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## PROVIDING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR A DEAF-BLIND STUDENT IN A MAINSTREAM UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

Eugene A. Bourquin<sup>1</sup>

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Today, deaf-blind individuals can and do pursue higher education. A deaf-blind student presents unique challenges for the traditional support facility, even when they may have a history of service to deaf and/or blind students. Additional considerations are presented for an academic institution when coordinating services, using technologies, and addressing special needs for a deaf-blind student. By examining the experience of New York University with a deaf-blind student, related issues can be explored; coordination of dual services, early planning, and cross-departmental cooperation are necessary to succeed in providing the required support and allowing the student to fulfill educational requirements and goals. By adopting a proactive stance toward designing and providing services, and following a philosophy of equal access within and beyond statutory requirements, qualified staff can accomplish the task to fruition.

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In the past ten academic years, from 1984 though 1994, Gallaudet University has annually served approximately 24 students with visual impairments, (Gallaudet University, Office for Students with Disabilities). Many other colleges also have a tradition of providing services for deaf or blind students, but rarely do the conditions present themselves concurrently in mainstream college settings. In 1991, New York University, the largest private university in the United States, was presented with just such a circumstance. An international deaf-blind student approached the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at N.Y.U. with inquiries about attending graduate classes in pursuit of a masters degree.

A review of the literature on the rehabilitation and education of deaf-blind people finds a remarkable lack of references to higher education. Very little has been written regarding high-functioning deaf-blind adults. Almost all the literature reviewed by the author found that strategies for deaf-blind clients and students concluded with vocational training and supported work environments, and did not address matters beyond secondary education. The lack of research and published materials may leave agencies and educational institutions unprepared and

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without reference resources. One of the exceptions to this general paucity in the literature was an article by a deaf-blind individual, Mr. Arthur Roehrig. Roehrig detailed the components required for a successful educational environment:

- \* interpreter services, including training and evaluation
- \* transcription services, for print to Braille
- \* transportation
- \* guide services
- \* budget planning

Using Roehrig's list of required components, we can review the year-long events at New York University.

### The Student/Consumer

The student was a twenty-six year old Japanese male. He was adventitiously blinded by illness at the age of three months, with visual acuity that only allowed for recognition of shadows and light. The student was also hard-of-hearing, but learned to articulate spoken Japanese. At the age of five, again due to illness, he became profoundly deaf with a loss of over one hundred decibels in the better ear.

The student's visual perception did not allow him to see sign language or read printed material unassisted. Some limited use of close-captioned television (CCTV) equipment, which electronically enlarges print, was possible for short written discourse but too slow and physically demanding a task to be of practical use for academic studies.

The student had attended schools for the blind through high school and then was granted a bachelor's degree at a mainstream college. Communication was provided by print-on-palm, finger Braille (receptive and expressive Braille using the fingers on both hands as if they were a Braille machine), and by Braille produced on strips of paper from a manual transcription machine. Until the individual visited the United States during the mid-1980's, and was exposed to sign language, those three methods were used for all communication. Learning American Sign Language at conventions and meetings in the United States opened up new and improved pathways to language and learning.

The consumer was fluent in standard English (having studied English and German through to his undergraduate college years) and the Braille codes used in America. He also attended Gallaudet University for several months to improve his expressive and receptive tactile American Sign Language skills prior to applying to N.Y.U.

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### The Center for Students with Disabilities

A pre-admissions meeting was arranged between the Coordinator of Interpreting Services, who also functioned in the role of deafness specialist, and the prospective student. Following the standard admission procedures, the student was admitted to N.Y.U. as a graduate student in the Deafness Rehabilitation program.

The N.Y.U. Center for Students with Disabilities (CSU) was divided into support roles that served various populations: blind and visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, learning disabled, and orthopedically impaired. As far as the staff could determine, the institution had no experience with deaf-blind individuals.

The Center was funded through the general budget of the University and support from private foundations, as well as reimbursement from government agencies for particular services. Both the size and relative financial stability of the institution allowed N.Y.U. to deal with budgetary constraints.

When the student formally approached the CSD for services, a meeting was held to determine how to deliver the necessary entitlement. This involved several complicated decisions. N.Y.U. had a critical mass of both deaf and blind students. Most of the assistive technology in place for blind and visually impaired students used speech synthesis and reproduction technology. Although equipment was available for producing Braille transcription, it was infrequently used, and no staff at the CSD had the requisite training in using the machinery. Furthermore, although N.Y.U. was experienced in providing high-quality interpreting services for the deaf student body, only one of the interpreters had a background in tactile sign language.

Complicating the situation was the fact that any staff at CSD who had preparation in working with blind students could not communicate with the deaf-blind student without using an interpreter. The decision was made to place the coordination of comprehensive services with the Coordinator of Interpreting Services. The role included most of the areas detailed in Mr. Roehrig's model for support services, including interpreting, transcription, mobility, and training.

### Tactile Sign Language Interpreting Services

The primary concern was to make classes accessible. For the student and CSD this meant quality interpreting services. A certified interpreter with an extensive background working with deaf-blind people was recruited to teach an in-service training session which

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focused on the special issues and concerns of working with deaf-blind consumers. A letter was sent to New York area interpreters inviting them to the training. As a result, an extended roster of interpreters, including three with deaf-blind experience, was established; training was provided in tactile sign language, team interpreting, basic guide techniques, and specifics regarding the communication skills of the individual student. The interpreters were given the opportunity to share previous experiences and ask questions. This training proved invaluable to the success of the service.

Further policies were put in place to maintain quality interpreter services. Each class assignment required two interpreters for the deaf-blind student, allowing each "team" member adequate relief and support in the work environment. The interpreters were compensated at a higher rate of pay (approximately 25% above the prevailing rates), considering the special efforts, additional responsibilities, and skills involved in tactile interpreting.

### **Orientation and Mobility Training**

N.Y.U. is a large, sprawling, urban campus. It is intercut with city streets and traffic, busy walkways, and numerous buildings. Navigation became the second concern for the CSD. A certified orientation and mobility teacher (OEM), fluent in sign language, was hired to provide instruction for traveling to and throughout the campus. This resource, a sign-fluent O&M teacher, is a rare commodity, and fortunately New York City had one full-time instructor with these skills.

The Orientation and Mobility teacher worked with the student to insure maximum independence in traveling from the dormitory to various N.Y.U. facilities, and navigation of the dormitory and cafeteria.

The original O&M training consumed approximately thirty-five hours. Follow-up education provided later in the year (detailed below) brought the total duration to about fifty hours.

### **Housing**

When the student moved to campus housing, providing appropriate dormitory facilities became the next focus. To insure the safety of the student, the CSD worked with the N.Y.U. housing department to locate the safest and most accessible dormitory facilities. After an appropriate site was chosen, considering the physical location, safety, and staffing, an in-service session was planned for the residential manager and dormitory floor supervisors. Relationships and communication were established between the CSD and the residence hall to ensure a quick resolution should any problems occur. The residential employees then held an orientation with

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all the students living in the facility on the dormitory floor to alleviate any concerns. A briefing was also held with the cafeteria staff in the building, explaining how the student would communicate with them for meals. The mobility instructor assisted in making printed cards with Braille legends, allowing the student to order various menu items.

The communication established between the housing employees and the CSD office, as well as the educational efforts within the dormitory, proved to be thorough. For the year of study, no major problems occurred.

The Center for Students with Disabilities also arranged for special equipment to be installed in the dormitory room. At first a Sonic Alert system was purchased and tested. This equipment could detect when the telephone, smoke alarm, or door bell was activated. The student, wearing a belt pager, could receive various vibrating signals indicating which device was active. A consultant was hired to install the equipment, but after several attempts the equipment did not function properly. Instead, individual smoke alarm, door bell, and telephone devices were installed using bright flashing strobe lights. The student could detect the strobe and respond appropriately. Outfitting the room in such a manner meant that the student would remain in the same dormitory room throughout his studies, and agreement from the housing department was obtained.

### Braille Transcription

Perhaps the most difficult and frustrating aspect of providing services was Braille transcription. No institution in the New York area could provide the large volume of Braille transcription needed for text books and notes. There was no commercial outlet where written text could routinely be transferred to Braille, and none of New York universities had previously offered this service to a deaf-blind student.

In order to succeed the CSD had to coordinate various in-house resources. Working late hours and weekends, staff familiarized themselves with the various scanner and Braille printing equipment. The equipment, previously housed in the library, was moved to the CSD facility. Each teacher, for each class, was contacted to determine the essential materials needed for the semester. The materials were identified and then prioritized. In a limited number of cases materials were summarized before transcription. A blind student, with equipment for transcription in his home, was contracted to help produce and review the Braille materials.

Realizing that this task was monumental, during the first semester the CSD arranged for TeleSensory Incorporated, a company located in California, to visit the campus and demonstrate the TeleBraille II (TBI) equipment for the center and student. This equipment allows for the display of documents directly from a computer disk onto a strip of twenty Braille

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characters. It can access information from word processing programs and be used to communicate via a TTY. The student ordered the equipment using his own funds. When the TBII arrived, the printed text material only needed to be "scanned" from the page to computer disk. This eliminated the time consuming work of actually printing the Braille. Some materials were requested directly on computer disk from the publishers. When materials were unsuitable for scanning (because they were printed in unreadable fonts or were not clear enough) the CSD staff would retype the materials.

### Special Needs

Notetakers were recruited from each class and the notes transcribed to Braille. The CSD office secretary learned to fingerspell using the manual alphabet and learned to be proficient with print-on-palm.

In addition to using classroom and dormitory facilities, the student participated in various extra curricular activities. Each situation was considered separately. For example, the student was active in several campus organizations. He became president of the university deaf student organization and participated in the Japanese club. Interpreter services were provided. The student also used the gymnasium facilities on a regular basis. Further orientation and mobility instruction was provided on the use of the pool and running track. The CSD coordinated services for numerous situations such as medical, international student office, and bursars/records office visits.

A freelance consultant was hired for several hours each week to assist the student in adjunct activities. These included library research, setting up new computer equipment and programs, and other miscellaneous tasks.

For the required internship assignments, the student was placed with several agencies that served deaf clients. By working with the site managers at the internship locations, communication issues were anticipated. This reduced, but did not eliminate, the need for off-campus interpreting services.

### Outcome and Discussions

In 1992, with a Japanese television crew present for the event, the student was graduated from N.Y.U. with a Master of Arts degree.

As discussed in Mr. Roehrig's 1985 model, the major areas of concern requiring planning were: Braille transcription, orientation and mobility, training, and interpreting services.

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Subjects that did not require special planning included the budget concerns. Since policies were previously established for budgetary considerations, and N.Y.U. had many deaf and blind students, no financial issues became significant problems. A modest grant from the CSD helped compensate for the mobility education. Regarding other areas that did not present major obstacles, guide services and transportation issues were satisfactorily resolved when O&M training was provided.

In retrospect, two major contributing factors were involved in the success of service delivery. The first was the planning involved in providing services. Whenever possible, needs were anticipated, a plan was made to implement the services, and the process was monitored. These needs had to be identified early, since some services were simply unavailable. The staff of the Center for Students with Disabilities needed to be flexible and willing to establish new procedures and policies.

The second factor, far more amorphous, was the attitude of the institution and its willingness to adhere, not only to the "letter of the law," but to go beyond statutory requirements. Throughout the experience, the employees of the university were consistently cooperative, understanding, and willing to assist. The philosophy that pervaded the institution was appropriately open to success for students with disabilities.

The situation presented several problems in the delivery of services. Communication barriers between the student and CSD staff meant that all services were handled by the interpreter coordinator - with additional responsibilities not usually included in her professional role. This required a quick learning curve to deal with new situations, rehabilitation support, and communication assistive devices.

Additionally, Braille services, even in a large metropolitan area such as New York, were not readily available from non-profit or commercial agencies. University professionals providing support services should plan as soon as possible for technological solutions when large-volume Braille transcription is unavailable.

Rod Macdonald (1992) refers to the deaf-blind student as "the forgotten minority within the deaf population." To provide proper services in a mainstream college environment to deaf-blind students, institutions must be willing to bridge traditional roles, anticipate and prioritize needs, and be sustained by a student centered philosophy of equal accessibility.

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