudet in the Summer of 2011, participating in the JumpStart program, and enrolling in ASL 101 during her first semester at Gallaudet. She has completed her first year at Gallaudet.

**Rachel.** Rachel is a Biracial/Multiracial female who was diagnosed with a very mild hearing loss at age 3, which progressively worsened as she grew up, an experience that she actively denied until she entered a regular predominantly hearing college. She considers herself hard-of-hearing and occasionally wears hearing aids. She grew up as the only hard-of-hearing member of her family and in her school. She attended another four-year college for two years before dropping out and at this time began the process of accepting her hearing loss. She worked briefly and then entered Gallaudet as a transfer student in 2007, participating in JumpStart and taking ASL 101 during her first semester at Gallaudet. She graduated in May 2012 after five years.

**Sam.** Sam is a White male who was born hard-of-hearing as a result of a genetic disorder and is the only hard-of-hearing member of his family. He considers himself hard-of-hearing, grew up mainstreamed in an inclusive learning environment, as the only hard-of-hearing student in the school and entered Gallaudet in the Fall of 2009 directly from high school. He uses an implant and attended JumpStart prior to enrolling at Gallaudet. He also enrolled in ASL 101 during his first semester at Gallaudet and is wrapping up his third year at Gallaudet.

**Sophie.** Sophie is a White Female with a moderate hearing loss diagnosed at age 5. She has one hard-of-hearing younger sibling with whom she has a close relationship. She grew up mainstreamed as the only hard-of-hearing student in her school, with her sibling attending a private school elsewhere. She wears hearing aids in both ears. She enrolled at Gallaudet in the Fall of 2010, coming directly from high school. She attended JS: NSP and took ASL 101 during her first semester at Gallaudet. She is currently wrapping up her second year at Gallaudet.

### **Summary of participants.**

Eight of the participants were female, with two male participants. In the larger context of Gallaudet University, undergraduate females outnumber males 54% to 46% so the sample for this study was skewed heavily towards female representation. Seven of the participants were White, one is Hispanic, one is African American/Black, and one is Biracial/Multiracial. At Gallaudet, Hispanic students represent 10% of the undergraduate population, African American students represent 11 % of the population, and students of two or more backgrounds represent 2% of the population (Gallaudet University, 2011). Four of the participants had prior college experience, with one of them coming directly

from a high school with a dual enrollment program, two transferring from a community college, and one transferring from a four-year college. Seven of the participants were the only deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in their immediate family, with three of them having a sibling who is also deaf or hard-of-hearing and raised in the same environment as the participants. One of the participants attended an oral deaf program in early elementary school and then moved into a mainstreamed program with her hearing peer during 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Nine of the participants attended JS: NSP prior to starting classes at Gallaudet, with one participant arriving for the program very late and one participant who never attended JS: NSP, starting directly at Gallaudet without any prior transitional experience such as the JS: NSP. All of the participants were enrolled in ASL 101 or ASL 102 during their first semester at Gallaudet. Two participants enrolled at Gallaudet in 2007, none enrolled in 2008, three enrolled in 2009, one enrolled in 2010, and four enrolled in 2011. At the time of interviews, four of these participants had completed their first year and the rest were in their second, third, or fifth years, with three of them graduating in May of 2012.

### **Setting the Stage for a Sense of Difference**

The first step in the process of having a deaf or hard-of-hearing identity is to have it named as such. The context surrounding the discovery of this identity plays a role in whether this identity is a desirable one or not. For the participants in this study, the first awareness of being deaf or hard-of-hearing came in the form of a diagnosis. While seven of the participants were the only one's in their immediate family with a hearing loss, three of them had siblings with a similar hearing loss. One of the participants had an older sibling with the same kind of hearing loss and two of the participants later had



younger siblings who also had a hearing loss. All of the individuals, including those with siblings, were raised in a predominantly hearing family environment relying on speech-reading, use of hearing aids, and use of residual hearing as a primary means of communicating.

The decisions that were made by family members as a result of the participants being diagnosed as deaf or hard-of-hearing started these participants on a path that would shape their initial identity experiences. Most of the participants were diagnosed at a young age, with varying degrees of hearing loss ranging from those like Rachel who had a barely noticeable level of mild hearing loss that initially did not require use of hearing aids to Chase, who had a more severe and profound degree of loss in the range of deaf. Some of these participants, such as Hayley, Kim, and Rachel were born hearing or with very mild hearing losses and their hearing progressively worsened as they grew up, becoming more and more hard-of-hearing or deaf by the time they reached middle school. All of these participants wore hearing aids, either soon after diagnosis or as they became older and their hearing progressively declined. Kim, Maryann, and Sam all received implants, either a cochlear implant or a bone conduction implant, as these technologies became available in their middle school or high school years. The key themes in this category are becoming aware of being different, of being alone in their experience of difference within the family, and of wearing hearing aids as symbols of their difference.

### **Diagnosis: Early indicators of Difference**

The diagnosis of hearing loss and subsequent responses to the diagnosis were a property of this category, with responses ranging from absent to distraught. Their stories

began with the participants sharing the discovery and diagnosis of their hearing loss and the family's reactions to the diagnosis and subsequent decisions regarding communication and school placement decisions. The discovery of the participants hearing loss most often occurred as a result of a teacher or a parent noticing the participant's lack of response to auditory cues or lack of development of speech. From this observation, the participants were taken to a doctor or hearing specialist to determine a diagnosis. This diagnosis and subsequent responses to the diagnosis set the stage early in the participant's lives of a sense of difference. This type of experience, seeing the parents upset about your hearing loss or deafness and struggling to address it, sets the stage for viewing the hearing loss in negative ways and perceiving that their hearing loss is not a desirable or normal way of being. Anna and Bethany's teachers each noticed that "something was wrong" and encouraged the parents to take their daughters to see a doctor. Kim and Rachel "failed a hearing test" given in school and this led to a subsequent visit to a doctor and a diagnosis. Chase and Jennifer's parents noticed that their son or daughter was "not developing appropriately, not behaving normally" and from this observation and a resulting follow-up visit to a doctor, discovered their son or daughter was deaf.

Not all the participants commented on their parent's reactions to the diagnosis, however Anna, Chase, Kim, Jennifer, and Sophie recalled to various extents that their family members were uncertain about what to do and also recalled them as being upset and distraught upon learning that their son or daughter had a hearing loss. Jennifer's story was vivid as she shared her mother's reaction when "the audiologist confirmed, 'yes, she's deaf and she needs hearing aids'. My mom was shocked. She left upset. The

woman actually chased her ‘No, no, she's deaf she needs hearing aids!’ My mom was overwhelmed.”

For some, the diagnosis did not affect their daily life experience. Rachel initially was diagnosed with a very mild hearing loss. For several years, she stated that her hearing loss was so mild that it had no real impact on her life experience. It was not until she was around 13 years old, just before entering high school that she realized her hearing had progressively worsened. Her hearing loss continued to worsen as she progressed through and graduated from high school and entered a community college. During this time, she refused to accept that she was losing her hearing. Her story is a strong one of denial, most likely as she was born into a family of musicians and was struggling to reconcile her hearing loss with her identity as a musician,

it's never good to know that your hearing loss will continue to progress through your life ... that really sucks. So I was depressed about it for a little bit. And then understanding and then I thought ‘well ok ... I guess I have to accept this ... so what can I do?’.

As she finally realized that she would continue to lose her hearing over time, she began the process of coming to terms with and accepting the diagnosis. Again, this strong refusal throughout her early years is a strong indication of the lack of desirability of having a hearing loss or hard-of-hearing identity.

### **Being the Only Hard-of-Hearing or Deaf Person**

Another property of this category was the experience of being the only member of their family with a hearing loss, with seven of the ten participants being the only one in their family with a hearing loss. Three of the participants had one sibling who was also deaf or hard-of-hearing. This information fits with national statistics, which indicate that 77% of deaf or hard-of-hearing children are born into hearing families and are the only

member of the family with a hearing loss (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2008). The experience of being different from other members in your family sets the stage for difference, not feeling a sense of normalcy, and creates a sense of isolation due to not having others with whom you can relate to, understand, or share your experiences.

Later in the interviews, several participants shared that there were times when they felt that their family members, as hearing individuals, could not relate to or fully understand their experience as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. Hayley, whose hearing has progressively decreased with age, shared that,

I don't think my parents haven't really accepted how deaf I am. They understand that I have some hearing, but I have to work to understand them. At home, my mom will yell for me (from a different room), and I wouldn't hear her. She thinks I'm ignoring her but I'm not. I don't hear her.

Maryann shared at one point that she often felt that no one could understand her experience, that until one has lived the experience, they cannot possibly understand. Sophie also shared that they do not believe their parents “understand fully how I process in my life with my hearing loss.” This is interesting coming from Sophie and Maryann as the two participants who also have a hard-of-hearing sibling. From most of the participants, while family members were supportive and the participants acknowledge that they did the best they could, there is a strong sense in their stories of being alone and isolated and not having anyone they could connect to as the only deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in the family.

**Having deaf or hard-of-hearing siblings.** While most of the participants were the only deaf or hard-of-hearing member in their family, three of the participants reported that they also had one hard-of-hearing sibling. Two of the participants each had a younger hard-of-hearing brother, and one of the participants had an older hard-of-hearing

sister. The relationships between the siblings varied. All of the siblings also attended mainstreamed or inclusive schools with their hearing peers, wore hearing aids, and were raised in an oral hearing environment like the participants. While they had a shared commonality across their hearing losses, this did not seem to alleviate the sense of isolation the participants experienced in their early lives, particularly as the age difference was quite pronounced between the siblings, on average about five years apart in age. In addition, the two participants who were the oldest paved the way and looked out for their younger siblings. The one participant who had an older sibling shared that she and her sister were not close and while raised in similar contexts, they had chosen different life paths. Apparently having a hard-of-hearing sibling does not necessarily make one's experience growing up in a hearing family or in the school system easier and this is consistent with findings in the research on siblings raised in hearing families using oral methods and attending and mainstreaming into regular hearing schools (Moschella, 1992). Moschella (1992) found that this is most likely due to the relative inexperience of hearing parents in raising deaf or hard-of-hearing children and the fact that in her study, the participants were all the older siblings.

The role of siblings is highlighted in the stories of three participants. Sophie was the oldest in her family and had a younger brother who was also hard-of-hearing. Sophie was close to her brother, and the two seem to have a sense of solidarity in their shared experience. Sophie clearly enjoys her role as the big sister and being able to share her wisdom while acting as a role model to her younger brother. Sophie described her brother's hearing loss as being milder than hers, however, unlike Sophie, her younger brother struggled in the public school environment and was eventually placed in a small

private school where he thrived in the smaller and more structured learning environment. Because of this, Sophie was on her own in her school experience in the public school.

Jennifer was the middle child in her family, and like Jennifer, her younger brother was also born with a hearing loss. Jennifer's brother, like Jennifer, attended a mainstreamed and inclusive public school for most of his K-12 educational career but apparently struggled in the public school setting and was eventually placed in a school for the deaf when he was in high school, a decision that startled Jennifer. This decision made Jennifer curious to explore the deaf school online and from that, she learned about Gallaudet University. The two are several years apart in age, and like Sophie and her brother, Jennifer is very much the older sister looking out for her younger brother, and also like Sophie, Jennifer and her brother share a unique bond due to their deafness.

Maryann, unlike Sophie and Jennifer, is the younger sibling with an older sister who has the same kind of hearing loss as Maryann. Like Maryann, her sister wears hearing aids in both ears and was raised oral in the public predominantly hearing school system. Maryann also explains that her sister is several years older than her and very comfortable in the hearing environment with no interest to explore the deaf community. Maryann shares that she is not close to her sister, despite both of them having a hearing loss.

### **Hearing Aids as Symbols of Difference**

Another property of this category centered around the symbolism of wearing hearing aids. All of the participants experienced wearing hearing aids, either soon after diagnosis or later as their hearing loss progressed. None of the participants reported positive feelings related to wearing their hearing aids in their early years, sharing that

they would choose not to wear them, attempt to hide them, or beg their parents for smaller, less visible hearing aids. Participants described their experience with wearing hearing aids and for many the hearing aid was a concrete and visible symbol of their difference and a source of shame and embarrassment. Anna, who wears hearing aids in both ears shares that “it was awkward at first because I was always wondering why I was the only one with hearing aids? I was always curious why me?”

The participants described their initial experience with hearing aids as being overwhelming and uncomfortable. Jennifer’s describes being angry while being fitted with hearing aids

I was so upset about what they were doing that I just screamed. My mom actually had to wrestle me to put the hearing aids on because I didn’t want to wear them. I was like ‘no no no’ and resisting her.

The experience of being fitted for a hearing aid, adjusting to the sound amplification and the itchiness of the ear molds, and the perceived visibility of the hearing aid was uncomfortable and awkward. Jennifer, Kim, Rachel, Sophie, and Sam all talked about feeling as if the hearing aids were beacons for attention and their efforts to hide their hearing aids by growing their hair long to cover up their hearing aids. Sophie begged to have less visible ‘in-the-ear’ hearing aids, and some, like Rachel, even chose not to wear the hearing aids at all. Kim, who had just moved and was also a new student in the school when she got her first hearing aid, shared the already difficult experience of trying to fit in as the new kid with “the bright pink, blue, purple ear molds”.

As they got older, Kim, Maryann, and Sam received implants, either a cochlear implant or a bone conduction implant. It appears at this time in their lives, the idea of wearing an assistive hearing device such as a hearing aid or implant was something they

had become used to and adapted to, and in general their experience of the implant was a positive experience, especially pertaining to sound quality. Sam noted that the quality of sound from his implant was much better than his hearing aids and improved his ability to navigate the hearing environment, but it was not perfect,

I got it when I was 12-13 years old. It was a BIG change in how I understand everything a lot better now. I didn't need to read lips as much. It is not perfect, more like being hard-of-hearing (as opposed to hearing). Also the background noise was still distracting. I still understand better but with a lot of people talking and the background noise, I was lost. I'd miss a lot.

## **Summary**

The diagnosis of a hearing loss was not a positive experience for these participant's and set the stage early for a sense of difference, of being outside the norm, of recognizing that their hearing loss was not perceived as a positive way of being, and for most, of feeling alone in a family where they were often the only member of the family with a hearing loss as they observed their families struggling with decisions about how to best raise them. As the participant's described their early experiences of being diagnosed, it is interesting to note the language the participants use to describe these experiences. Hayley stated, "I was born normal", and several others like Anna, Brittany, Jennifer, and Chase sharing that teachers or family members noticed that "something was wrong" that lead to a diagnosis. Some of the participants like Jennifer and Kim shared their experiences of their parents being upset upon learning of the diagnosis. Some, like Anna, validate their parent's responses, empathizing with them, that this diagnosis was unexpected and once again, "not normal". The language used clearly sets them apart from what is perceived as acceptable or desirable or normal.



The participants also shared their own confusion of the impact of having their hearing tested and failing the tests, of being diagnosed and seeing parents respond to the diagnosis, of receiving hearing aids, and for most, of being “the only one” in their family. This initiated an early realization that they were ‘different’ from their family subsequently setting the stage for shaping their initial identity development as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in potentially negative ways. The concept of normalcy or what is normal and the idea that they do not fit into this concept, that there is something wrong, that they are different, and that they are alone, even those with siblings, in this experience begins early for these participants.

### **On the Margins of the Mainstream: Passing for Hearing**

As the participants moved from the sphere of family into the broader sphere of school and community, the participants further realized that they were also different from their peers. As they began to interact with others outside of the family environment, they began to identify, learn, and navigate the challenges inherent in communicating, socializing and learning in a predominantly auditory-privileged environment. As deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals, the participant’s access to this environment required a great deal of effort and they had to work hard to fit in and belong. Not only were they the only deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in their families but often, they were also the only deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in their community and their school. The participants initiated various strategies in an effort to gain access while also trying to downplay their hearing loss or hide their difference. This effort to ‘to be hearing’ or ‘pass for hearing’ was evident in the desire not to stand out as different, in the lack of willingness or comfort in advocating for themselves, in their attempts to be involved in the community

despite communication barriers, and in their denial or shame in admitting or sharing with others that they had a hearing loss.

Academically, all of the students were successful in school and able to progress with various supports in place to help in this process. The participants learning strategies for navigating the learning environment were consistent across all stories and demonstrated the amount of work involved for them to succeed. These strategies are common for most deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals raised in the mainstreamed or inclusive learning environment.

Socially, most of the participants were involved in the formal extracurricular activities offered through the school such as athletics, band, girl scouts, student council, and theater, to name a few. These social activities provided opportunities for friendships based on shared activities. However, these social milieus were more challenging to navigate and required a level of resilience and desire to be involved as the participants were often on their own with minimal supports in place. For some, the active nature of activities, such as sports, allowed for interactions based primarily on action and skill as opposed to communication, and this was one way participants were able to bond and connect.

Almost all of the participants spoke of having at least one or two close friends. Even with these friendships, the participants generally shared a sense of being alone in their experience as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in a predominantly hearing world, stating that occasionally it was hard because no one else could relate to or understand their experiences. Family and friends would be inclusive yet invariably, when communication challenges arose, the dissonance of difference came into play. Maryann

eloquently shared this concept, “It's like, if you haven't been through it yourself, you cannot understand. That's the point. A lot of people don't understand.” The key dimensions of this property center around being alone in the predominantly hearing mainstreamed environment, navigating the environment, and seeking a sense of belonging.

### **Being Alone in the Mainstream**

This property encompasses the experience of the participants as the only deaf or hard-of-hearing student in the mainstream or inclusive learning environment. For the most part, a majority of the participants were the only one in their school for their entire K-12 educational experience. Three of the participants were aware of perhaps one other, or even of a special education classroom for deaf and hard-of-hearing, during a year or two of their educational experience but did not interact with them. Two of the participants had significant experience interacting with other deaf and hard-of-hearing during either the early years or the middle school years. For the most part, all of the participants experienced a sense of being alone for significant parts of their upbringing.

Parents of the participants opted to place their children in an oral mainstreamed or inclusive learning environment in which the participants would rely on their residual hearing, use of hearing aids, lip-reading skills, speaking and speech therapy, and other oral methods of communicating in addition to receiving support and using various learning strategies in the classroom. All except one were initially placed in a public mainstreamed or inclusive learning environment, with Jennifer being the only one who was placed in an oral classroom for the deaf and hard-of-hearing students with seven other deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, eventually moving into the mainstream in

fourth grade. As being raised in the predominantly hearing mainstream or inclusive learning environment was one of the criteria for participating in this study, it is expected that all the participants were raised in this manner.

However, as a result of these decisions, all of the participants shared experiences of being the only one in their school with a hearing loss for most of their educational experience with Anna, Bethany, and Jennifer having the most exposure to a learning environment with other deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals either in a special education classroom environment or in the oral deaf classroom environment. Chase and Jennifer both discussed meeting at least one other hard-of-hearing student while in the mainstream, outside of special education environments, and the remaining participants shared that they were the only one in the mainstream hearing learning environment throughout their entire K-12 education, never having met much less knowing if there were other deaf or hard-of-hearing students in the school with them.

In various ways, the participants all shared that their experience alone in the mainstream hearing learning and social environment was “awkward”, “hard”, or “tough”, not because of academic challenges, but because of barriers to communication and understanding in a predominantly auditory hearing environment. For the participants, it is significant to note that the work involved in the academic environment focused primarily on accessing the environment and addressing communication barriers, and then on learning. The daily effort to understand what is happening in their environment while also putting energy into the effort of learning is significant. For this reason, the participants hearing loss is a salient and everyday part of their life experience, one that they cannot push to the background while they focus on learning and being.

Of the participants, three of them were initially placed in a special education classroom. Bethany was specifically placed in a “hearing impaired class”, with other deaf and hard-of-hearing students, while Anna and Sam were placed in a broader special education classroom or resource room. Bethany and Sam, after a short amount of time in their respective special education classrooms, were quickly moved into the regular mainstream and inclusive learning environment by first grade. Apparently the teachers determined that with their hearing aids and degree of hearing loss, the participants would be able to do well in the mainstreamed and inclusive learning environment.

Unlike Bethany and Sam, Anna continued with special education in a classroom of students with ADD or ADHD or other learning disabilities, “I was the only one (who was hearing-of-hearing) ... if I can remember correctly, most of the other students had ADD/ADHD stuff like that ... special education class”. When Anna entered middle school, her family moved and Anna continued with special education, though this time “that school had more students with hearing aids, students with disabilities, in wheelchairs, blind. That school helped me see ‘oh I’m not the only one’ so that was fine”. It is worthwhile to note that this exposure to meeting others with hearing aids shifted Anna’s frame of reference from being the only one with a hearing loss to “I’m not the only one” and therefore, a sense of feeling “fine”. Earlier, Anna was noted as wondering, “Why was I the only one with hearing aids?” By high school, Anna was no longer in the special education environment and was fully integrated into the mainstreamed learning environment.

Jennifer, unlike the others, was the only participant who was originally placed in an oral deaf school with seven other deaf and hard-of-hearing students, where all of them

learned using an FM system. (An FM system is an amplification system. The student wears a small box that connects to their hearing aid. The teacher wears a microphone that transmits what is he or she is saying to the box, which in turn amplifies directly to the students hearing aid.) Jennifer noted that this was a comfortable learning environment for her as all the students were like her and the teacher was trained specifically to work with deaf and hard-of-hearing students. When Jennifer started the fourth grade, her family placed her in a public school and from that point on

I was the only deaf/hearing-of-hearing student at that school from 4th, 5th, 6th grade. When I transferred to a different school in 6th grade, there was one guy in my 6th grade class at that school who was also hearing-of-hearing and mainstreamed too. In high school, I was the only one that was hearing-of-hearing.

Jennifer was unable to share why her family made this decision sharing that it may have been to “broaden my experience”. The experience transitioning to the mainstream environment was difficult for Jennifer. It was at this time that her experience as a deaf or hard-of-hearing student became more salient, and she began to experience a sense of difference and isolation as the only deaf or hard-of-hearing student in the mainstreamed classroom. In addition, she had to adjust to a different classroom experience with teachers and peers who were not familiar with interacting with deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals. She shared, “when I transferred to mainstreamed, it was disorienting, it was hard, rough. It was very isolating.”

For Anna and Jennifer, being able to connect with others like themselves gave each of them an awareness that they were not alone in the world and that there were others out there like them. For other participants, never having met others like themselves, integrating into the mainstream could be an isolating and lonely experience. Sam shares, “I was raised alone in the mainstream, not having anyone with the same

problems as me, it was tough.” Bethany, Chase, Hayley, Kim, Maryann, Rachel, Sam, and Sophie all grew up not knowing or interacting with any other deaf or hearing-of-hearing individuals, and if they did, these interactions were brief and they did not establish any memorable or long-lasting connections. Essentially, they were very much alone in their experiences.

### **Navigating the Environment: The Effort of Learning and Fitting In**

The amount of effort required for navigating the environment dominates as a central theme. This section examines the participant’s stories about their academic and social experiences in the predominantly hearing learning environment. All of the participants were enrolled in public mainstreamed or inclusive schools, with various additional support and services ranging from being relying mainly on residual hearing and lip-reading as a means of navigating the system to being placed in a special education classroom and receiving numerous supports. Generally, the counselors and teachers in the school worked closely with the participants and their families to address their learning needs. Many of the participants, though not all, talked about being involved in the formal social environment of the school. The participants also shared their experiences with friendships and social lives. The central theme of this experience is the amount of work and effort required by the participants to navigate their academic and social environments.

**Advocating for self.** Navigating the learning environment of a predominantly hearing school often began family members, counselors, and teachers meeting to review an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) designed to address accommodations in the classroom. In the early elementary school years, parents were often involved with

advocating for the participants needs in the school. Later, as they became older, the participants would start advocating for their needs on their own. Jennifer shares that she had

IEP meetings every year. My parents were always very motivated to go to IEP meetings, they always wanted to stay on top of things. As I got older, I developed the ability to talk with the teachers myself. I know the counselor took care of it but I'd also go up to the teacher and inform them as well.

Maryann, like Jennifer, started early in elementary school with her parents and then developed the skills to advocate for herself as she got older,

My parents taught me to always talk to the teacher, so I learned to advocate for myself in high school. I met with my teachers all the time, I always made sure that they knew I was hearing-of-hearing because I have problems in the classroom. When I was young, I would meet them with my parents, then in high school I met with teachers on my own.

Interwoven within their stories, the participants discussed the expectation and need to develop assertiveness and advocacy skills to ensure their needs were continuously met in the classroom. The need and the expectation to self-advocate was one that the participants shared as being one of their more challenging experiences, particularly in the classroom, where raising their hand to ask for clarification singled them out and made them feel uncomfortable. While some of the participants, like Jennifer, Sam and Anna became comfortable advocating for themselves, others like Chase, Rachel, and Sophie preferred not to draw attention to themselves and chose to remain quiet. Rachel was the most concise about summing up this experience,

I know everyone tried to tell me if there's something you don't understand, raise your hand (raises hand assertively). I never raised my hand (raises hand in a posture of reluctance ... as if interrupting/interfering). I didn't like the attention. That's a separate issue. Plus it opens up space for gossip or something and I just didn't want that kind of 'attention'.

She joked with the interviewer, who, in connecting to her experience, shared that



if she raised her hand every time she did not understand something, class would never move forward, to which Rachel replied “EXACTLY!”

Some of the participants, like Bethany, Sophie and Chase, believed that the teachers, because they had been informed through IEP meetings, were responsible for remembering the participant’s needs without having to constantly be reminded by the participants themselves and therefore, they would choose not to assert their needs, expecting the teachers to be informed and aware. Being assertive, as Rachel noted, drew attention to them and this was not a comfortable experience, with the participants clearly weighing the need to advocate with a conflicting desire not to stand out or be different from their peers.

Anna and Sam developed their assertiveness skills as they got older and came to appreciate it as a means for taking care of their needs. Anna shared that in community college,

I had to find strength to ask questions or to ask, ‘You don't mind saying again?’ so that was different for me. But that helped me to find confidence as I grew up, to find confidence in myself, saying to myself, it was ok to ask questions, if I need them to repeat, I have that right. The teacher has the paper, they need to say "ok fine" and explain again.

Similar to Anna, Sam also developed the capacity to self-advocate,

If I didn't understand, I tried not to be shy and would raise my hand. I used to not want to be the only one not understanding but in high school I broke out of that habit and would raise my hand and ask teachers to repeat please so that helped.

Generally, the participants described the teachers as being accommodating, though occasionally they would deal with some less accommodating experiences. For Bethany, her mild degree of hearing loss and capacity to speak well and function well in the classroom, apparently lead the teachers to believe that her needs were minor.

Bethany shared that,

The high school teachers didn't really recognize my disability, one teacher, I sat down with her and told her I was hard-of-hearing, she was like 'Really? Really?' I had an IEP but I don't think they really read them. They didn't know what was my disability, they never actually followed the IEP, I felt they saw me as really really independent/capable.

The invisibility of the hearing loss, as well as the participants capacity to speech-read, speak, and generally do well in the classroom may have lead the teachers to believe that the participants were able to understand much more than they did and therefore were doing fine. This may have been exacerbated by the participants discomfort and unwillingness to assert or advocate for their needs, therefore leading teachers to believe the participants were ok.

Several participants discussed a counselor, an audiologist, or a specific "Teacher for the Hearing Impaired" who would provide support and check on them and their progress in school and advocate for them if needed. Chase discussed his audiologist, who would advocate for him with his teachers so by the time he showed up in class, his teachers knew who he was and what his needs were. Rachel shared her experiences with her "Teacher for the Hearing Impaired", noting "She was really good about telling the teachers certain things about what I needed in the classroom, negotiating things." Rachel said "She was great (signed 'perfect' with emphasis), she was awesome." Sophie had a helper in middle school that Sophie described as "like a counselor for my hearing to see how I progressed in my classes."

Sometimes it was the regular teachers who made a difference in the student's lives, for example, Sophie's helper in middle school encouraged her to sign up for an ASL class in high school to fulfill her foreign language requirements. Sophie was

initially reluctant to sign up, noting that she would be the only hard-of-hearing student in the ASL class, as if this difference would be more pronounced due to the nature of the class. However, this decision was to become one of her most memorable and enjoyable experiences in high school as the ASL teacher became an advocate for Sophie and encouraged her to participate in performances. These experiences were the most positive and affirming experiences of Sophie's high school experience.

**Navigating the Learning Environment.** The participants developed numerous strategies for navigating the learning environment in the classroom. The litany of strategies that the participants shared was consistent across most of the participant's experiences.

Every participant without fail discussed sitting in the front row and depending on lip-reading or speech-reading as a means of following the teacher. Several of them noted that they had good speech-reading skills, with Anna stating that "it was a gift from God, I really believe that!" Kim shared that she

followed as best as I could in the classroom by lip-reading. Most of the time I was able to follow. At the beginning I could hear better (lip-reading plus residual hearing) but by the time I reached high school, my hearing had decreased so I was struggling with that (more dependent on lip-reading).

For most of them, the challenges came when they missed what the teacher said and needed to be assertive about asking the teacher to repeat what they said, like Maryann's experience

Learning, in the classroom, I missed a lot, I knew that ... I always have to ask the teacher to say it again please, again and again and again and that's if they are always talking. The teachers started to learn to start using power-point with main point on the screen so I would not need to ask so often.

Like Maryann, Sam's teachers also used visual power-point with key ideas on display as a way to guide the discussion and Sam would ask for copies of the power-point after class to read on his own. Some, like Hayley and Sam, noted that, "If I really missed something, I'd ask friends." Rachel simply preferred to see the teacher after class with any questions she had rather than raising her hand in class.

Another challenge was when other students spoke up in classroom discussions. Many of the participants stated this was when they became lost and were no longer able to follow. Chase said that for "group discussions, I'd just sit and wait for the discussion to finish, I would not learn anything. I would miss out when it came to group discussions." Jennifer stated, several times, that "It was hard to follow discussions. Sometimes I'd ask the teacher 'what did they say?' They'd clarify. Sometimes I'd already know what they were talking about so I didn't care, just let it slide." Jennifer also noted that her classmates would become impatient with her and not want to work with her in team projects because communication was difficult. It seems that the participants developed a energy expenditure radar of when it was worthwhile to expend energy for following along in the classroom i.e. lip-reading and speech-reading the teacher is easier versus trying to follow the rapid and quickly shifting nature of a classroom discussion.

Many participants talked about using an FM system in their early years, with most of them stopping use of it by the time they arrived at high school. Jennifer shared

I had an FM system up until junior high school. I didn't like it. It made too much noise. There was a lot of interference. Sometimes I would understand the teacher, other times I didn't. So I pitched it in Junior High School.

Kim also shared that she hated the FM system,

It worked from second grade until fourth grade, then I started having problems with it and it went downhill from there. By the time I arrived to high school I

refused to use it. I hated it, I didn't want to use it. I could hear some but most of the time it was static, or the batteries weren't working or the teacher would drop it or ... it just never worked so I gave up.

Maryann also reported similar frustrations and like Jennifer and Kim, had stopped using it by middle school. Sam and Chase also shared their experiences using the FM system as well.

A few of the participants discussed use of captions, use of transcripts, or increasing the volume during films, and this was not always received positively by their peers. Sophie and Hayley both commented on their peers complaining about use of captions. Sophie would not even remind the teachers about turning on the captions, stating that the teachers should know but also

I just felt like the other kids would be like 'Why do we have words? I don't want to see words. I want to see the full picture.' Whatever. Of course the teachers always knew about my IEP. Of course I'd also have to remind them. But sometimes I didn't. I felt ashamed, I wasn't comfortable with that.

Hayley related a similar experience, sharing that for movies, "I always had to turn on the caption. At times it was like 'because of me' ... some people hated captioning, complained, didn't want caption, that kind of thing."

One of the most consistent strategies used by all the participants and one that many of them attributed to their success in school, was their own intrinsic means of learning through reading and doing independent work. Kim, who gradually lost her hearing over time, shared that "Basically I learned myself after so much time passed, it became where I preferred to do it myself because it was so much of a struggle to follow the teacher." Maryann, like Kim, noted that she would miss out on a lot despite the efforts of speech-reading and other means of accommodations and credits her success to reading:

I read a lot in school, I would always have a book in my face, reading reading reading reading, that was the main way I would learn. If I missed anything, I would ask the librarians for workbooks, go to a tutor, meet with the teacher outside of class. I missed a lot, whatever ... it was hard.

Bethany shares “I’d read, read, read to understand and pass the tests. I was more independent with my homework, so I’d read.” Chase, echoed Maryann and Bethany, “reading ... reading reading reading ... I read a lot. I didn’t pay attention to the teacher much. In sum, I grew up enduring a lot but I learned through reading, not through teachers.” Sam and Sophie also stated that reading was a primary means for their success in navigating the environment, the amount of time and energy they devoted to reading in order to stay caught up and on track with their learning, and like Bethany and Kim, becoming very independent with doing their work.

Despite the various challenges, academic achievement was not an issue with the participants, with most of them doing self-described average to above average work in school. Anna, Rachel, and Sam described their academics as average, with Sam noting that it became more difficult in middle school and high school, when “my grades started declining a bit because the classes were bigger and it was harder to understand the teacher. I was lost. I’d miss a lot. I noticed my grades were declining because of that.” Anna also shared that high school was more challenging, not necessarily because of communication issues alone but because of the learning challenges. At this time, both Anna and Sam were also no longer receiving special education support and were on their own, a situation both shared as being a challenge but beneficial as it forced them to also self-advocate more instead of depending on others to do it for them, an interesting perspective as they were the only two who noted that and also the ones who became more comfortable with self-advocacy, clearly out of necessity being on their own.

Bethany, Chase, Maryann and Sophie all shared that they were high academic achievers, doing very well in school. Some, like Chase shared that “interestingly enough, social issues aside, my academics were fine.” Sophie “realized I was smart, so I started focusing on school more, got A’s and B’s, became an honor roll student, became principals list”. This was also Kim and Hayley’ experience, with both doing well in school.

Some of them, like Hayley, Jennifer and Rachel, and possibly others like Chase and Kim, though this was not always explicitly stated, were in gifted programs or taking advanced placement courses. Hayley was taking advanced placement and was also enrolled in a dual enrollment program earning college credit while in high school and during summer breaks. One of the participants, Rachel, described her high school as academically competitive and her performance as average in comparison to her high-achieving classmates. Because of this experience, she did not have a positive academic self-concept and was uncertain about her capability to do well in college, even while taking honors level courses.

**Navigating the social environment.** Growing up, school is a central defining construct in our lives. It is not only where we learn, but also a place where friendships and social experiences emerge. For many, the formal social structures of the school environment, such as athletics, band, theater, honor society, and various leadership councils, were a place where friendships developed. Many of the participants reported rich extracurricular involvement in the formal social structures of the school environment: athletics, band, theater, leadership councils, honors societies, and other

various activities. For some of these participants, these were avenues from which friendships developed.

A large number of the participants were involved in some level of athletics. Anna loved softball and lacrosse, noting that “the coaches knew if they couldn't get my attention they'd tap me on the shoulder, they'd talk to me up front”. She acknowledged it was not always easy, “Lacrosse was hard on the field, they would call out a person's name (to direct the ball), so I had to work so much harder. But I enjoyed it.” Chase, who had played hockey since elementary school, shared that the advantage of playing hockey is “you don't really have to talk with them, just play”. Sophie played basketball though her experience with the coaches was not always positive, “I didn't hear the coach well enough. I believe he judged me because of my hearing loss because sometimes I didn't focus or pay attention.” Sam thrived in baseball and football, crediting these experiences for his friendships in middle school and high school, noting “I made new friends on the football team, same with baseball team. It helped me interact better in the mainstream”.

Naturally, not all the participants were athletes but were involved in other activities. Jennifer, who entered the mainstream learning environment in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, credits her experience with the band during high school as being her avenue for a social life and friendships,

I started developing some good friends when, in high school, I got involved with one organization on campus, the color guard, which was with the marching band. That was more of a visual performance so that way so I was able to shine there. You don't have to hear, it's so noisy anyway, you just have to count to dance and follow the choreography for the flags.

She stayed involved with the Color Guard all through high school, sharing “I loved high school because of that ... I developed my social skills there, step by step. I



really blossomed then.”

Rachel became involved with the theater when, thanks to some of her friends in Girl Scouts,

they dragged me to the theater club and other things after school and I just jumped right in with that ...so those two years (Junior and Senior Year) were great for me, outside of school. I met a lot of friends that year, so it was really cool.

Kim, who was involved in cheerleading and soccer, was also very involved in various honor societies and as a prominent leader in the student council. When asked about how she managed these experiences, she stated,

I wasn't always sure 'what to do'. For some of the small group meetings, those were fine. For the big groups, I'd depend on friends and ask them what was happening and things like that. Really I just adapted, I got used to it.

Sophie, outside of basketball, thrived in the activities offered through her ASL class, which she exclaimed was the center of her social life and was a positive anchor in her experience of high school,

I loved ASL class. I was involved a variety show, where I would perform and sign my own song in ASL. Everyone was stunned, they loved me. I felt my self esteem go up. I felt really good, I felt like they appreciated me. They respected me. I felt good. Even though I was deaf/hearing-of-hearing myself. I felt good.

### **Friendships: Fitting in and seeking a sense of belonging**

Outside of the formal structures, participant experiences with friendships in general ranged from ‘having many friends, I was normal’ to ‘I was a loner, I preferred to be alone’. Some of them talked about being teased or bullied, and some mentioned that even with friends, sometimes it was just easier being on their own.

Anna, Bethany, Hayley, Kim and Rachel all shared that they had friends, and did pretty well with their friends. Anna shared that growing up, her social life was fine and she had a number of friends that she is still friends with today. But she also admitted that

the social life “it was hard. It was hard but I survived.” When asked about what was hard, she shared that “many picked on me, it was awkward, I didn’t like that.” Other than those experiences, “I’m still normal like other people.”

Bethany and Kim both said that they had many friends. Kim often preferred small groups and one-on-one interactions, and admitted that it was not always easy but she managed. Bethany and Hayley admitted that classmates often did not realize they were hearing-of-hearing and both of them said they did not always bother to enlighten them unless it became obvious. Rachel shared that her hearing loss was not an issue among her friends.

Chase, Maryann, and Sophie all talked about their efforts to fit in, which were challenging and as they grew older, they shared that they preferred being alone. Chase shared that in elementary school, friendships were different and based more on play and action than on communication. As he grew older, the inability to communicate effectively became uncomfortable,

I remember a few times, I'd go over to a friend's house, one on one, not group but it would become awkward because I did not understand them ... I couldn't understand them, I would ask them to repeat all the time, and it became weird, just very awkward.

By middle school, Chase started experiencing being teased and bullied once his peers started realizing that he was unable to understand things and that he was different from them. It was about this time that Chase began to experience depression.

Fourth, fifth, sixth grade communication starts to become important, not just doing things. I started getting overwhelmed, confused. By the time I hit sixth grade, I was depressed. I'd fake being sick to get out of school. It was not fun. I wanted to avoid people. I felt like these boys were my good friends but I was being bullied and teased by them. I wasn't sure what was going on. When I hit middle school, I really did not understand what was happening.

Chase's depression continued through high school, and he noted that the only times he was not depressed was "during the summer I was happier. People can't judge me if I'm by myself."

Maryann had two to three close friends that she knew all the way through school. Generally, however, she shares that she "didn't socialize with a lot of people, it was outside my comfort zone. With my hearing loss, I was not comfortable meeting a lot of people. If I could, I preferred being by myself." Maryann, like Chase, Anna, and Jennifer, also experienced being teased by her classmates, sharing that "they verbally abused me a lot. They didn't like that I was a loner, I stood out."

Sophie shared that "growing up, I didn't have a lot of friends, I really didn't have a best friend either." By the time she reached high school, she lost confidence, "You know how everyone had their groups, popular, jocks, sports, girly girls, nerds, whatever, band? I didn't really fit with any of them." In short, she said, "I hated high school." Sophie often "just couldn't wait to go home. Home. I loved home. I never really left home." In telling her story, you could sense that home was a safe place and a place where she could relax and not have to work so hard at fitting in, much like summer was a happy time for Chase.

## **Summary**

Growing up, in both the academic and social areas of their lives, these participants share their experiences of being the only one with a hearing loss, of the effort and work required to navigate and fit in to their academic and social experiences, and the challenges of developing friendships and trying to fit in with their peers. Their capacity to achieve academically, their determination to be part of the larger social sphere despite

feelings of marginalization, and their resilience in face of being the only one with a hearing loss in an auditory privileged world is a testament to their strength. Yet this also laid a foundation of how their experience would continue to play out in a predominantly hearing world, one in which they would constantly be on the margins and trying to assimilate into the hearing world. Then the opportunity to experience a different world came along.

### **Gallaudet as a Catalyst: A Gateway into a New Culture and a Language**

The theme in this section is the experience of discovering Gallaudet University and deciding to enroll at the University as a catalyst. A catalyst is defined as “a person or thing that precipitates an event or change” ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). The dimensions of the category focuses on the reasons the participants give for their decision to attend a predominantly deaf and hard-of-hearing university. These reasons include the opportunity to learn ASL, to meet others like themselves, to feel a sense of belonging, and to explore their deaf identity. By exploring the options that Gallaudet could offer them, these participants became aware of the opportunity to learn ASL, a language that would potentially give them access to a place they could comfortably fit in and belong more fully. Many of the participants noted that they were also at a point in their identity where they were ready to explore a different understanding of their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. Each participant, in various ways, expressed a desire to learn ASL, to explore deaf culture, to meet others like themselves, and to be “comfortable” in a community of others with shared experiences.

## **Learning ASL**

Prior to learning about Gallaudet University, most of the participants did not know ASL nor had many of them ever met with or interacted with other deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals nor been exposed to Deaf culture. With regard to ASL, Sophie had the most experience through her ASL class in high school, which she took for four years as part of the foreign language requirement. For Sophie, this experience was an affirming and positive experience that clearly had a positive impact on her. Chase took an ASL class in his senior year of high school when he moved with his father to a different state and learned that an ASL class was offered in his new high school. Jennifer enrolled in ASL class at her community college just before transferring to Gallaudet. The remaining participants had almost no experience with ASL or sign language, short of knowing how to fingerspell the ABC's. For all of the participants, the opportunity to learn and use ASL was one of the reasons for enrolling in the University. For many of these participants, learning ASL was seen as a potential gateway into the deaf community.

For Chase, the opportunity to learn sign language was the key motivation for his decision to enroll. Chase was one of the participants who visited the campus. It was during this visit that he realized that if he came to Gallaudet, he would learn sign language, “and I will understanding everything and that is what made me determined to come to Gallaudet.” For Chase, Gallaudet was the ONLY option. He did not even consider applying for other schools, and in a poignant, impassioned speech:

I set my mind to Gallaudet. Starting senior year of high school, I realized hearing education did not work for me. It was not good enough. I realized in high school, I did not interact a lot. I did not get the full experience of communicating, having fun. I realized if I went to a hearing college, using an FM system, guaranteed I would continue with the same experience as high school. I realized I wanted to go to parties. I wanted to have the college experience, the fun like you see on TV,

in the movies. I realized I do not want my experience to continue to happen to me. I want to be some place where I can access fully. I set my mind to Gallaudet. I wanted Gallaudet. I did not want any other school at all, period. I applied to ONE. I didn't even think about other schools, at all. None. I was tired of tolerating and putting up with my experience. I needed, wanted something new.

For Chase, Gallaudet and learning ASL was clearly a potential gateway to a different life experience, one that he hoped would be more positive and enjoyable than his current existence in the predominantly hearing school environment. He clearly perceived learning ASL as a key means to an accessible communication environment in a community of peers like himself.

Hayley, Jennifer, and Kim also viewed learning sign language as a possible means for communication access and belonging. When asked why she chose Gallaudet over the other schools, Hayley's and Kim's responses both touched on the hope that by learning ASL, communication would become easier. Hayley shared, that for her, "not having to say 'what?' all the time. In the hearing world, it's harder to understand people. I thought maybe when I learned sign language, it would be easier to understand."

Rachel and Bethany, unlike the others, were more curious about learning ASL so they could have a different means of communicating as their hearing loss progressed. Bethany shared that "you never know! I could become fully deaf. I need to learn ASL! It was an opportunity." Rachel expressed similar sentiments, sharing that she decided to attend Gallaudet after finally coming to terms with her progressing hearing loss and realizing that "maybe it would be a good idea to learn ASL".

### **Feeling comfortable, as if I fit in.**

As they discovered Gallaudet, the participant's interest was piqued and they explored the opportunities that Gallaudet offered to them, with many of them looking up

Gallaudet online and most of them choosing to visit the school. At least six of them visited the campus. Those that visited shared that their experience was overwhelming, especially seeing so many people using sign language, but despite this sense of being overwhelmed, they felt comfortable, as if they ‘fit’ in. Kim and Maryann visited and shared that during their respective visits, they felt very “comfortable”. Kim elaborated, “Most of the other colleges, I was nervous. I was not really as excited to go there. When I visited Gallaudet, I felt relaxed and comfortable. I just felt like I ‘fit’ here.” Maryann echoed a similar sentiment of feeling comfortable, also in comparison to other schools, “The thing about the other colleges, I did not feel comfortable. I was uncomfortable with those schools.” Other reasons cited for feeling comfortable included liking the small size of the campus, the opportunity to participate in JumpStart: New Signers Program (JS:NSP) and meet others like themselves, and the opportunity, for some of them, to participate in college athletics. The JS:NSP is a sign language immersion program at Gallaudet University that is designed to teach students basic sign language skills before they enroll in the predominantly ASL environment of the university.

#### **A desire to meet others who are ‘like me’**

As for meeting other deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals, again Jennifer had the advantage here from her short experience of growing up in early elementary school with other oral deaf children and experiencing a sense of ease with teachers who were prepared and classmates who were like her. She also had a deaf younger brother. Anna, was able to meet other deaf and hard-of-hearing students in her middle school class, realizing “I’m not the only one”. Sophie and Maryann also had hard-of-hearing siblings. The remaining participants shared that they had never met another deaf or hard-of-

hearing person like themselves while growing up. Again, most of these participants shared that they became interested in Gallaudet because they were curious to meet others like themselves. Maryann was really happy to be accepted, and like Chase, was determined to attend Gallaudet because

most people at Gallaudet are like me, I mean, heard of hearing, mainstreamed, growing up alone. There are not a lot of people that can relate to how I grew up. I wanted to find other people I could relate to.

For Sam, it was also an opportunity to meet others like himself, “I’d never been around people like myself, it was a huge part of the interest for me. I really wanted to go to a school where everyone was the same.”

### **Curiosity about Deaf culture and Deaf identity**

Another factor that came to light when asked about their decision to enroll at the university was a sense of curiosity about Deaf culture and their place in it, particularly in exploring their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. When asked what prompted her to enroll, Anna shared that “it was something different for me. Deaf culture, yes, that’s something different. And yes, I feel like I am a part of that so why not see more about who I am as a hard-of-hearing or deaf person.” Bethany was “curious about Gallaudet. I wanted to experience Deaf culture. I never saw a deaf school when I was growing up.”

Rachel’s experience is a bit different than the others. Rachel first heard about Gallaudet when she received a letter from Gallaudet while she was in high school and she “found out about Gallaudet as a school for the Deaf and Hard-of-hearing, I was like ‘oh no, I’m not hard-of-hearing, I’m normal’” and quickly set aside the letter. This was at the period of her life where Rachel was struggling with her progressing hearing loss and in a strong stage of denial. She elected to attend another four-year college and after



struggling for various reasons at that school, she dropped out. During that time, she “found a doctor to try to figure out a diagnosis” for her progressing hearing loss. Once she realized that her hearing loss was going to continue, she was depressed for a while and then in the process of acceptance, she “remembered Gallaudet. I checked into it a little bit more and then I just went ahead and applied.” For her, she thought attending Gallaudet “Maybe I’ll meet some people with similar experiences growing up. Maybe it’ll answer some questions I cannot think of right now.” For Rachel, it was necessary for her to reach a stage of acceptance or recognition of her hearing loss before she could consider Gallaudet as an opportunity that may benefit her and this opportunity was an opportunity to find “answers to some questions I cannot think of right now”.

### **Summary.**

Discovering Gallaudet, exploring Gallaudet, and deciding to enroll all brought forth key aspects of the participants desire to understand themselves better, to find a sense of belonging, to explore their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing person, and ultimately, to change the current experiences of their life as a hard-of-hearing or deaf individual. All of these participants shared these needs. They also shared, here and there, their curiosity about living in D.C, the nations capital, their desire to be involved in college sports, and even the candid admission that “Well, Gallaudet was the only school that accepted me.” Yet, for each of these participants, their decision to attend the university would prove to be a catalyst that would change their life experience as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. The next section discusses the transitional experiences of these participants as they enter the predominantly signing deaf culture environment of Gallaudet University.

### **Transitions: Finding a Sense of Place and Self**

The dimensions of this property cover the transitional experience of the participants as they entered the deaf community of Gallaudet University. These experiences included meeting others like themselves, becoming involved in the deaf community, learning and participating in the deaf classroom environment, and experiencing dissonance and challenges during the transition process.

Nine out of ten of the participants entered the deaf community through the JumpStart: New Signers Program (JS:NSP). Students attending the program also learn about deaf culture, history, and traditions while becoming familiar with the university environment. JS:NSP offered the participants an opportunity to meet others like themselves and to learn sign language while becoming familiar with the university culture and deaf community before classes started. For some students, learning about this program was the hook that convinced them to attend Gallaudet.

Involvement for these participants is a broad term, ranging from becoming involved in developing new friendships to becoming involved in the formal social structures of the university such as athletics, theater, multicultural organizations, student leadership organizations or committees, and other similar offerings. Many of the participants shared that involvement in various capacities was critical for learning ASL and thereby, for integrating into the community. As they became more involved in the community, they noted that their ASL skills and confidence using ASL improved and their friendships expanded and broadened to include a wider variety of deaf and hard-of-hearing friends outside of the friends they knew from JS:NSP.

Within the classroom environment, the participants noted that it took them on average about a year to adjust to learning in an ASL classroom environment, and even with this adjustment process, they shared that the learning experience in the predominantly visual ASL learning environment was much easier than in the predominantly auditory hearing learning environment. While most of the participants shared that they were generally able to follow the teacher in the ASL classroom, it took them a while to become comfortable and confident with their own understanding and use of ASL before they were able to confidently follow class discussions and participate. Some of them used available supports such as voice interpreters and closed captioning services to help them follow along in the classroom. As they developed confidence and began to understand more in the classroom, the participants eventually recognized that they did not need the supports any longer and they were able to proceed on their own. For some, this awareness occurred within the first six weeks of the semester and for others, the need for additional support continued throughout the first year. By the time the participants were entering their second year, they were functioning independently in the classroom.

While for the most part, the transitional experiences were largely positive, there were times when the participants experienced dissonance and challenges during the transition process. Most often, this took the form of learning about and adjusting to cultural norms within the deaf community, such as realizing that speaking without signing is not acceptable in a visual communication environment. Other times it was realizing that within the deaf community, there are different levels of identity status, from a core group of strong culturally Deaf, native ASL users raised in the culture and social

structure of the deaf community to a more marginalized culturally hearing, oral group raised in the hearing community. For these participants, their transition included recognizing this hierarchical structure of the Deaf community and beginning the process of navigating the identity continuum from the margins towards the center and finding their sense of place within this framework of deaf identity.

### **Meeting Others “Like Me”**

One of the key factors that drove the participants decisions to attend Gallaudet was the opportunity to meet others with similar experiences of being deaf or hard-of-hearing. Essentially, the participants were seeking to have a shared experience with others like themselves and to no longer be alone in their experience as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. Nine of the participants first came to Gallaudet University to attend JS: NSP and each of these participants, without fail, shared that experience of finally meeting others like themselves and developing friendships based on a shared commonality was a life-changing experience. For these participants, being understood and having these shared experiences removed the sense of ‘being different’ and provided them with an experience of normalcy, of fitting in, and of realizing that they are no longer alone or isolated in their experience.

Naturally, like any new college student, the participants were nervous when they first arrived to JS: NSP. Sam and Kim both shared their experiences meeting the student leaders for JS:NSP, which Sam described as “awkward as they were all using sign language” yet Kim shared, despite the use of sign language, “they were patient and I felt welcomed.” As the day progressed, they met other students who were also participating

in the JS:NSP and like them, these students talked, wore hearing aids and were not using sign language.

As the participants eased into the program, they started making friends. Sophie, the same participant who believed Gallaudet was for those who strongly identified as Deaf, was the most emotional about sharing her experiences during JS:NSP and eloquently sums up the experience that resonated across the participants stories:

That time, from the beginning of July until the end of August, that was the BEST time in my life (huge smile). I found my friends. I learned in one month that I can fit myself into the Deaf culture too. I'm actually more comfortable in the Deaf culture much more than the hearing culture because this Deaf culture, these people in the new signers program, they understand me, they are like me, we grew up having the same experience. I felt like wow, they are just like me. Friends here -- that bond, that feeling of being the same. My best friends here are REAL, not fake.

Many of the participant stories resonated with Sophie's experience. Those who attended JS: NSP shared, like Sophie, that this experience was one of the best of their lives primarily because they met others similar to them and they developed quality friendships that felt more authentic and real, without the barriers of being hard-of-hearing or deaf impeding communication and connection as it did with their hearing friends growing up.

JS: NSP also provided a good opportunity for the participants to become familiar and comfortable with the environment of a deaf university. By the time school started, and the rest of the study body convened for the start of classes, these participants had developed a foundation of support that would prepare them for the start of their college career. Kim summed up this experience of JS:NSP beautifully: "I loved it. I felt like it was a way of easing into college life before classes started and everything and when all the other students arrived, I had met some people and made friends already. I loved the

experience. It was nice.” By the time Orientation started, Kim stated that she was still nervous but

I had already been there for like six weeks so far so I was comfortable with the place, ready for class to start. I met new people, and new friends and everything that was cool. I had some 'insight' already.

However, not all of the participants were able to be fully involved in JS:NSP.

Anna arrived very late in the program, and this was difficult as by the time she arrived “it was hard because the other students arrived here earlier so it was easier for them to make friends, make connections.” She was nervous, and shared that she “pretty much came in cold, everyone knew people, they all had their groups, they all did things together. I kind of had to ease in. It was awkward.” However, she did note that the counselors, teachers, and other students were helpful and did try to make her experience easier. The challenge was learning sign language and adjusting to the new environment in the shorter time frame “With the signing part, it was hard. I think at first, I thought to myself, ‘not bad, I really think I can enjoy this’.” When classes started, Anna admitted she was lost and thought about leaving. However, she decided to stay and stick it out, realizing she could get support in the classroom. In light of these challenging experiences, Anna was still able to share that, like the others, “I’m not the only person that is going through what I went through. It was fun, we could all relate. That was cool.”

Unlike the others, however, Bethany was the only participant who did not attend JS:NSP, stating that she was accepted to the university after the program had already started. Her first exposure to Gallaudet was the first day she arrived for New Student Orientation. She had never even visited the University and flew in from out of state with no idea what to expect. She shared “I came into Gallaudet and whew! Different culture, everyone was signing. I did not understand ANYTHING! It went right over my head.”

She was also, surprisingly, assigned to ASL 102 class rather than ASL 101, a fact that puzzled her as she had no exposure or understanding of ASL and felt she really needed ASL 101. She stuck through the class, and credits her ability to pick up sign language quickly to friends and her involvement with an organization called The Sisterhood, a group of African American women, and a program called “Keeping the Promise”, a mentoring program for African American students. Her roommate, fortunately, was in the same situation as Bethany, and they connected and quickly started finding and making friends with others similar to them. While Bethany did not have the formal support mechanisms that were part of JS:NSP, she did set about creating an informal support system through her roommate and then expanding this support through the formal support systems of the multicultural student organizations that she joined. Again, the key property centers around the connection with others with similar experiences, even if the student was not involved in JS:NSP.

### **Becoming Involved in the Deaf community and Learning ASL**

Clearly, establishing a strong system of support through JS:NSP or through friendships or a social organization, as in the case with Anna and Bethany, was an important process for integrating socially into the institution. Many of the participants shared that the first year was the most challenging in terms of transition and adjustment to a predominantly signing Deaf culture environment and having a strong support system of peers in place appeared to make this adjustment easier. As time progressed and they developed competence with using and understanding sign language, both among their friends and in the classroom, the participants began to become more involved with the larger university community. This involvement was seen as a means for developing their

competence in ASL and gaining access and acceptance into the deaf community. As in high school, a number of the participants became involved in athletics and/or various organizations on campus such as theater, multicultural student programs, the honors program, the school newspaper, and different leadership groups like student government and fraternities or sororities.

Bethany described herself as very outgoing and motivated, recognizing that in order to learn sign language, especially considering she was so new to the culture, the best way to learn was “to be involved. I was involved in a lot of organizations, especially the multicultural groups.” Jennifer, like Bethany, noted that she was also “involved with organizations on campus, sorority and student government, and that helped a lot with picking up ASL”. She continued, “if you do not get involved and you just contain yourself within your small group of friends, it will be hard to develop your ASL skills.” Jennifer also admitted that when she first arrived, she was used to being an introvert and advised others to “give yourself time to transition to the change, some people need more time to transition, others a little, it depends on your experience but I encourage you to explore and get involved.” It is not surprising to note that the participant’s experiences with athletics in high school quickly translated to involvement with athletics at Gallaudet. Anna joined the swim and softball teams. Kim joined cheerleading, Sophie joined the basketball team, and Sam joined both the football and baseball teams. Sam shared that football “helped me the most because obviously you had to know ASL to communicate so that was the biggest influence on learning sign, you had to know sign to play and participate so that was motivating.” Sophie acknowledged that her involvement in sports also was an opportunity to pick up and learn sign language.



Essentially, the idea of involvement is one that can be as minimal as developing friendships with others to being involved in the opportunities that arise out of the comfort zone of JS: NSP to participating in the larger organizations of the university environment such as athletics, student government, theater, student newspaper, and so forth.

### **Learning and Participating in a Visual Deaf Learning Environment**

Involvement was not just important in the social avenues of the university, but also in the academic learning environment of the classrooms. Initially, involvement was challenging as the participants were still learning ASL and adjusting to the visual learning environment. Many of the participants used voice interpreters and captioning in the classroom during their first year as a means of understanding what was being said in the classroom. As they became more comfortable and confident using and understanding ASL, they were able to stop relying on the support of interpreters and captions and started becoming more involved in the classroom environment. For many, the visual learning environment of the ASL classroom was much easier than the auditory environment of the hearing classroom they grew up in and as Maryann shared,

It's easier to learn here. I do not have to use my coping skills as much. I did not realize how much and how often I used my coping skills before I came to Gallaudet. It is like a weight has been taken off.

Though this sentiment was echoed by many of the participants, they did mention that some of the strategies they had developed in high school helped them navigate their learning experience during their first year at Gallaudet. Bethany said she did well for the most part and considering her lack of knowledge of sign language, she was able to “understand most of the time. I tried to ‘fill-in-the-blank’ the parts I did not understand. I’d figure it out for myself, it’s what I’d been doing for years.” Sam shared during the

first year, as he was adjusting, that he relied on reading the textbooks and using the classroom technology as a means of keeping up, much like he had done in high school.

Hayley, who was wrapping up her first year at Gallaudet, said that she liked learning at Gallaudet and while she was still using an interpreter in some of her classes, she shared that “it’s nice here. It’s not hard to understand.” She was optimistic “next year will be easier. When I know the language better, it will become easier.” She acknowledged that she is not

able to be fully involved in discussions while using the interpreter because of the lag time (interpreters tend to be a few seconds behind as they translate). I understand everything but I just have a hard time participating. Next year it will be easier.

Chase verified that after his first year, once he had developed his ASL skills, he became more involved with learning and participating in the classroom, something he had not been able to do as readily in the hearing mainstreamed classroom environment. Overall, despite the adjustment period, many of the participants noted that learning was easier, especially as their ASL skills developed and it became easier to communicate and be involved in the classroom.

### **Experiencing Dissonance and Challenges during Transition**

Despite their ability to bond with others like themselves in various ways and their encouragement to get involved in the community, both academically and socially, the participants experienced challenges from students who were already part of the culture and fluent in the language. Bethany felt this experience more readily, noting that she “did not feel accepted here at first” because she did not know sign language. She experienced a situation where “one deaf person came up and said, “You are required to sign! You must sign! Wow, it was really different.” Hayley admitted that she had no idea that there

was a deaf culture, and that it took some time to adjust to the deaf culture norms. Like Bethany, Hayley experienced the expectation that

you MUST sign, especially in the cafeteria. I was talking to my hard-of-hearing friends because we did not know sign language and we were more comfortable talking and people would come up to us and tell us to sign. It is kind of scary. I feel sometimes it is mean.

Rachel, who graduated soon after the interviews, shared that

I know some people were frustrated with me because I did not understand sign language. I kind of understood that but, come on, it is not easy for me either. First year was definitely the hardest for me in that way.

Sam also noted that it wasn't always easy but shrugged it off saying "some people are not patient with you at the start, it is their loss. Other people are very supportive and there are others here with the same experience as you."

Not only were the participants learning about cultural norms, such as the expectation that in the visual learning environment of the deaf university all members of the community must sign, but they also were learning about the hierarchy of different identity frameworks within the deaf community itself. These participants, having grown up in isolation within the hearing community and not knowing ASL, entered the community on the margins of the deaf continuum. As they developed their sign language skills and became involved and began exploring their deaf and hard-of-hearing identities, these participants slowly began the process of moving from outside of the margins of the community towards becoming members of the community. However this process was not always easy and the hierarchy would assert itself in various ways, as demonstrated above by the deaf students chastising the participants for not using sign language and in other ways in which the mainstreamed versus deaf divide would make itself apparent. Sophie noted that as she became involved in athletics, she had to continuously wrestle

with the identity dynamics of the deaf community as represented through the microcosm of her team. For her, the divide between students who are from mainstreamed backgrounds and those coming from strong culturally deaf family and school backgrounds was a constant issue, with mainstreamed students communicating using more oral means of communicating and the deaf students using fluent ASL and not being patient with the more oral students. Several other participants also described similar experiences of feeling a part of the larger community while still feeling marginalized within the strong culturally Deaf native ASL using faction of the community. These experiences shaped the next phase of their experience as they reflected on their identity development process as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual.

### **Summary**

Overall, the participants share that their experience of transitioning into the new environment of Gallaudet University, while not easy, was generally positive. The JS:NSP provided a safe transitional experience for this particular group of students in a variety of ways. First, the students become connected with a critical mass of others like themselves. This is a key defining moment in the overall transitional experience. From this connection, the participants developed a base of support and friendship while also adjusting to the deaf environment and the university culture. By the time classes began, the participants were grounded and prepared for the next phase of their experience, adjusting to the deaf ASL learning environment and immersing themselves fully into the larger social environment. The participants note the importance of involvement as being critical both for learning ASL and for integrating themselves into the academic and social aspects of the university culture. This involvement and immersion into the community,

however, is not always easy as the participants experience dissonance from cultural conflicts and dealing with the identity politics and their place in the hierarchy of the deaf community.

### **Solidifying a Positive Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing Identity**

The properties of this dimension include embracing a deaf or hard-of-hearing identity and navigating the family dynamics with this new identity. Despite the challenges from adjusting to their new community, the participants all shared that they were happy with their decision. They recognize that entering the deaf community, embodied by the university, and meeting others like themselves was a positive catalyst that started them on the path towards identity acceptance. Some, particularly in the first year, were reluctant to return to the hearing world, including their family, due to the perceived effort that communication and involvement in the hearing world required. Not only were they reluctant to deal with the effort of communicating again in the hearing world, but they were also working to reconcile their emerging social identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual with their previous identity that their hearing family and friends were accustomed to.

Others, particularly those who have been in the deaf community a bit longer, had navigated the transition both internally and within the family. As they had developed a positive acceptance of their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual, they had learned to navigate the family dynamic and become comfortable with their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing person in the larger hearing world.

When asked about their identity, the responses run the gamut of being clearly hard-of-hearing to being either/or or both to being deaf. Regardless of their identity

label, it is clear that being at Gallaudet in the deaf community of the university environment has started them on the process of exploring their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in an environment that supports having an affirmative deaf or hard-of-hearing identity. This critical milestone shifts their frame of reference from viewing their hearing loss as undesirable within the culturally hearing and medical identity framework towards shifting towards viewing their hearing loss positively from a self-affirming social identity framework. From this, they have developed a sense of confidence that makes it possible for them to interact as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual in both the deaf and the hearing worlds.

### **Embracing the Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing Identity**

At this point in the interviews, I asked each of them how they chose to identify themselves? Naturally, the interviews brought forth the salience of hard-of-hearing or deaf identities, and therefore most of the responses were in that framework. Of interest, two of the participants from different race and ethnic backgrounds gave more complex responses that brought forth the intersectionality of their identities, underscoring the importance that identity frameworks are not static, but rather fluid and overlapping. For these two participants, both of whom were seniors, their responses focused on the multiplicity of their identities and it became apparent that even within the deaf community, the other aspects of their identity are still very much salient and cannot be separated from their deaf or hard-of-hearing identity. One of the two shared that various aspects of her identity become salient depending on the situation and context in which she finds herself at the time, with occasionally the deaf or hard-of-hearing identity being

most dominant or her racial identity or her religious identity or her birth order identity becoming more dominant. Rachel noted that

I'm used to 'straddling the line' ... between worlds. I'm not completely in any one. I'm all over the place. I'm fine with that. I think it makes me a stronger person, more understanding, open-minded. I'm not limited at all.

The other participant, Bethany, focused on her identity as a strong and independent individual, noting her capacity to succeed despite her socio-economic and educational challenges both from a racial identity framework and from a deaf identity framework.

The remaining participants expressed that they were hard-of-hearing or deaf or both depending on the context. This was a marked change from describing their earlier experiences in the mainstream hearing environment in which they attempted to hide their deafness, refused to tell others they were hard-of-hearing or deaf, and essentially tried to 'pass for hearing'. What was interesting to note about how they identify now, some like Chase, clearly stated they were deaf, others like Bethany and Sam, were proudly hard-of-hearing, and some had an interesting variation of this response, with their identity shifting from hard-of-hearing to deaf, depending on the context of the situation they found themselves in at the time. However, what is important is not so much the identity they chose, but the fact that they are now comfortable with confidently and positively claiming either a hard-of-hearing or deaf identity.

Chase's story is the most compelling. Chase, completing his third year, said that growing up, he always considered himself audiologically deaf. His self-identity was challenged when he came to Gallaudet and met other Deaf students. Upon telling them he was deaf, "they would be puzzled because I did not sign. This made me feel ambivalent and confused so I started labeling myself as hard-of-hearing." This ambivalence

continued for a while until he realized “I’m more deaf than they are! They can hear with hearing aids! What’s up with that?” This was when Chase realized the difference between audiolgically deaf and culturally Deaf. He reconciled his identity as a non-signing deaf person by telling others “I am ORAL deaf. I cannot hear.” Now, he considers himself deaf. “Do I consider myself big ‘D’ deaf? No. I’m in the deaf culture yes, but I am not FROM it. I’m part of it but not FROM it. I’m 2<sup>nd</sup> tier Deaf. (laughing).” Chase has fully embraced the deaf community, determined to take an ASL class each semester to improve his signs and has immersed himself into the community. He has stopped wearing his hearing aids, has become close friends with many other d/Deaf students at the university from a mix of culturally deaf and mainstreamed backgrounds, and is focusing on becoming fluent in ASL, clearly adopting a culturally deaf identity framework. He shares that his family is very supportive and he will, when he goes home, wear his hearing aids with his family to facilitate communication but notes that they recognize he is happy.

Hayley, ending her first year, shares that she is “between worlds. I don’t really fit in with the Deaf world, and I don’t really fit with the hearing world.” When asked where she wanted to fit, she said “Honestly, I do not know. I am still learning. It’s good to have both. My identity at Gallaudet, I say I’m hard-of-hearing but at home, I still say I am half-deaf.” Hayley’s rationale for the half-deaf identity label is interesting. She shares “at home, no one understands that term hard-of-hearing. Hard-of-hearing? What does that mean?” Hayley said she’s never identified herself as deaf either, “I’m not deaf, really deaf, because that means I hear nothing. So at home, I say I’m half-deaf because I am completely deaf in one ear.” Clearly, Hayley is still exploring her identity framework



and is in the process of finding her place as a deaf, half-deaf, or hard-of-hearing individual. What is significant is that she acknowledges that she is undergoing this process of learning and deciding, noting that it's good to be able to try on the different identities to see which one best suits her.

Sophie, who prior to enrolling at Gallaudet, stated that she was 'between worlds' now, exclaims

I have the BEST of both worlds. It's weird. In the hearing world, I think of myself as Deaf. In the Deaf world, I think of myself as Hard-of-hearing. I can hear in the Deaf world better than the Hearing world.

Sophie echoes Hayley's place while demonstrating that she has moved further along in her process of exploration and ownership after two years at Gallaudet. Sam's sentiments are identical to Sophie's, he identifies as hard-of-hearing in both worlds, "Here at Gallaudet, I am hard-of-hearing. In the hearing world, I am hard-of-hearing. I have the same identity in both worlds. I think it is an advantage for me, it's a positive for me." Sam is wrapping up his third year at Gallaudet and is clearly comfortable with his identity and his capacity to navigate between cultures.

For all of them, the sense of isolation and loneliness, of shame and difference, of effort and lack of confidence has transitioned into discovering a sense of belonging and community, of pride and acceptance, of ease and confidence.

### **Navigating Family Dynamics and Identity**

While the participants were in the process of transitioning into the deaf community of the university, they were also undergoing this transition away from family. Consequently, when it came time to return home for breaks, the participants experienced a sense of dissonance as they attempted to reconcile their new emerging identity with the

one that they were leaving behind as represented by home and family. Of course, the usual processes of maturity, transitioning to adulthood, and becoming more independent are to be expected of any college-going son or daughter, yet for these participants they were also addressing a growing self-confidence and assertiveness in their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual, an experience that was new for them within the dynamics of family and home. Naturally, we expect family members to be supportive of seeing their son or daughter or sibling becoming more confident, assertive and mature yet this transition still requires some paradigm shifts regardless of the positive nature of the developmental experiences.

Kim, a first year student, discussed going home for the summer, noting that she was “excited to go home but at the same time, I’m not excited to have to struggle to communicate again.” For her, she is not looking forward to “having to wear hearing aids all the time, to struggle with ‘what did you say?’ to have to ask (family members and friends) to repeat themselves again and again and again.” She feels in the deaf community of Gallaudet, it is so much easier to communicate, and unlike in high school, she is “not afraid to be myself, I can be silly, I’m not afraid to show myself”. She shared that her first time going home during winter break, she became so frustrated trying to follow the discussion of her hearing family members at the breakfast table that she rebelled at dinner by refusing to speak and only using sign language in an effort to give them a sense of what it felt like to be excluded from the conversation and not understand what was going on. She shared that her younger brother became furious with her, refusing to accept the point she was forcefully making with her family, but her father,

while taken aback, was also rather amused and this generated a discussion about her experiences.

Maryann, also a first year student, notes that she is more comfortable at Gallaudet. She feels that Gallaudet is “more my home than my own state right now. I fit in more here. Here, I am not a loner.” She recalled going home for the holidays during winter break, sharing that she thought she was homesick before she got home but when she got home, she realized she “didn’t feel as comfortable as I used to. It was hard. I had to teach myself to use my coping skills again.” She worries that her family does not realize how much happier she is at Gallaudet, “I want my family to see how I am on campus. I want them to see the different person I have become because of this school. I’m happier, I’m just happier.” She was dreading the summer break, uncertain how the family dynamics would play out over the extended three to four month break.

Sophie, a second year student, like others, also shared that she is “actually more comfortable in the deaf culture much more than the hearing culture.” She is also navigating the family dynamic, and has taken on a role of becoming a mentor to her hard-of-hearing younger brother. She shared that she does not believe her family really understands what her experience being hard-of-hearing have been like for her but that they have been fully supportive of her experiences since she has enrolled at the university. She shared that she is still undergoing a transitional process and becoming accustomed to a new understanding of who she is as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual and while she still has to remind family members how to communicate with her when she goes home, she appreciates that her family is also undergoing a transitional process with adjusting to her emerging assertiveness and self-confidence.

## Summary

Clearly, the experience of meeting others like themselves, of learning sign language, and of immersing themselves in the deaf community was affirming for these participants. The participants no longer felt alone, they felt they were in a community of like-minded peers who understood what it was like being deaf or hard-of-hearing in a predominantly hearing world, and they were in a place where they felt accepted by a critical mass of peers like themselves. They were also in a place where their hearing ability, while still salient, could be put aside as they focused on developing authentic and genuine friendships. As they adjusted, the participants began to feel more comfortable and at ease in their new environment. Many of the participants described the new environment as if it were a place like home, noting their comfort with peers and friends, the ease of learning in the classroom, and overall the ability to be themselves and be authentic. They were able to focus on socializing and learning without the constant vigilance or effort required for communicating that was needed in the hearing world. As this transition unfolded, the participants sense of self began to shift noticeably from one of denial or a desire to hide their identity as hard-of-hearing or deaf towards a sense of pride or confidence in themselves as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. The first year students demonstrated the dissonance of this transitional process as they wrestled with shifting cultural and communication norms both in the university and within the family unit while the upper-level students demonstrated a sense of ease that comes from navigating these hurdles and being comfortable with their sense of place.

Some of the participants described the experience of being between worlds. While not being fully part of the hearing world due to communication barriers, and not

being fully embraced in the Deaf world due to cultural and language differences, these participants shared the sense that the Deaf world was more permeable, less marginalizing for them than the hearing world. The fact that they are hard-of-hearing or deaf will always make access to the hearing world a challenge, where they will constantly be on the margins and their deafness will be salient in their daily interactions. Unlike the hearing world, the participants are aware that their being hard-of-hearing or deaf, their ability to continue to improve language skills and to be involved in the deaf community gives them increased access into the Deaf world, though with an insight that they would never be at the core of the Deaf world. As Chase so clearly shared, they can be “in the Deaf world but not FROM it.” For these participants, in the continuum of identities in the Deaf world, the fact that there was a critical mass of others like themselves was a key shift in their identity development process and for many, simply being in this community, not at the core but not outside the margins, is all that is needed. By the time these participants were graduating, their identity framework was established and they exuded a clearly positive social identity framework around their deaf or hard-of-hearing identity.

### **Conclusion**

In their early years, these participants described an experience of knowing they were different and the discomfort of dealing with the diagnosis of a hearing loss, their families reactions to the diagnosis, the discomfort of being fitted with hearing aids, and decisions about language and educational choices. Growing up in a predominantly hearing mainstreamed learning and social environment, the participants demonstrate a lot of resilience as they continuously put forth effort into adapting to and fitting in the learning and social environment in a mainstream public school system. For most of the

participants, they were often the only deaf or hard-of-hearing student in their school. Despite communication challenges and the amount of effort expended for learning and being involved, they were able to perform well in the formal academic sphere of the educational environment. While their academic accomplishments are notable, however, many of them shared a common experience of feeling isolated, alone, and different when it came to navigating the social spheres of the mainstream predominantly hearing environment. Many of the participants were involved in the more formal social avenues such as athletics, theater, leadership councils, honors councils, band, and other social curricular activities offered by the schools, however they continuously had to focus attention and effort on addressing and attending to communication challenges even in their social lives. Outside of the formal academic and social structures of the school system, participants reported having a many to a few friends and a number of them reported that their social lives were often lonely and isolating. Some reported that it was easier and less stressful to be alone than to deal with the struggles and effort of navigating the informal social scene.

For most of these participants, learning about Gallaudet University, a four-year private institution of higher learning specifically for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, elicited a curiosity and a desire to explore a part of their identity as a deaf and hard-of-hearing individual. Many of them were eager to find a place where they would meet peers like themselves and learn American Sign Language. Underlying this desire is a sense that for these participants learning ASL and meeting peers with similar experiences may give them access to a missing part of their lives: the social connection that they desired and access to an environment that would require less effort to address

communication challenges. Some of the participants dove enthusiastically into the transitional experience and others struggled with the adjustment, yet all of them shared that they were glad they stuck it out during the most difficult first year of the transition. For all of them who attended, meeting others like themselves through the JS:NSP brought a feeling of normalcy to their life experience and created a foundational support system that grounded them throughout their transition into a new culture and language experience. Many, if not all, described their involvement in JS:NSP as the best time of their life, where they finally made friends like themselves and developed deep bonds of friendship. As they transitioned together into the new environment, learning became easier and more exciting, friendships were developed and deepened, and their identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual shifted into a more positive social identity framework. Clearly, in all of these stories, there is a pervasive sense of ease and relaxation in their lives as they focus on the experience of living and not on the constant challenge of attending to communication issues. Despite facing challenges transitioning, the participants reported being happier and demonstrated a developing sense of pride in their emerging self-identity.

The participants also acknowledged navigating the processes of identity development between the world they used to know and their current world, between the family they grew up with and their emerging place in the family as their identity developed, and their own place in two different worlds, the deaf and the hearing world. During this transition and process of identity development, they acknowledged that even though they were not 'central' to the Deaf community, they felt the community provided a place (or 'home') where they could be their authentic self. It was clear as they developed

skills in ASL that they became less marginalized in the community and more embraced as they moved closer to the center. They were aware that they may never be 'central' yet they were comfortable with their sense of place among peers like themselves with similar experiences in the community. In the deaf world, the margins are permeable and easier to navigate. In the hearing world, the margins are less permeable and require more effort to navigate.

Overall, the key theory found in these stories is the participants development of positive and affirming identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. From their early years, in which they were very much a minority in a predominantly hearing-privileged environment, these participants experienced an uncomfortable sense of difference and isolation. In an effort to fit in and be a part of the majority hearing culture, the participants essentially attempted to hide their deaf or hard-of-hearing, viewing this from a negative disability framework as an undesirable way of being. A key catalyst that shifted their perception of their identity towards a more positive and affirming experience was meeting others like themselves, learning ASL, and accessing a community where they discovered a sense of belonging. This experience for these participants occurred through their exposure to Gallaudet University, a university for the deaf and hard of hearing. Once they accessed this community, the participants began to experience their identity in positive ways and began the shift towards a social identity framework as a deaf or hard-of hearing person. This framework changed their self-understanding from an undesirable identity framework towards a proud and confident identity framework. Once the participants began to own their deaf and hard of hearing identity, they became more comfortable asserting this identity and advocating for their needs and rights as a



deaf and hard-of-hearing individual. Most telling of this experience is not necessarily the identity they chose to own, be it either deaf or hard-of-hearing, but that the one they felt a sense of comfort, ownership and pride in their chosen deaf or hard-of-hearing identity.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings**

This chapter presents a brief overview of the research and the grounded theory findings. The findings will be discussed with connections to related literature. The discussion is followed by implications for practice. Future recommendations for research are examined along with the limitations and strengths of this research.

### **Overview of Research**

Using a qualitative grounded theory methodological approach, this research sought to understand how the experience of ten oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their experiences integrating both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment influenced their identity development. The key finding of this study is that the experience of integrating, both socially and academically, into a predominantly signing deaf university environment initiates a process of developing a positive identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual.

Overall, during this process, the participants discovered a sense of pride and confidence as deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. Their experiences of feeling isolated as the only deaf or hard-of-hearing individual while growing up in the hearing world shifted towards feeling a sense of belonging and comfort in a community of deaf and hard-of-hearing peers. The experience outlined in the final theory highlighted their process as they shifted from operating within a medical pathological identity framework of themselves as being disabled and trying to 'be hearing' towards viewing themselves from a social identity framework in which they embraced their deaf or hard-of-hearing identity and became comfortable asserting for and expressing their needs. For these participants, the social and academic integration into the predominantly signing

university, in which their identity as a deaf and hard-of-hearing individual was embraced, served as a catalyst in developing a positive and affirmative identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. These findings demonstrate the value of a predominantly deaf-serving institution for creating a sense of pride and empowerment in these individual student's experiences and the importance of the existence of institutions that serve the needs of these students.

The various stories from this study shared a common series of developmental themes. *Setting the stage for a sense of difference* begins with the participants generally experiencing a sense of difference beginning with diagnosis and the influence of this diagnosis on decisions made by the family in regard to addressing the diagnosis. This sense of difference continued as they were growing up in the hearing mainstream learning and social environment. Regardless of their success in the learning environment, the support of family and school practitioners, and their resilience in navigating the academic and social environments of the K-12 environment, the participant's stories resonated with a sense of the continuous effort required from them on a daily basis to understand what was happening in their environment.

*On the margins: passing for hearing* emphasizes the amount of energy, and effort, that was expended by these participants as they sought to assimilate and fit into a predominantly hearing and auditory privileged learning and social environment. For many of these participants, navigating the communication barriers was a central experience in their daily lives. In the classroom, the effort to navigate these barriers took up a lot of their primary focus, with actual learning being secondary to this focus of energy. The effort to assimilate was also evident in their social experiences, both formal

and informal. While many of the participants were involved in various social structures such as formal school activities and informal friendships, some of the participants shared that they preferred being alone as this did not require them to expend energy on trying to understand or fit into their environment or to 'pass for hearing'. It is as if the participants private and public selves are at odds with each other, the private self being the one that is deaf or hard-of-hearing and the public self being the one that is trying to 'pass for hearing' and assimilate or fit into the dominant hearing environment.

Upon learning about Gallaudet University, a predominantly signing university for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, these participants decided to enroll, despite their lack of knowledge of ASL or experience in the Deaf community. This experience opened the door for experiencing *Gallaudet University as a catalyst: a gateway to a new community and meeting others like themselves*. The primary reasons for their decision to attend Gallaudet University centered upon a desire to meet others like themselves, to learn ASL, and to access a community where they could fit in or belong. Clearly, the dominant theme conveyed in this decision centered around a desire to explore a different understanding of their experience as deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals. For some of the participants, this decision was driven by a desire for a social experience among peers like themselves and for others it was a curiosity about exploring their deaf or hard-of-hearing identities. The literature on students choices for attending minority serving institution supports this finding, as often students attending historically black colleges and universities cite that their reasons for attending these institutions is due to a desire to be around others like themselves and also to explore facets of their racial identity development (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan & Clarke, 2009).

In the next phase of *transitions: finding a sense of place and self*, their stories of integrating into the Deaf university environment focused initially on their social integration, as they connected with peers from similar backgrounds and with similar experiences, and shared a sense of feeling comfortable in their newfound community of peers. What emerges from this discovery is the capacity to merge their private and public selves, in other words the capacity to be and feel authentic as a deaf or hard of hearing individual in a community of peers like themselves rather than trying to ‘pass for hearing’ in the pre-dominantly hearing world. The participants talk about feeling comfortable, feeling a ‘fit’ with the community, of finding ‘home’, of feeling relaxed, of feeling like they could truly be themselves, and of being accepted. This initial social integration created a sense of grounding for these participants, a foundation of support, as they began to navigate the academic learning environment of the university. Again, in the literature on African American students and their experiences attending both predominantly white institutions as well as historically black colleges and universities, these students note the importance of connecting to a critical mass of peers like themselves as being a key aspect of their academic and social integration experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The participants acknowledged that adjusting to the visual ASL-dominant learning environment of the deaf university was challenging, particularly in the first year as they slowly acquired fluency in ASL and adjusted to the cultural norms of a the Deaf environment. Clearly, from the stories, this experience transitioning to the visual learning environment of an ASL-dominant community was made easier by having a peer support system as well as by the implicit recognition by the participants that, as they became more fluent in ASL, the learning experience would become easier and more inclusive.

Even as they were in the process of learning ASL however, many of the participants stated that the learning environment was already easier as it was more suited to their needs, i.e. small classrooms, visual learning environments, and having teachers who were familiar with and comfortable with teaching deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

Participants who had been at the university for over a year shared that this indeed was true, that as their sign language skills developed, learning and subsequently involvement in the classroom experience became easier. Unlike their experiences growing up in the predominantly hearing learning environment, where they were continuously addressing challenges, the participants found themselves becoming more involved in the actual process of learning and engagement, with the effort of navigating barriers and trying to fit in becoming secondary concerns as they became more fluent in ASL and more familiar with the cultural norms of the deaf environment. The focus was not so much on putting energy into navigating communication barriers as it was on the primary task of participating in the learning experiences.

Many of the participants emphasized that their language development was facilitated by their involvement in various social experiences within the community, with many of them stressing that involvement and immersion was important for quickly developing language capacity. As with the classroom experience, as their ASL skills improved, their acceptance and inclusion in the community also increased. Lastly, as they began the process of *moving from the margins to the center: developing a positive and affirmative deaf or hard of hearing identity*, these participants shared that the experience of marginalization as new members of the deaf community decreased as they became more fluent in the language and adjusted to the cultural norms of the deaf community.

For them, the borders of the deaf culture were much more permeable and fluid than the borders of the hearing world. When discussing the continuum of their place within the Deaf community, most of the participants recognized that while they were not at the core center of the Deaf culture, having been raised oral and in the hearing culture, they did feel a sense of belonging within the larger community due to having a peer group with similar experiences who were also a part of the larger deaf community. This resonates with the literature on the impact of minority serving institutions such as HBCU's on the development of minority students self-concept as well as the growth and development of psychosocial wellness, academic ability, and achievement orientation (Berger & Milem, 2000).

### **General Discussion**

Reviewing the literature, there is much to support these findings. Pertaining to the overall emergent finding, various researchers have noted the significance for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals of meeting others like themselves as a key factor in developing a deaf or hard-of-hearing identity (Leigh, 2009; Melick, 1998; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004).

#### **Moschella's research**

Moschella's (1992) qualitative study on the experience of 28 participants growing up deaf or hard of hearing compared the experiences of deaf individuals raised in deaf families and using ASL with deaf individuals raised in hearing families using oral communication methods. Her study focused on how these different upbringings affected the participant's identity development and emotional well-being. Her study found that "visual access to language and affiliation with other deaf or hard-of-hearing persons was

critical to the respondents in terms of their search for a secure and positive identity” (p. xx). Similar to the participants in my study, her findings indicated that discovering sign language and connecting with others who have similar backgrounds is a key turning point towards developing a positive deaf identity for those individuals who were raised by hearing parents using oral communication methods and attending mainstreamed schools. Like the participants in this study, Moschella’s participants who were raised using oral methods and expected to adapt or integrate into the hearing environment experienced feelings of difference, shame and isolation while growing up. For about half of these participants, “discovering sign language as adults and connecting with others with similar backgrounds became a turning point for them, enhancing their self-esteem as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual” (p. 1).

### **Glickman’s Deaf Identity Development Model**

Glickman’s (1993) quantitative study from which his Deaf Identity framework was developed shows some similar parallels in my findings. A key component of Glickman’s work, which was based on racial identity development frameworks, is the shift from a culturally, hearing medical-pathological perspective to a bi-cultural, cultural perspective of deafness. Overall, this key understanding is noted in my participants as they shift from framing their identity within the dominant culturally hearing experience of their early home and educational environment towards a more positive and affirmative deaf and hard-of-hearing cultural identity framework from their immersion into the deaf community and deaf culture of the university.

Glickman outlined four stages of a Deaf Identity Development theoretical model: culturally hearing, marginality, immersion, and bicultural. His identity development



framework encompasses the full range of individuals in the deaf/Deaf community, from oral deaf mainstreamed to native Deaf ASL users, and is unique in that the initial stages of identity development may vary based on the individual's background, i.e. a native Deaf ASL user born into a Deaf family and raised with Deaf cultural values will most likely not begin the identity development process at the culturally hearing stage of the framework.

Connecting my findings to Glickman's (1993) model, all of my participants began their story with a self-understanding that was framed by the dominant hearing culture into which they were born and raised. In the culturally hearing stage, deafness was considered solely from a medical-pathological perspective and was not considered a cultural construct (Glickman). Essentially, Glickman (1993) asserted that in this stage, hearing people are considered the norm and deaf individuals strive to fit into the hearing culture norm. Individuals who are culturally hearing do not consider their deafness an important valued part of their identity (Glickman). As is evident in my participants, all of them shared their experiences of being 'different' from the norm and their efforts of striving to assimilate or fit into the predominantly hearing culture through speech training, lip reading, use of hearing aids, and mainstreaming. They also devalued their deafness or hard-of-hearing identity by hiding their hearing aids, by not feeling comfortable sharing that they had a hearing loss, and by displaying a lack of confidence in or desire to advocate for their needs, preferring to 'pass as hearing' as much as possible. For these participants, being identified as hard-of-hearing or deaf brought forth a sense of shame and embarrassment. Glickman noted in his model that at this stage that there was a lack of awareness or desire to be identified and to associate with the Deaf

culture, that individual's in this stage preferred to be called 'hard-of-hearing' or 'hearing-impaired' rather than deaf, and did not associate nor want to associate with the deaf community or deaf culture. I feel that Glickman needs to be more explicit in this finding and separate those who have a lack of awareness from those who expressly are aware of but choose not to be a part of the culture, as there is a distinction.

For my participants, it was clearly a lack of awareness and exposure to the deaf community and deaf culture that shaped their identity, and even with awareness, there was still a lack of understanding about the deaf community and deaf culture. Their identities were shaped by the dominant hearing cultural environment in which they were raised, and even for some, by the advice given by professionals that were guiding the decisions by the family, such as the doctor who advised against teaching MaryAnn sign language as it would be detrimental to her speech and hearing development.

Glickman noted that in the second stage, marginality, most deaf children born into hearing families will experience this stage, in which they essentially are on the margins of the hearing culture and attempting to fit in through various means noted above. Individuals in this stage feel a sense of difference, loneliness, and isolation and may also, if exposed to the deaf community or deaf culture, feel marginalized in this culture due to not being able to identify with the norms of this culture. This stage is where Glickman introduces the concept of feeling 'in-between' cultures as individuals may feel 'stuck between two worlds', words that Sophie expressed prior to her exposure to Gallaudet, and not sure which world they most want to belong to much less will be accepted in (Glickman). This creates confusion and they may shift between feeling comfortable with one community over another and then later feeling the opposite (Glickman).

For my participants, this was a notable aspect of their experience and especially for the participants in the early years such as Hayley, Kim, and Anna, while they were embracing their experiences at the university, they were still reflecting upon their place back home in the hearing culture as they navigated their newfound sense of self at the university with their sense of self at home. What is unique about my study in relation to Glickman's work is again, the concept of the participants undergoing this experience with a critical mass of peers like themselves. Clearly, marginality was an issue in the hearing world in which the participants were raised, and if exposed to the deaf community and deaf culture as a singular incidence or in isolation, it is likely that the participants would also experience being marginalized due to not knowing ASL nor being familiar with the cultural norms, or even, as in the case with Rachel, strongly denying that they even a part of the hard-of-hearing and deaf continuum. However, by meeting others like themselves and having the opportunity to interact with a critical mass of oral deaf and hard-of-hearing peers within the larger deaf community and deaf culture, this sense of marginality most likely was still prevalent but not as pronounced as it could have been had they experienced this in isolation. Of significance in my study, the two participants who entered the university at a later date away from the experience of JumpStart: New Signers Program, Anna and Bethany, who were most conscious of this sense of marginality in the deaf community of the university, more so than those who went through the JumpStart: New Signers program.

Glickman's third stage, immersion, is one in which the individuals fully immersed themselves into the deaf culture and essentially, rejected the hearing cultural norms. These individuals embraced ASL and rejected speech-reading and oral methods of

communicating, and may become angry or confrontational with hearing individuals.

Clearly, the participants in my study are becoming immersed in the deaf community and deaf culture, though most of them are primarily adjusting to and transitioning into the experience and addressing most of the components of Glickman's marginal stage.

With my participants, I saw some levels of this immersion, most notably in Chase, Kim, MaryAnn, and Sophie as they embraced the deaf cultural norms, demonstrated a strong preference for using ASL over oral communication, stopped wearing their hearing aids or Cochlear Implants, and began challenging their families, particularly with communicating and asserting their needs. The most vivid example of this is in Kim's story of turning off her voice and signing at the dinner table with her hearing family in retaliation for her family's not being inclusive with her needs at breakfast earlier that morning. Clearly, anger drove this demonstration and a point was aggressively being made and this demonstrated Kim's ownership and pride of her new identity framework that she is now imposing on her family rather than allowing them to impose their culturally hearing framework on her.

The last stage of Glickman's model is Biculturalism and for my participants, I do believe that they are working towards this stage but not quite yet there. This is most notable in the students who are graduating as they begin to consider their life beyond graduation and they being the next stage of their life back in the dominant hearing culture. These participants recognized, with pride as demonstrated in Rachel's story that she would not trade the past five years of her life for anything. They realize with a sense of pride and awe that they are not the same person they were when they arrived, yet they have yet to navigate this new understanding of themselves back in the hearing culture.

### **Melick's research**

Melick (1998), expanding on Moschella's work, focused specifically on the identity development process of ten oral deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals raised in the mainstream and their identity development process. The findings of Melick's extensive grounded theory research parallel the findings of this study. From her research, Melick proposed an identity development framework for this particular population of participants. Similar to my study, Moschella's framework describes the initial stage of identity development as "Being an Outsider", in which participants report feelings of difference and isolation being raised in the hearing world in their early life experience. For my participants, this phase fits into both the "Setting the Stage for 'self as different'" and "On the Margins of the Mainstream: Passing for Hearing". Moving into the next phase of their identity development, which Melick labeled "Encounter and Connect", required that the individual encounter and connect with other Deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals. For my study, this phase was the "Catalyst: Gallaudet as a gateway to a new community and language" where my participants were first exposed to Gallaudet University and the opportunity to meet others like themselves.

For Melick's participants, three of the ten participants cited their initial encounter with others like themselves occurred through attending college, particularly a college that provided extensive support for and enrolled a critical mass of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. My study explores the nature of the college experience in more depth. Similar to my findings, for these three participants in her study, the college choice process was influenced by the participants desire to meet others like themselves and to have a social life. Other avenues for encountering d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals included

taking ASL classes, participating in support programs and services for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, and with one participant, encountering others through family connections to the Deaf community.

After the “Encounter and Connect” phase of their experience, the participants in Melick’s study began the “Transition” phase, in which the participants decided to enter the Deaf community, which included learning ASL, adjusting to the cultural norms of the Deaf community, and slowly fitting into the community. My participants engaged in this stage through a similarly named stage of “Transitions: Finding a Sense of Place and Self”. The final stage of the identity development process is a period of “Self-definition”, in which the “person begins to move into a phase where s/he developed a comfort level with who s/he is and starts to define for him/herself what it means for him/her to be a Deaf person.” This stage aligns with my findings of “Moving from the Margins to the Center: Developing a positive and affirmative identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual”. It is encouraging to find congruence in my study and with Melick’s research.

Differences in my study and Melick’s study are that the primary encounter and connect stage for my participants occurred through the central experience of being exposed to Gallaudet University, a university that educates d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in a bilingual ASL and English environment, with ASL being the primary communication modality on campus. This primacy of this d/Deaf setting and location was also a key component throughout the transition and integration phases of the experience, with the participants becoming fully immersed in the d/Deaf community and culture of the university. In addition, these participants were exploring this transition and

integration with a critical mass of peers undergoing a similar experience, rather than in isolation. This experience created a deep level of immersion into the culture, away from family and friends from their home environment. As the study was primarily established in a university setting, the study also examined both the social and academic integration experiences and the influence on identity development. Participants were not only undergoing a transition into a new community but they were also undergoing a transition into a new academic experience and hence, unlike Melick's study, my study includes the experience of integrating into the academic environment of the d/Deaf classroom and the ASL-dominant learning environment, as well as the overall university environment and the various developmental components that is inherent in this overlap.

#### **Oliva's research.**

Oliva's (2004) research further illuminates the findings in this study, specifically on the oral mainstreamed experience of deaf individuals raised alone in the mainstream educational environment, a group that she terms solitaires. Illuminating the early stages of this grounded theory, her research focused specifically on the K-12 educational experience of these students, using an autobiographical framework around her own experience as a solitaire. Like the participants in this study and in Melick's (1998) work, Oliva's participants also experienced a sense of shame, isolation and difference and a desire to fit in while growing up in the mainstreamed educational environment. Oliva also found that for a number of her participants, including herself, discovering ASL and meeting others like themselves had a positive impact on their lives and was a critical juncture towards finding a sense of belonging and developing a positive deaf or hard-of-hearing identity. She noted that for herself, learning ASL and meeting others like her

was like “coming home”, a phrase also used in Melick’s study and found in Leigh’s (2009) meta-analysis of the Deaf identity literature. Of the 60 participants in Oliva’s study, 80% of them reported that they eventually learned ASL and chose to befriend other deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Many of her participants were also college-educated and noted that the college-going experience, particularly attending a deaf-serving institution, was the critical turning point for the shift in their sense-of-self. However, this was not a key focus of Oliva’s study, but a noted finding towards the end of her study, focusing primarily on the K-12 experiences of these participants. For these participants, this experience provided a sense of connectedness and normalcy, particularly in the social venues of their life experience.

### **The Value of the Deaf Serving Institution**

Clearly, the research provides a better understanding of the identity development process of the ten participants as they transition both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment. While the intent of this research was to focus on the experience of these individuals, it is also important to know the influence of the environment on their development, that of a university that is uniquely qualified to address both the academic and social needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

Tinto (1993) in his model of student departure notes the importance not only of student pre-college characteristics but of the students ability to integrate both academically and socially into the life of the institution as key components that will determine if a student will persist or depart from the institution. Bean and Eaton (2000) also noted the importance of psychological factors such as individual student’s attitudes and beliefs, coping strategies, self-efficacy beliefs, and attributional locus of control



perceptions as key psychological characteristics that would influence a student's persistence. Various researchers have demonstrated the critical importance of involvement in all aspects of the college experience that drive student learning and development and therefore student persistence (Astin, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2006; Tinto, 1993, 2000). These findings are supported in this research study. These students demonstrated strong pre-college characteristics both academically and in their demonstrated levels of resilience and capacity for coping in a challenging environment while in their K-12 years. These characteristics most likely created a strong foundation for their ability to persist in the difficult first year of college in the new cultural and learning environment of a predominantly deaf institution. In addition, these students themselves shared that one of their primary reasons for electing to attend this institution was their desire for a social connection, an opportunity to meet others like themselves and explore facets of their identity that they would otherwise not have been able to experience at a predominantly hearing institution. This desire for a level of social integration was a key driving force in their decision and became a strong component of their continued persistence at the institution. Clearly these students already had academic capacity for success and they noted that as they adjusted to the predominantly visual ASL learning environment, learning became easier and they were able to integrate and become involved in the learning environment of the classroom, a much more involved and accessible experience for them than their academic integration in the K-12 environment where they were often marginalized.

While growing up in the K-12 classroom, each of these students shared an experience in which their deafness was a predominant part of their everyday experience,

and they constantly had to address the effort of navigating communication challenges, they often felt ‘different’ or ‘not normal’, and despite their best efforts to fit in, they were still marginalized. Attending a minority serving institution, a university for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, these participants were able to connect with a critical mass of peers like themselves and as a result, to set aside their experiences of difference and finally become part of the norm, moving from the margins to the center. The unique nature of this environment allowed for the opportunity to become involved, to connect, and to be a part of the norm.

When reviewing the literature on students in minority serving institutions, we find similar findings. Students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) shared that their primary reason for electing to attend an HBCU was to be around other Black students like themselves and to explore facets of their racial identity (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009). Berger and Milen (2000) also found that attending an HBCU was positively correlated with promoting the development of self-concept among African American students, a clear parallel to this study and how the participants in this study were in the process of developing a positive and affirmative identity as a Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing individual. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discussed the indirect advantage of HBCU’s and their ability to provide more supportive social environments as the faculty and staff, peer culture, mission, and general culture are designed to provide a more supportive environment than would be available to these students at predominantly hearing universities. Drezner (2008) also postulated a similar experience for deaf and hard-of-hearing students attending a predominantly deaf-serving institution. In short, for these students, attending a Deaf-serving institution provided an

empowering opportunity for them to become fully involved in all aspects of their learning and development while also giving them a safe and supportive environment for freely exploring their identity as deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals. Research on deaf and hard-of-hearing students attending predominantly hearing institutions of higher learning demonstrates that while these students are able to succeed and do well in predominantly hearing institutions, they do not have the same experiences as those who attend a predominantly deaf and signing university (English, 1993; Liversidge, 2003; Martin, 2009; Menchel, 1995).

### **Dichotomy of the d/Deaf identity frameworks.**

Another level of difference for my research is more of a question that emerged in the process of reflection and analysis during this study. Primarily, the either/or dichotomy of the d/Deaf identity spectrum. You are either 'hearing' or 'deaf'; you are either 'deaf' or 'Deaf'. For the participants in my study, what clearly emerged was the concept of what Leigh (2009) calls the 'in-betweenity' factor, of being 'in-between' the Deaf and the Hearing worlds, of being 'in-between' the deaf and Deaf worlds. Clearly, the participants are not hearing and are no longer working to 'pass for hearing', yet they are navigating their new understanding of their deaf or hard-of-hearing identities and how this understanding of themselves fits into both the hearing and the deaf worlds. The participants in my study also recognize that they are not at the center or core of the Deaf culture due to their primarily oral and mainstreamed hearing environment upbringing and the fact that they did not learn ASL until later in their life experience. Most of them accept and recognize this and hence they do feel comfortable with claiming a deaf or hard-of-hearing identity, as opposed to a Deaf identity, recognizing and embracing this

self-understanding as they develop their sign language skills and become immersed into the deaf community. Others are comfortable embracing a very solid ‘hard-of-hearing’ identity, which for these participants was also a positive and affirmative experience. By owning this identity and taking pride in it, the participants demonstrated an understanding of their self-identity using a social identity framework.

Yet the ‘hard-of-hearing’ identity is not fully recognized in the various deaf identity frameworks presented. If it is recognized, it is considered a part of the identity diffusion process, of the ‘in-betweenity’ stage, as if it’s a part of what is necessary towards embracing a fully deaf or Deaf identity. What is curious to me is that the hard-of-hearing identity is a salient and positive identity for these participants. They are comfortable claiming this as their identity, yet are struggling with socially constructed notions by others in both the Hearing and Deaf communities to fit this identity into a recognizable part of the process in the identity framework. Some would argue that a ‘hard-of-hearing’ identity is actually a ‘deaf’ identity, just worded differently. My argument is why it cannot have its own place on the continuum and be defined and constructed and owned by those who claim it rather than subsumed in the ‘deaf’ identity. Others may argue that one can be “Deaf”, yet still ‘hard of hearing’. This points to a distinction between the cultural identity of being “Deaf” while having an audiological understanding as a hard-of-hearing individual.

When reviewing the literature on d/Deaf identity, the ‘hard-of-hearing’ identity does not claim a confident space on the continuum and I challenge this notion of its ambiguity in the continuum. With the Cochlear Implant generation growing, I anticipate that the ‘hard-of-hearing’ identity may become more pre-dominant in the discussion on

what it means to be ‘deaf’, ‘Deaf’ or ‘Hard of Hearing’. Leigh (2009) acknowledges the complexity of defining a ‘hard-of-hearing’ identity in her meta-analysis of the literature on deaf/Deaf identity, and this complexity is evident in the participants stories, particularly as they share that “in the hearing world, I’m deaf; in the Deaf world, I’m ‘hard-of-hearing’.” The question emerges, what does it mean to embrace a very comfortable sense of self as a hard-of-hearing individual? Or is hard-of-hearing just a different understanding of the lowercase ‘d’ in the deaf identity continuum? How does this identity fit into the Deaf identity models, and how should this be defined?

There is also the whole concept of situational identity. Several of the participant’s identity shifted depending on contextual surroundings. For example, in the hearing environment, participants describe themselves as either hard-of-hearing or deaf, shaping this identity to a perceived understanding of which one would better be received by those with whom they are interacting. The participants shared that the hard-of-hearing identity is difficult concept for members of the hearing culture to grasp, the ambiguity of knowing ‘how much one can hear or understand’ that is inherent in that description; whereas claiming the deaf identity label is clear and explicit and sends the message that ‘I cannot hear’, as opposed to the vague message of ‘I can hear some’ that is part of the hard-of-hearing identity. In the Deaf environment, some of the participants describe themselves as ‘hard-of-hearing’ rather than deaf because they can speech-read, speak, communicate orally with hearing people, and hence they are comfortable with owning and claiming the oral capacities that their oral upbringing conferred upon them.

Sophie shared, “In the Deaf world, I can hear better than I can hear in the hearing world.” This is an interesting statement and has several potential meanings, i.e. in the

Deaf world, she has access through ‘seeing’ the visual language and therefore, can ‘hear’ i.e. understand better OR in the Deaf world, she can actually ‘hear’ better as she is able to navigate the hearing world through her residual hearing, speech-reading and oral skills. The meaning also implies that in the Deaf world, there is an implicit understanding that with her hard-of-hearing identity that while she is not ‘hearing’, she is still a part of the deaf community as a hard-of-hearing individual. The ambiguity does not exist as it does in the hearing world. It’s a beautifully symbolic way of describing the concept of ‘in-betweenity’, to incorporate not just the ‘in-betweenity’ of Hearing and Deaf, but the ‘in-betweenity’ of hard-of-hearing, deaf, and Deaf. This is an element that is missing in the identity frameworks and I believe needs to be studied further, particularly in light of the large numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing being raised in the mainstream or inclusive educational setting and the growing numbers of deaf individuals who are receiving cochlear implants.

However, what is particularly notable is that none of the participants considers themselves from a hearing identity framework. The hearing world is not permeable for them, and will always require an element of effort, work, frustration and isolation or aloneness. Despite not being at the core of the Deaf world, these participants have become a part of the larger deaf community, and feel a sense of belongingness and comfort. The participants expressly share that they feel more comfortable in the deaf community than in the hearing community, and this comfort is not just with access to language but also the ability to be genuine, have friendships and relationships that are deep and meaningful, and essentially, feel a sense of home. This community includes a critical mass of peers like themselves who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, who grew up oral

experiencing the same challenges and frustrations, who initially relied on residual hearing, speech-reading, and oral communication methods, and who now are experiencing a sense of community and belonging in a visual signing academic and social environment of a deaf university.

### **Discussion of Key Categories with Implications for Practice**

This section will further discuss each element of the theory ending with the key category of *identity development*. Implications for practice are embedded in each section.

#### **Setting the stage for a sense of difference**

Examining the various components that build this theory, the first component is the impact of diagnosis on *setting the stage for a sense of difference* in the individual participant's life experiences. The issue surrounding a sense of difference, starting with diagnosis of hearing loss, is not surprising. Because a majority of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are born into hearing families, who most likely have no experience with deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals, it is expected that family members may respond with a measure of confusion, shock, and even grief, as they cope with understanding the diagnosis and its impact on the family structure (Scheetz, 2004). For hearing parents, this diagnosis is most often viewed as a medical diagnosis (Schirmer, 2001). As such, hearing parents will most likely respond to the diagnosis from a medical framework, seeking out the best means to 'fix' their child's hearing in ways that help them function most effectively in the hearing world.

For this reason, professionals who work with parents to address the decisions surrounding their child's deafness or hearing loss play a key role towards helping parents understand and address the range of options available for raising their child. It is critical

that these professionals be familiar with and be informed about the various approaches and the pros and cons of each approach as they apply to the unique needs of the individual child. These professionals, in addition to providing resources and educating families about their options, should consider introducing the parents to deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals so the parents can learn from these deaf or hard of hearing individuals (McKee & Hauser, 2012). How the parents, family, and professionals respond to and interact with the child, particularly when it comes to communicating with the child and staying open to exploring a range of approaches, will begin the process of shaping the child's self-concept (Scheetz, 2004).

Regardless of the decision made by the parents in terms of the child's upbringing, the key factor that must be addressed early in the child's life is acknowledging that the child may experience a sense of difference, particularly if they are the only member of the family, the school or the community with a hearing loss. From the stories of these participants, and others in the various research studies, it is clear that these participants needed someone they could connect with and share their experiences with. Therefore, it is important to expose the child to a positive role models, mentors and peers like themselves so they feel a sense of normalcy and develop a connection with and learn from others with similar experiences (Israelite, Ower, & Goldstein, 2002; McKee & Hauser, 2012). This may help to reduce the feelings of difference and isolation that these children may experience when they grow up. For professionals and educators who work with children and families of children with hearing loss, one of their roles should also include connecting parents as well as deaf or hard-of-hearing clients with each other through hosting or referring them to social and educational opportunities such as camps,



workshops, and other events, that provide opportunities for meeting role models, mentors, and peers.

Overall, medical, service, and education professionals who work with families and their deaf or hard-of-hearing children must stay knowledgeable about the variety of options for addressing the unique needs of the deaf or hard-of-hearing child, ranging from use of assistive hearing devices, to communication methods, to educational decisions. Often, families have no experience of deafness or how to address it and they will depend greatly on the advice of professionals in the field for guidance. It is important that the professional remain unbiased and balanced in presenting the various options, while also remaining flexible with identifying when certain choices are working or are not working, and offering strategies or solutions for addressing them. Practitioners should work to connect parents with other parents dealing with similar decisions and experiences, to connect families with educational resources that empower them to advocate for their child, and to also connect families with deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals who can act as role models as well as sources of information and support in the process.

### **On the Margins of the Mainstream: The K-12 Mainstream Educational Experience**

When examining the K-12 educational experience of the participants in the mainstream, the findings in this study are not new and in light of the continued dispersion of the small population of deaf and hard-of-hearing children across the nation, are likely to continue. Currently the Cochlear Implant (CI) generation is now growing up in the mainstream or inclusive environments and it would be interesting to document their experiences in the educational environment in light of the enhancements that the CI brings to hearing technology and the subsequent impact on learning and social

experiences, and also on identity development. While the CI may be enriching many of these young people's lives and providing them a level of access that hearing aids cannot, it still remains to be seen how these children's experiences in the educational environment impact this next generation in terms of their academic achievements, and their self-concept and self-identity in the predominantly hearing learning environment. The fact is that even with these assistive devices and how well they enhance an individual's hearing capacities, these children are still deaf and/or hard-of-hearing, and this must be acknowledged and addressed. The potential for feeling a sense of difference may still be a very real issue for these children, and findings from this and other studies (Leigh, 2009; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004) illustrate that the desire and/or need to connect with others like themselves is still relevant.

Recommendations for practitioners working with these children, as mentioned earlier, include the need to ensure that these children are exposed to positive role models who also use CI's and that they have opportunities to interact with other children like themselves so that they can connect across shared experiences. It is also important that educators, practitioners working with deaf and hard of hearing children, and parents, recognize and accept that each child is unique and what may work for one child may not always be the most effective strategy for another child. Clearly, from the experiences of the participants in my study, as well as other research (Leigh, 2009; Melick, 1998; Menchel, 1998; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004; Scheetz, 2004), many of the same strategies are used in the mainstream or inclusive educational environment: IEP meetings that outline a learning environment that puts the burden of learning and addressing communication barriers on the deaf and/or hard-of-hearing child to adapt to a

predominantly hearing/auditory centered classroom. Most of the participants in my study relied on speech-reading and use of residual hearing as a means for accessing the learning environment, a clearly imperfect means of access that required a great deal of energy and effort on the part of the participants. From hearing the participant's stories, it appears that more energy is expended on simply gaining access to the environment than is on actual learning. The capabilities of these participants for succeeding in the auditory- or hearing-centered environment in light of these communication barriers is admirable. One has to wonder about the deaf or hard-of-hearing child who, through no fault of their own, does not have the same capacity for integrating into the predominantly hearing environment, or who does not have the same level of access to resources or knowledge capital. One has to question if mainstreamed or inclusive education is serving our deaf or hard-of-hearing children well, particularly if they are learning in isolation and missing out on the important developmental stages that come from socializing with peers and having access to the environment.

Colleges and Universities that serve a large deaf or hard-of-hearing population would do well to consider providing enrichment and outreach opportunities to middle school and high school aged deaf or hard-of-hearing students in the predominantly hearing learning environments as a means of bringing them together in a fun and educational environment. Granted, finding these students when many are dispersed throughout the country is challenging, yet outreach efforts to K-12 schools and programs are an option. On a different note, although it is beyond the scope of this study, one has to wonder about both the cognitive and non-cognitive capacity, in relation to the degree

of hearing loss, that those deaf and hard-of-hearing students who do succeed in the predominantly hearing learning environments possess.

### **Gallaudet University as a Catalyst**

Essentially, for my participants, Gallaudet University represents the d/Deaf community. By learning about the university and discovering a community of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, these participants gained access and immersed themselves into the community and the opportunity to explore a facet of their identity from a different framework. This provided them with a chance to meet others like themselves and develop a support system of peers, while learning a language that would give them access to the broader Deaf community. It is not necessarily the university itself that makes a difference, but what the university represents at a critical time in their lives. The uniqueness of this situation is that it occurs in the context of the college environment, at a time in which these participants are naturally exploring aspects of their various identities as a natural part of the college student development process (Chickering, 1973; Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

By attending college, the participants are separated from their family and immersed fully into both the college experience and the deaf cultural experience. Clearly, having a critical mass of peers like themselves helps in the transition process, as opposed to addressing this transition singularly and on their own. Upon reviewing the literature on college choice among deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, the discovery of strong supports and a critical mass of other deaf and hard-of-hearing students does play a factor in the decision making process (Stinson and Walter, 1992; Stinson and Walter, 1997).

Oral deaf and hard-of-hearing students who grew up in predominantly hearing learning environments are most likely to initially explore and expect to attend a similar college because they are familiar with the experience (Liversidge, 2003; Menchel, 1995). This was true for all of the participants in this study, all of whom were considering other colleges, until they discovered or were recruited to attend Gallaudet University.

What was surprising was that many of these participants had never heard of Gallaudet University, or if they had, they understood it to be a university for “native Deaf ASL signers” as Sophia believed. Clearly, most of the participants did not visualize themselves as being the typical student who would attend a Deaf university and only upon learning that other hard-of-hearing students attended and that the university provided a program for non-signers like themselves did they begin to see their potential for attending this university.

While attendance at the university creates the conditions in which these participants will meet others like themselves, learn a language, and gain access to a community of peers, and therefore become a catalyst for a newfound understanding of their identity framework, it also shapes an opportunity in which future generations of deaf and hard-of-hearing students can have a similar experience because these students then become part of the larger peer culture that will become a foundation of support for the next generation.

Institutions that draw a critical mass of deaf and hard-of-hearing students would benefit from having targeted and timely recruitment strategies in place to reach out to these students. Once these students are accepted and decide to attend, these institutions should shape orientations and welcome events specifically designed to introduce them to

their peers and campus role models in fun and supportive ways. The support program providers could even move beyond the institution and connect to the deaf or hard-of-hearing alumni or role models at the local, city, and state levels and consider ways to develop experiences within the larger community that may benefit these students. This would be particularly essential at institutions that provide services to a smaller number of deaf or hard-of-hearing students.

Most importantly, it is also critical not only for institutions to ensure accommodations are provided in the learning environment of the classroom, but also work to address provision of resources and providing support as an ally and advocate in the social and extracurricular opportunities of the institution. Practitioners should not assume that the individual student is knowledgeable or informed about his or her rights and is familiar with the full range of resources and supports in place. Hence the need to have access to information that identifies these students early on (i.e. admissions applications) and reach out to and provide learning and teaching opportunities that help strengthen the students understanding of their rights and how to advocate for themselves. Ideally, the introduction to the community could be shaped at even earlier ages, such as middle school, where innovative college recruiters and social agencies that work with deaf or hard-of-hearing youth could offer summer camps, sports events, and other outreach efforts to bring together young deaf and hard-of-hearing youth as mentioned earlier. These efforts could focus both on the social needs of these youth as well as on exposing them to visual learning environments, learning ASL, meeting Deaf role models, interacting with peers, and providing them with learning about their rights and how to effectively advocate at a young age.

## **Transitioning**

When looking at the experience of these participants through various frameworks on college integration and success, we can see support for these frameworks. Tinto (1993) in his theory of student departure noted the importance of pre-college characteristics, institutional fit, goal commitment, academic integration, and social integration on a student's decision to persist. When examined through this framework, the participants in this study essentially based their decision to attend and subsequently persist at the institution primarily on the social aspects of their experience. I do believe that their pre-college characteristics, in terms of their college readiness, level of academic achievement in the hearing learning environment, and their proven capacity to successfully navigate the barriers of this learning environment, helped pave the way for their capacity to successfully transition into the academic and social environments of the Deaf university. By meeting others like themselves and developing a support system, these participants created a solid foundation that helped guide them through the difficult first year integrating both academically into a visual ASL-centric learning environment and socially into the larger Deaf community of the institution.

Tinto does note in explaining his framework that “during the first several weeks of the first year of college, ...issues of social membership may be somewhat more important than those of academic membership” (p. 134). Essentially, for my participants, the need to establish a sense of belonging to the institution played a critical role in the first few weeks and provided a foundation of support that helped them adjust and transition. As time progressed and the students began to feel more comfortable and develop their language capacity, they were able to focus on the academic and learning

processes, and to become engaged in the college experience overall. For most of them, the academic integration, albeit fraught with communication challenges during the first year, was reported as being easier for learning than their experience in the mainstreamed educational environment.

Astin's (1993) research supports the impact of engagement and involvement on student learning and development, and ultimately on student success. All of the participants in my study, emphasized in various ways, the importance of becoming involved in the university environment as a means for learning ASL and indirectly as a means for learning and developing. Their level of involvement ranged from being involved in the JumpStart: New Signers Program, in developing a network of friends, in participating in athletics, in joining various student organizations on campus, and in engaging in the academic learning environment of the classroom. Repeatedly, the participants reported that by being involved, they were able to facilitate their language development skills, which then lead to expanding friendships, more opportunities for being involved, and an improved capacity to fully participate in all aspects of the classroom environment, both inside and outside the classroom. If anything, these participants are excellent models of the impact of involvement and engagement on both learning and development.

Baird (2000) also found that in applying the Tinto model to minority students, the concept of developing a sense of belonging was critical for social integration into the university. This finding is also found in research by Padilla et al. (1997), as they conducted studies on minority student success in predominantly White institutions. The findings from their research indicated that for minority students, establishing a strong



support system of peers was critical for their success and persistence at the institutions. For my participants, as non-signers entering the larger deaf community for the first-time, having a network of peers like themselves was critical for easing this transition.

Tinto (1993) notes in his model on persistence that pre-college characteristics of the student are an important factor in student persistence decisions. However, Bean and Eaton (2000) found that Tinto's theory did not pay sufficient attention to the psychological components of student success and proposed that various student characteristics also contribute to student persistence, chief among these attitude and behavior, coping behaviors, self-efficacy, and attribution or locus of control.

When reviewing the participant's experiences in the mainstream learning environment in light of these psychological characteristics, it becomes apparent that factors potentially play into the college-choice process of deaf or hard-of-hearing students. Stinson and Walter (1997) noted that the attrition rates of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in traditional predominantly hearing colleges were around 75%. (More recent research is needed on this front.) Stinson and Walter found that while deaf or hard-of-hearing students may meet admissions standards and be on par academically in the hearing college environment, the issue then becomes one of how prepared the college environment is for providing the needed levels of access to ensure success of these students.

While having an environment that provides needed levels of access as well as resources for ensuring success is important, the psychological factors of the individual student are also important. Menchel (1995) and Liversidge (2003) both conducted research on deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the hearing learning environment and

noted critical factors that helped their participants succeed. The key factor they found focused on the participant's having a strong set of advocacy skills and a comfort with being proactive in having their needs met. It would be interesting to connect the ability to be proactive and to advocate for their needs with self-efficacy and self-concept. With this in mind, it seems that a student who enrolls with a strong academic record but a low self-concept or sense of self-efficacy, and a lack of comfort with advocating for their needs, particularly in an inhospitable environment, may most likely be at high-risk for attrition.

From the interviews with my participants, while many of them excelled academically during their K-12 years, and were becoming proactive in having their needs met as they became older, they were also not comfortable with advocating for themselves, most often because it made them stand out and highlighted their sense of difference. After coming to Gallaudet and beginning the process of developing an affirmative and positive deaf or hard-of-hearing identity, these participants began become comfortable with asserting their needs and advocating for themselves. Clearly, having a positive identity framework facilitated this process. I do believe that should these students decide to once attend a predominantly hearing university after their experience in the deaf community of Gallaudet University, they would be highly proactive and comfortable ensuring their academic and social needs are met. Implications for practice among students transitioning into college once again point to the need to connect these students with similar peers, role models, and educational and social opportunities that help empower them.

## **Identity Development**

Chickering and Reisser (1993) presented a College Student Identity Development framework that outlined the primary developmental goal of college students as being the search for identity, and answering the question “Who Am I?”. For most college students, various identities are explored and shaped as they begin the process of laying a foundation and deciding their life’s purpose. For the participants in this study, the early and salient exploration of their deaf or hard-of-hearing identity was on the forefront as they adapted and adjusted to a new community and exploration of their place in this community.

However, as they become more comfortable within the community, it is likely that other facets of identity exploration will arise, and may even pre-dominate or compete with their deaf and/or hard-of-hearing identity. This became evident in the stories of the participants from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds as they not only addressed their deaf or hard-of-hearing identities but also addressed the intersectionality of identities in terms of race and socioeconomic status. The complexity of the intersectionalities of identity was evident in their stories as they were less linear and more complex than the stories from the White and mostly middle class participants. The complexity of the African American Deaf experience is evident in Bethany’s story, particularly as she connected first and foremost with African American peers when she arrived at Gallaudet, and credited her involvement with the African American social groups as a key support system. That a number of these peers were also oral and hard-of-hearing was an added bonus. For Bethany, the realities of her socioeconomic status and family background also dominated her experience and added a further layer of

complexity. For Rachel, a multiracial participant, the various intersectionalities of her identities outside of her hard-of-hearing identity development added layered nuances and depth to her experiences and lent her story a level of complexity as well. When asked how she currently identifies herself, her response was,

I don't describe myself as any one thing. That's the story of my life, I'm not one thing at all. It's impossible. I'm used to 'straddling the line' ... between worlds. I'm not completely in any one, I'm all over the place. I'm fine with that ... I think it makes me a stronger person.

Within the context of the interview, with the focus on deaf or hard-of-hearing experiences, every other participant responded with a deaf or hard-of-hearing identity framework. For most of the participants, including Bethany and Rachel, the experience of attending a deaf university and interacting with peers like themselves, was a catalyst towards exploring their deaf or hard-of-hearing identity in a supportive and affirmative deaf community environment. By allowing for this exploration, and subsequent comfort with the emerging deaf or hard-of-hearing identity, one has to wonder if this creates an opportunity for other identities to also be explored once the deaf or hard-of-hearing identity becomes less salient.

When it comes to practice, it is important to remember that each individual's experience is unique and to tailor resources and support based on the individual's needs and experiences. This may include connecting students from different identity backgrounds with relevant supports on campus based on their various identity needs and ensuring that resources and supports are provided that enable them to access these additional resources. For example, a student from a specific racial or ethnic background should be informed about clubs, organizations, or supports for students from the same background, and practitioners working with the student can work with the student to

empower them to advocate for their needs so they can join and access these additional resources.

Colleges or university practitioners who work with deaf or hard-of-hearing students need to approach their practice from a holistic student development perspective. While ensuring access and accommodation to learning is critical, it is equally critical to attend to the social needs of the student. Being aware of resources and opportunities for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the college community as well as within the local, state or national level and working to connect these students with these opportunities is important. Reaching out to these students and providing a support base begins with pre-enrollment and should continue through orientation and as they transition and integrate into the environment. Practitioners should not assume deaf or hard-of-hearing students are aware of their rights nor that they are comfortable with or familiar with how to advocate for themselves. Hence, providing educational opportunities about their rights and strategies for successfully advocating for their needs is critical.

### **Future Research**

During the course of this research study, potential areas of future research emerged. First and foremost, this study focused on primarily White, female, U.S. born, and traditional college-aged participants from mainstreamed or inclusive oral backgrounds. Areas of future exploration include exploring the stories of participants from specific racial and ethnic backgrounds as I believe that their experiences may provide a different framework for understanding the deaf or hard-of-hearing education and identity development process. It became apparent when reviewing the stories of the participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds that the deaf or hard-of-hearing

identity development process intersected with their racial and/or ethnic identity development process. The intersectionality of these experiences is worth exploring and understanding in order to provide appropriate support and resources for these individuals as well.

A second area of potential research emerged from interviewing two participants with immigrant backgrounds. When hearing their stories, it was clearly apparent that their experiences growing up in the K-12 educational environment and transitioning into a predominantly deaf signing community were vastly different from those of U.S. born participants. Not only were they transitioning from an oral upbringing into a deaf signing learning environment, they were also transitioning from their culture of origin into the American culture, along with the vastly different levels of rights and access for deaf individuals in the U.S. as compared to other countries. Their stories were fascinating, compelling, and inspiring, and are worthy of further exploration, particularly as more immigrant and undocumented students are now gaining access to higher education in the United States.

Lastly, with more and more older students entering the university environment, it is also critical to explore their experiences of making the choice to attend, and transition, into the deaf signing university environment. Three women volunteered their stories and while their stories of growing up oral were similar to the K-12 experiences of the final participants, even in light of changing laws, their post-secondary school life experiences were vastly different. Each of these women decided to marry, raise children, and/or enter the workforce directly from high school and only later in life did they make the decision to enroll at Gallaudet. Their stories were similar in terms of their finding a community of

others like themselves and feeling a strong sense of belonging with the community, however their experiences are also tempered by their very different life experiences, their reflections on making this discovery later in life, and their transitional experience as older adults into the college environment. This warrants a separate study.

This study does not include the experiences of individuals who, like the participants, did not sign, were raised oral and mainstreamed in the inclusive K-12 environment, and decided to attend Gallaudet, but chose to depart. It would be interesting to interview those individuals and understand their experiences, particularly if their reason for departing was due to not feeling a sense of belonging or due to not feeling a connection to the deaf culture of the institution. It would be interesting to also explore their academic fit, in addition to their social fit. One potential research study would be to conduct a longitudinal study following the experiences of a group of oral non-signing students like these students from pre-enrollment through to graduation and beyond and documenting their experiences over time. This would also be an interesting study to conduct with other colleges with large deaf or hard-of-hearing student populations.

### **Limitations**

It is also important to acknowledge that this experience is true of this particular sample of participants, and is not necessarily generalizable across the population of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. In order to capture the richness and depth of this experience, the sample used for the study is by necessity limited to selecting enough participants to sufficiently saturate the data. Therefore, the experiences of this particular group of students may not translate to be similar to the experiences of all oral non-signing

deaf and hard-of-hearing youth. However, it does shed some light on a potential experience and phenomena and provide a theoretical framework from which to examine this phenomena. The fact that other research has also reported similar findings over the years strengthens these findings collectively. Prior research has clearly demonstrated support for the findings of this study (e.g. Melick, 1998; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004).

While conducting this study, one challenge, yet not necessarily a limitation, was the transcription of the participants interview from ASL to written English. As these are two different languages, the nuance of meaning that is portrayed in a visual language can be difficult to convey effectively in a direct English translation, and meaning can be lost in a concrete word-for-word transcription. Therefore, the researcher made the decision to focus on the concepts and meaning conveyed in the participant's stories rather than on the word-for-word transcription in order to stay true to the meaningful telling of their experiences. The actual video footage of the participants is the original 'text' used for this research. The original codes were developed from the video and then supported with the written transcripts. The researcher frequently returned to the video text when doing cross-comparisons during the analysis of the data in order to continuously ensure that meaning was correctly understood from the English text in relation to the video text. This was an interesting challenge and from this experience, should this research be replicated, it is recommended that video transcripts that are translated into English text have a second and/or third reader to ensure meaning is portrayed accurately. An even stronger way to strengthen this would be to share the transcriptions of the videos with the participants and have them clarify intended meaning and ensure accuracy in portrayal of their stories. I believe this would also lend an extra level of trustworthiness to the



findings. Another way to strengthen this work would be conducting a member-check by not sharing the written transcription of the videotaped interviews with the participants to ensure accurate understanding and portrayal of the participant's stories, but to continue to review the emerging findings with the participants throughout the analysis phase, sharing the emerging codes, categories, and theory and soliciting the participants feedback and thoughts on these findings. However, due to timing of this research, it was not possible to do this. The findings of this research are being shared with the participants .

Another limitation of this study is the focus on one institution, Gallaudet University. While this research may appear to have significance only for Gallaudet University, it has potential significance for any educational institution serving d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing individuals. For elementary and secondary school practitioners working with d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students, this study is intended to enlighten them on the experiences of these students and ensure that they work to address pre-college needs. For vocational rehabilitation counselors and other service providers who work with these students in helping them establish educational and vocational goals beyond high school, this study informs them on the potential impact of college choice and the importance of making a decision that considers both academic and social integration needs of the student. By understanding the experiences of oral deaf and hard-of-hearing non-signing students, higher education practitioners providing services to these students can become informed about how best to understand and address the needs of similar students at their institution.

### **Strengths**

A strength of this research is the closeness of my experience to the participants experience and therefore my ability to connect across a shared commonality and elicit a deeper understanding of the stories. While this could also be a limitation in terms of researcher bias, this was prevented by consulting with a peer debriefer who was familiar with the population and with the research methods used. By sharing the transcripts (with identifying factors removed), coding analysis, and emerging theory with the peer debriefer, I was able to stay true to the participants stories as well as to review the emerging analysis from an additional lens provided by the peer debriefer. The peer debriefer proved invaluable in helping identify potential codes and categories of codes that were not originally noted in my original review as well as by providing additional ways of describing aspects of the theory as it emerged.

In addition, in this particular study, as a deaf member of a small marginalized and historically oppressed group, and particularly of the deaf and hard-of-hearing oral subset of this group, I feel that the best individual to elicit the quality of depth needed for this research is one who has a common shared experience with the participants. I do feel this strengthened the study, as noted in most of the participant's sense of comfort and eagerness to participate in the study. This not only helped me establish a level of rapport and trustworthiness with the individual participants but also helped to elicit a depth of information that would be more difficult for one who may be challenged to fully understand the experiences of these students. In addition, being fluent in ASL as well as speech-reading both proved to be an invaluable way to connect with these participants as

well as to ensure accuracy in the transcription and coding processes that may otherwise have been more challenging by one who was not fluent in ASL and speech-reading both.

An emerging strength of this research that came about in the final stage of this work is the support in the literature of similar research documenting parallel findings (e.g. Melick 1998; Moschella, 1992; Oliva, 2004). It was heartening to return to the literature and carefully review the findings of their work and see the support that each of the research studies lend to each other.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to understand how the experience of ten oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their experiences integrating both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment influenced their identity development. The background, significance, and purpose of the study as well as key terms and definitions are explained in Chapter Two. Chapter Three highlights the methods used to collect and analyze the data for this study. This study used a qualitative grounded theory methodology to examine the experiences of these ten participants. This approach seeks to build substantive theory about a specific experience grounded in the data that emerges from the experiences of the participants (Birks & Mills, 2011; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). The participants and the key findings of their stories are introduced in Chapter Four. Using video-taped interviews, the participants shared their story of growing up as oral deaf or hard-of-hearing in the mainstreamed or inclusive educational environment and how they discovered Gallaudet University, a university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in which the primary communication modality is ASL. None of the participants were fluent in ASL nor had they had much

exposure to the deaf community yet they decided to enroll. The reasons for this decision were explored and then the participants shared their experiences integrating, both socially and academically, into the culturally deaf ASL environment of the university. The key finding that emerged from this study is that the experience of integrating, both socially and academically, into a predominantly signing deaf university environment initiates a process of developing a positive identity as a deaf or hard-of-hearing individual. In Chapter Five, the findings are discussed and implications for practice as well as recommendations for future research are shared.

## Appendix A

### Recruitment Letter

March 8, 2012

Dear Student:

My name is Jerri Lyn Dorminy, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education at University of Maryland, College Park. I am collecting data for my dissertation titled "The Experience of Non-Signing Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students and Their Academic and Social Integration Into A Predominantly Signing Deaf University Environment."

If you are a deaf or hard-of-hearing undergraduate student who was raised in a mainstreamed, oral and non-signing family and educational environment, and either participated in the JumpStart: New Signers Program or enrolled in ASL 101 or 102 when you arrived at Gallaudet, then I would love an opportunity to interview you.

Your total time commitment, including pre-interview meeting and interview, is anticipated to be at most 1 ½ hours.

If you are interested, I believe you will find this study to be worthwhile. Like you, I come from a mainstreamed, oral, non-signing background and attended Gallaudet. I am curious to learn more about the experience of others with similar backgrounds as I believe the common threads of the individual stories will provide much needed insight into this unique experience .

You can contact me at [jerri.dorminy@gallaudet.edu](mailto:jerri.dorminy@gallaudet.edu) to set up a time to meet that best fits both of our schedules. I will then share information on the confidentiality and plan for the interview processes. Please note that not all students can be selected. Selected students will receive a \$25 gift card from Amazon.com as compensation for their time.

Ideally, I would like to begin interviews as soon as possible with the goal to complete all interviews prior to the end of the semester on May 1, 2012.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me. Thank you for considering this request and I look forward to hearing from you.

Jerri Lyn Dorminy  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Counseling, Higher Education, & Special Education  
University of Maryland, College Park

## **Appendix B**

### **Screening Questionnaire**

- Are you deaf or hard of hearing?
  - If no, thank them for their interest and explain that this study targets deaf and hard of hearing students.
- Are you an undergraduate student?
  - If yes, go to next question.
  - If no, thank them for their interest and explain that this study targets undergraduate students.
- What year did you enroll at GU?
  - Determines potential effect of the Spring - Fall 2006 protest and subsequent accreditation/probation issues.
  - If students enrolled 2005-2006, 2006-2007 AY and 2007-2008 AY, anticipate issues around protest and accreditation. It is expected most of these students have graduated.
  - If students enrolled 2008 and beyond, less likely to have impact.
  - Ideal to have students enrolled 2010 and beyond to ensure less of an impact from protest and accreditation issues.
- Prior to attending GU, how well did you know ASL?
  - Did you participate in JumpStart New Signers Program?
    - If yes, potential participant.
  - Did you take ASL 101 or 102 your first semester at GU?
    - If yes, potential participant.

- Prior to attending GU, what was your primary means of communicating and understanding others in:
  - Educational environments?
  - Social environments?
  - Family environments?
    - Seeking responses that indicate primarily oral, non-signing means of communicating as opposed to primarily sign-language based means of communicating.

## Appendix C

### Student Demographic Questionnaire

Student Demographic Questionnaire

All information will be kept confidential.

Full Name (First Name and Last Name):

Gender

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Transgender

Ethnic or Racial Background

- ☐ African American/Black
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Pacific Islander or Southeast Asian
- ☐ White
- ☐ Biracial or Multiracial

Permanent Address:

Campus or Alternate Address:

Email Address:

Date of Birth:

Age of Onset of Deafness:

Decibel Loss, if known, right ear:

Decibel Loss, if known, left ear:



Do you consider yourself hard of hearing or deaf?

- ☐ hard of hearing
- ☐ deaf
- ☐ Other:

Do you wear hearing aids?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, left ear only
- ☐ Yes, right ear only
- ☐ Yes, both ears

Do you have a Cochlear Implant?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, left ear only
- ☐ Yes, right ear only
- ☐ Yes, both ears

Are your parents hearing, hard of hearing, or deaf? Mother is ....

- ☐ hearing
- ☐ hard of hearing
- ☐ deaf

Are your parents hearing, hard of hearing, or deaf? Father is ....

- ☐ hearing
- ☐ hard of hearing
- ☐ deaf

Do you have any hard of hearing or deaf siblings?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

What was your primary means of communicating with your family?

- ☐ Oral / speech and speechreading
- ☐ Cued Speech
- ☐ Signed English or Signing Exact English
- ☐ Sign Supported Speech
- ☐ Total Communication / Signing with Voice
- ☐ American Sign Language
- ☐ Other

What was your primary means of communicating in the school system prior to enrolling at Gallaudet?

- ☐ Oral / speech and speechreading
- ☐ Cued Speech
- ☐ Signed English or Signing Exact English
- ☐ Sign Supported Speech
- ☐ Total Communication / Signing with Voice
- ☐ American Sign Language
- ☐ Other

Where did you attend elementary school?

Was your elementary school ...

- ☐ mainstreamed?
- ☐ school for the deaf?
- ☐ public?
- ☐ private?

Where did you attend high school?

Was your high school ...

- ☐ mainstreamed?
- ☐ school for the deaf?
- ☐ public?
- ☐ private?

What year did you enroll at Gallaudet University?

Did you participate in JumpStart: New Signers Program when you enrolled at Gallaudet?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Did you take ASL 101 or 102 when you enrolled at Gallaudet?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Are you a transfer student?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

If you answered yes as a transfer student, what was the name of your previous college?

What is your current class standing?

- ☐ Freshmen
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

What is your current preferred mode of communication?

- ☐ Oral/Speech and speech reading
- ☐ Cued Speech
- ☒ Signed English
- ☐ Sign supported speech
- ☐ Total Communication (Signing with Voice/SimCom)
- ☐ American Sign Language
- ☐ Other:

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Protocols**

#### **Introduction**

Prior to the interview, set up the room with two chairs facing each other, a table, and water for the participant. There will be two video cameras, one framed on the participant from the front, and one framed on both the participant and the interviewer from an angle.

When participant arrives, greet them warmly and thank them for coming. I will introduce myself as the researcher and explain, again, the purpose of the interview, what will happen during the interview, and ensure confidentiality. I will also give these students a bit of background about myself and my interest in this topic, sharing with them that we have similar backgrounds in electing to attend the university without any prior exposure to ASL and I am curious about their perceptions of this experience. I will give students both a consent form and a background demographic questionnaire to fill out. Give them time to read over it and fill them out. Ask them if they have any questions before we start.

#### **Question Format**

Questions will be open-ended questions designed to elicit lengthy responses about their experiences. The interviewer's role is to listen to the participants and ask questions that encourage the participant to expand upon their responses and to clarify as needed. The interviewer will also paraphrase their own words back to them during the interview to ensure clarity and understanding of their experiences.

#### **Questions**

The primary research question is: how do oral non-signing deaf and hard-of-hearing students integrate both academically and socially into a predominantly signing university environment, and how does this process influence their deaf identity.

Pre-interview questions will be a warm-up process where I will ask them a bit about themselves while reviewing the background demographic questionnaire as an opportunity to begin learning about their experiences. During this process, the researcher will continue developing rapport by connecting across common shared experiences while also maintaining a level of respect for the uniqueness of their experience as well.

***Question #1.*** I see from your responses to the background data sheet that you attended (name of high school). Tell me a bit about your educational experiences at this school prior to attending Gallaudet University. Describe both your academic experiences and your social experiences.

Followup questions:

- What were some of your adaptive strategies you used to help you in your academic and social experiences?
- At this time in your life, prior to coming to Gallaudet, how did you identify yourself in terms of your deaf identity?

***Question #2.*** Describe how you first learned about Gallaudet University and what influenced your decision to apply to and attend this university?

Followup questions:

- Were you aware of the primary mode of communication as ASL?
- What were your thoughts about this in light of your own lack of knowledge of ASL?

- How did you expect to address your lack of knowledge of ASL in light of this being the primary communication mode?
- Describe your feelings and thoughts as time to enroll became closer and on your first day arriving at Gallaudet.

**Question #3:** Describe your experience integrating into the academic and social culture of Gallaudet. Tell me about your first day on campus, your first few weeks, your first semester, especially as a new signer.

Followup questions:

- What was your experience adjusting to the academic environment? Of participating in the classroom, interacting with your professors, and being involved in the learning experiences?
- What was your experience adjusting to the social environment? Of interacting with your peers and being involved with the campus community?
- Overall, what is your experience integrating into the signing deaf university environment? What experiences in terms of your academic and social integration stand out the most for you?

**Question #4.** How would you describe your deaf identity at this point in your life? What experiences at Gallaudet have shaped or influenced your thinking about your identity and how?

**Question #5.** In hindsight, how do you feel about your decision to attend Gallaudet University? There are many other individuals who have similar backgrounds as yours or educators who work with individuals with similar

backgrounds as yours, what would you want them to understand about your experience?



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