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# PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSE EDUCATORS REGARDING ETHNIC-MINORITY DEAF COLLEGE STUDENTS, ROLE MODELS, AND DIVERSITY

**I**N A QUALITATIVE STUDY, the researchers documented the perceptions of deaf and hearing ethnically diverse university faculty and staff regarding issues related to the education of ethnic-minority deaf college students. These experienced educators commented on the importance of ethnic-minority role models for deaf college students, the academic preparedness of ethnic-minority deaf students, these students' level of comfort on campus, and the success of institutional efforts to increase awareness regarding ethnic diversity. The insightful reflections of these diverse educators can be informative in improving the educational experience of ethnic-minority deaf students.

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In deaf education, there is an increasing awareness that cultural and language diversity within the Deaf community may influence the educational process (Christensen & Delgado, 1993; Parasnis, 1997). The primary focus of those involved in studying Deaf culture has been on establishing that there exist distinct Deaf and hearing worlds (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Parasnis, 1996). However, it is becoming evident that within each of these worlds, not everyone has equal social status or equal access to information. The percentage of ethnic-minority deaf children has continued to increase (Holden-Pitt & Diaz, 1998), but it has been found that ethnic-minority deaf children as a group do not fare well in existing educational programs, and in fact are more often

labeled as learning disabled than non-Hispanic White children (Cohen, Fischgrund, & Redding, 1990; Samar, Parasnis, & Berent, 1998). Hence, the negative effect of ethnic-minority status on the retention and success of deaf students, and how to counteract it, is a growing concern among those involved in deaf education.

One often-mentioned strategy to increase the retention and success of ethnic-minority deaf students is to increase the number of ethnic-minority educators so that all students can benefit from having diverse positive role models to emulate. Available data clearly suggest a serious paucity of such role models. In their survey of 6,043 professionals in 349 deaf education programs in the United States, Andrews and Jordan (1993) found that

only 10.4% of professionals in deaf education were people of color. Of these, only 11.7% were deaf. Nevertheless, it has not been documented in the research literature whether the availability of ethnic-minority role models is perceived by educators to be an important positive influence on the retention and success of ethnic-minority deaf students.

Another strategy followed by many colleges and universities to increase the retention and success of ethnic-minority students is to address issues related to diversity in curricular and cocurricular activities. In addition to explicit discussion of ethnic diversity and race, programs to celebrate students' multicultural backgrounds are often offered on campuses. Whether such efforts are perceived by educators as effective in positively influencing the retention and success of ethnic-minority deaf students is not documented in the research literature.

Educators and educational planners need explicit and systematically collected information from experienced educators on which to base educational and institutional policies for incorporating diversity into educational and staffing programs. The purpose of the present study was to document the perceptions of professionals in deaf education regarding the importance of role models for deaf ethnic-minority students and the effectiveness of efforts by an educational institution to promote awareness of ethnic diversity among members of the campus community. A unique feature of the present study was the inclusion of male and female deaf participants from a variety of ethnic-minority backgrounds who were serving deaf college students.

## Method

### Participants

The study participants were faculty or staff at the Rochester Institute of

Technology (RIT), which includes the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) as one of its colleges. The participants dealt with ethnic-minority deaf students on a regular basis or were key personnel involved in cocurricular activities planned for ethnic-minority students. These faculty and staff were working and interacting with students in a highly diverse and integrated college environment. About 1,100 deaf college students attend RIT, sharing the campus with about 11,000 hearing college students. At NTID, faculty use both sign language and speech to teach. At other colleges of RIT, deaf students are supported, as appropriate, by interpreting services, captioning services, and tutoring and note-taking services.

A heterogeneous group consisting of 21 faculty, staff, and administrators was interviewed. Fifty-two percent were faculty; 43% were professional staff, including administrators; 5% were general staff. Seventy-six percent were women; 43% were deaf; 48% were members of ethnic minorities. The participants' time at the university ranged from 1 to more than 25 years. Participants took part in interviews voluntarily; confidentiality was guaranteed.

### Procedure

The participants were interviewed individually in sessions of about 2 hours each; the interview questions are listed in Appendix A. Both authors of the present article acted as interviewers. We used the same protocol and took detailed notes, which were shared with each interviewee for approval. We both analyzed the final transcript of each interview, working alone and together, to reach consensus on common themes.

## Results and Discussion

In the present section, we provide a summary of the themes that arose from the interviews as well as suggestions that were made by the participants. Quotations excerpted from the interviews have been lightly edited to preserve anonymity. Each paragraph within an extract is from a different participant. We have excluded information that was of only local interest or comments that were unique to NTID or RIT.

### Role Models

All ethnic-minority faculty and staff, as well as all key personnel working with ethnic-minority students, recognized that it is important to have role models and that having sufficient diversity in the work force allows ethnic-minority students to have a choice in choosing role models:

Role models are both essential and critical. They serve several purposes: (1) We talk about the importance of cultural diversity, but having that kind of representation on campus demonstrates a real commitment on the part of the Institute [i.e., National Technical Institute for the Deaf] community. I am not necessarily talking about the idea that, for example, all African Americans need African American role models, but that minorities need to be visible. (2) Having role models also creates a climate of comfort and a sense of belonging. (3) Having role models inspires self-confidence.

[Role models] are extremely important. For many minorities, there is a lack of role models in the formative years, especially when getting ready for the real world. Minorities need to be able to identify with someone. I didn't have any role models growing up, and that made me think that I

couldn't achieve because I didn't see anyone out there who was doing it who looked like me. Having role models shows that you *can* do it. The support helps too. . . . Many deaf minority people say, "I want to be the first X deaf whatever." I have succeeded in part just to spite people who told me I couldn't! It is also good for the White majority to be more aware.

Deaf minority students need mentors and role models, because the hearing world tends to have false assumptions about deaf people as a whole. If you combine this with looking different, you have a double whammy. If you're female, that's a third strike against you. It's hard enough for hearing, but even worse for deaf. One can see how those models succeeded despite being Black; e.g., a White deaf person hasn't had that experience. In this case the deafness isn't so important, but we need more ethnically diverse faculty. Deaf students can then see how they've succeeded.

Some ethnic-minority faculty and staff felt that it was important for ethnic-minority students to have ethnic-minority role models, while others considered abilities and qualities that one admired to be the appropriate criteria for the selection of role models:

We need more role models for minority students to be able to identify with. If you can see someone successful who looks like you, it increases your confidence. Seeing a role model like themselves gives the students something they can strive for.

Students need to see faculty who look like them. Why is it important? The word *kindred* comes to mind. One needs to find kindred spirit with another person. People want to be

around someone like themselves. This is not related to prejudice—rather, with comfort level. If you put a group of people who are supposed to be similar together, then they don't expect others to evaluate them. Sometimes if you're with a group of people who aren't like you, you feel like you're being judged even when you are not.

It's important to see other students like you doing well, also to see people like yourself in authority, with high expectations from teachers. . . . We need more minority teachers. That tells the student that someone like them has succeeded. If there's only one, that is seen as an exception, "odd." If you see more, you realize it isn't odd.

For me, it is humanity first; ethnicity is not an issue. . . . Role models are picked by the individuals depending on their needs and goals. Many of my role models are not people of color.

It is difficult for me to answer how people of color feel on this campus because I see people for their abilities and skills. I do not think of myself as a person of color. Sometimes I notice that people around me are very white, but I don't think of my own color.

[Ethnic-minority students] need role models they can admire. They need role models for their education, jobs, and dreams. If you want to be an athlete, you look up to the best role model you can have. It is not important what race or color they are.

None of the ethnic-minority participants believed that they presented themselves as role models solely to ethnic-minority students, although some, especially faculty, were aware

that the students saw them as such. The faculty members had considerable experience dealing with ethnic-minority students both in and out of class:

Many minority students come to me for advice. I receive lots of e-mails related to problems students are having with professors, classes, or personal relationships; they come to me specifically because I'm a minority myself. They also ask for help proof-reading papers, feedback on content for class projects as well. . . . But there's only one of me.

I see many kinds of minorities: Asian, Hispanic, African American. I have not formally mentored, but informally I have quite frequently. If I recognize promise, I try to provide opportunities and encourage minority students to continue their education.

[I deal with] mostly non-African Americans: Hispanic, Asian (including Indian), African (not African Americans). Maybe they go to other faculty too, but I'm a member of a minority group, and they feel that I understand their situation, why they might have deficiencies, without making them feel bad.

Although the administration did not specifically expect or select these faculty and staff to mentor ethnic-minority students, those students nonetheless sought them out. In addition, some of them served as advisers to ethnic-minority student clubs and associations. Ethnic-minority faculty and staff are quite willing to serve as mentors and give the time the students need. However, these out-of-class interactions are often beyond their assigned job responsibilities. It was noted by some that there is a degree of trust and rapport that can

develop between ethnic-minority students and faculty that can have a positive impact on retention:

Attending to the minority students' concerns requires that we go beyond our routine job. The administration does not understand. They don't appreciate the process or the magnitude of the task and the time and individual attention we need to do it right.

Because of the lack of role models (very few Deaf Black staff and faculty), some of the students tend to be more than a little wary about initiating contact. When contact is made between student and faculty/staff, it can take quite a while to feel trusted.

Some ethnic-minority faculty and staff noted that their small numbers were stretched too thinly to cover the added burden of dealing with ethnic-minority students, and that consequently they were in danger of getting "burned out":

The magnifying glass is on each minority person as if they are representing the whole group. If you have a critical mass, it will be easier.

There is no support mechanism for minority faculty and staff. We use up the person who is interested in diversity issues and that leads to a burnout. We have a number of minority faculty and staff who we do not use. The same people get on committees and other Institute activities. We need to make an effort to be more inclusive. We need to bring more people of color into the decision-making process.

I do not know of any mechanism by which minority faculty time and efforts spent in advising minority

students are rewarded. This is not part of your appraisal. I do not see an easy way to incorporate it into the system either. A White faculty member may say that students did not come to me but it is not my fault. I see that point, but something should be done to prevent minority faculty from feeling overburdened.

### Academic Preparedness

Several ethnic-minority participants expressed the opinion that ethnic-minority deaf students tend to be academically underprepared compared to White deaf students. All expressed the opinion that institutional help needs to be given to those students who are underprepared and that they do not need to be stigmatized:

We need to look at the question of whether they have any academic weaknesses and get them the appropriate academic support that they need. Many nonminority students face that issue too, but they don't face the minority issue at the same time. It may be more difficult emotionally for a minority student to accept the fact that they have an academic weakness. They've had to face so many more barriers, that it may be harder to deal with. And it's hard for them to understand that those weaknesses are obvious to faculty pretty soon, and that they are not being singled out because of their minority status. . . . We need to help faculty have some sensitivity about the fact that this is a harder message for minority students to accept in a nonthreatening way.

If a student needs remediation, by all means it should be provided. However, how this service is viewed is important. People who need help should not be labeled permanently as "needing help" as a group. . . . Using words such as "remedial program"

versus "accelerated program" is a language of lesser expectation.

Several participants noted that once an underprepared student is admitted, it is the Institute's responsibility to make every effort to ensure that student's success. Both academic and cocurricular support are necessary:

Nationally, minority students come to college underprepared, with cultural differences. We don't provide resources to students, just collect their money and wave bye-bye if they fail; we almost expect them to fail. . . . [If] a student is accepted, a minority faculty member should contact them; first impressions are key.

If we have recruited [minority students] knowing that they are less prepared, we are doing them a disservice. We need to have support services and "remedial services" more than we currently have.

Anyway, kids come less prepared. What to do? NTID should not accept students without making sure that they can graduate. Don't just accept students for the sake of the numbers; rather, implement ways to help students graduate. We need an organized tutorial for these students (don't call them "high risk"). If we had better support services, students might stay: not just academic support, but effective role modeling.

### Comfort Level

Ethnic-minority deaf students were not perceived as being comfortable on campus, though some were perceived as more comfortable than others because for some, though not all, being part of the Deaf community transcended their ethnic-minority status. Many participants noted that it was sometimes difficult to find common

cause between deaf and hearing students of the same ethnic-minority background. Hearing status kept them separate. Some noted that a lot of lip service was paid to the celebration of diversity, but that their campus was still basically a conservative White campus. In addition, in terms of allocation of real resources, both budgetary and personnel, administrative support was perceived to be lacking:

Too many of my colleagues poo-poo the idea that anything is different for these students, probably out of an effort to idealize as compared to reality. They want the playing field to be level, but it really isn't yet. Some people just don't get it and never will. Maybe some faculty should be offered an early retirement incentive in order to change the atmosphere.

Minority students do not feel comfortable on campus. . . . But in sheer numbers there just aren't enough. We need to get more minority students here. We need to have scholarship money and beat the bushes to get it.

Minority students are used to being among the majority culture, but that doesn't mean that they are comfortable. I think students are generally not comfortable in the environment, as evidenced by some of the protests that occurred in the last couple of years.

College is hard enough to adjust to without the extra burden of being a minority. Even if they don't access the available services, they need to know that they're there. The concept of a critical mass is important; there again have to be enough minorities that they're visible on campus.

Some participants recommended that if incoming minority students

could be identified, faculty, staff, and other students could reach out to them and make them feel more welcome. This needed to happen early to have an impact:

What would make an enormous difference would be one-to-one mentoring for incoming freshmen—for example, a faculty member who isn't an adviser, but just a mentor (to a maximum number of students). The mentor doesn't have to be the same race or ethnic group. It would be part of the faculty member's job. Many kids arrive here and get lost in the shuffle. The mentor should be faculty, not people from Student Affairs.

I believe that the first 3 months of mentoring influence the retention of minority students.

Faculty and staff who are from different backgrounds can train other faculty to be culturally sensitive and aware. . . . Not recognizing that they are different, or ignoring that they are different, does not work. We do not have a good training program in place for increasing cultural sensitivity. There is not a good articulation between employers and trainers. We need in-service and professional development for . . . faculty and staff.

Based on my experience, I would say that for us to understand [ethnic-minority students] and their culture would contribute to their success and retention. We need to meet them halfway. We need to take the time to spend time with them, show them that we are interested and want to learn from them, rather than leave it up to them. In their culture, they may not be comfortable reaching out to our culture, so we need to reach out to them.

## Institute-Wide Diversity Efforts

Institute-wide efforts toward increasing diversity on campus were not known to the majority of the participants and were not viewed as likely to be sincere.

I am not aware of anything concrete that's happening other than talking about it. . . . I have no idea what they're doing in student recruitment. Maybe they're doing great stuff, but I frankly doubt it.

I don't think that the Institute has examined how they present themselves to students, including White students, about diversity. What I perceive is "PC" image control, rather than content (e.g., every picture must contain a Black and an Asian, etc.).

There is a lot of lip service, but not a willingness to pause and put yourselves in the shoes of the student with color.

Window-dressing. I was furious during strategic planning: "We can't find qualified minority faculty. . . ." That's been the excuse.

In some participants' opinion, students and faculty who perceived an injustice had no recourse other than filing a formal grievance. The personnel department was seen by some as working for the Institute, and so people would be reluctant to go there with a grievance. Using informal networking to resolve the problem was seen by some as the only way to proceed. As one participant said, "There is no clear linking of our program with other services. When we solve the problems, there is no clear-cut way about how we do this. Networking occurs, but it is because of the individuals involved."

Some participants mentioned diversity issues regarding women:

At the current time, our diversity plan does not include gender, so I would change the working definition of diversity to include women.

When I think about diversity, I want to include sexual orientation and gender as well as ethnicity.

There are parallels between ethnicity and gender. . . . I have been more discriminated against because I'm a woman.

Some participants mentioned that an ethnic-minority student would not necessarily approach someone from the same ethnic-minority group, but simply someone whom the student perceived as sympathetic. Not only ethnic minorities, but also women, would thus be approached.

### Conclusion

Many initiatives have been taken to increase awareness about diversity at the university we studied, and it seems that these efforts have not been enough to create a positive campus climate regarding diversity. In their comments, several participants noted that a critical mass of ethnic-minority faculty and staff and ethnic-minority students was necessary on any campus to change the campus cli-

mate and institutional awareness regarding diversity. Participants also commented on the burnout experienced by ethnic-minority faculty and staff and their feeling that their work with ethnic-minority students was underappreciated. They took their responsibility as role models to all students seriously, and were particularly aware of this responsibility in regard to ethnic-minority students. The participants were also aware that some ethnic-minority students may come underprepared for college, and said that they felt that the university should use sensitivity in offering such students the necessary services. The participants also felt that institutional diversity efforts needed to be increased and needed to be more visible.

In conclusion, the present study documented the informed reflections of diverse educators involved in daily interactions with ethnic-minority deaf students. Their perceptions regarding the importance of role models, the effectiveness of institution-wide diversity efforts, and the academic preparedness and comfort level of ethnic-minority deaf students on a college campus merit further study across college campuses to determine if these perceptions are generalizable.

### Note

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## Appendix A

### Primary Questions Asked in Participant Interviews

What are your views regarding the importance of having role models for deaf ethnic-minority students?

Based on your experience, what do you see as the important issues related to academic success and retention of deaf ethnic-minority students on this campus? Do deaf ethnic-minority students feel comfortable on this campus? What suggestions do you have about improving their retention rate?

What are your views about the Institute's efforts to increase faculty and student diversity? Do you have any suggestions on how to improve these efforts?

If you were in charge, what changes would you make to improve the current system in order to more effectively address issues concerning deaf ethnic-minority students?