

# Deaf Culture

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It often comes as a surprise to hearing people that there is a group of deaf individuals who refer to themselves as the Deaf community. This community functions in many ways like other minority groups. But unlike other minority groups, which are defined by racial or ethnic boundaries, the American Deaf Community is a *linguistic* minority group. Their language is American Sign Language (ASL). This "Teacher Tipsheet" focuses specifically on the *culture* of the American Deaf community and tips for working with the culturally Deaf individual in postsecondary and proprietary programs.

Because Deaf people are a linguistic minority group, they are often overlooked or otherwise invisible to the majority of the hearing population. They may interact with hearing people using their voices, or they may choose to use an interpreter or even pen and paper as their communication mode. They may or may not use hearing aids, assistive technology, or other auxiliary services such as C-Print™, CART, or interpreters. They also have a variety of educational backgrounds and written communication skills.

The Deaf community has common labels for identifying who they are. These labels have strong connotations, which assist other members of the deaf community in understanding where that particular member stands within the community. Offered here are definitions of certain terms used by the Deaf community, but with a twist, the words are defined from "deaf-world's perspective." They do not define themselves based on the degree of hearing loss, like the majority of the hearing community does, instead, they focus on the individuals themselves and what communication method they prefer to use and other behavioral and cultural values and norms. For this reason, it may be different from the standard definition that people are accustomed to understanding.

To fully understand the deaf community, one needs to figuratively "put on a different pair of glasses" than one normally uses. In this regard, one is seeing the Deaf World from the inside out, instead of outside in.

## Common terms used within the Deaf community:

*deaf* – Within the Deaf community, the word "deaf" refers to the audiological level or degree of hearing loss. It also is used as a generic term, as in the phrase "deaf and hard of hearing people", to refer to *all* people with a hearing loss regardless of which language they use to communicate and/or their cultural identify.

*Deaf* – This term specifically represents members of the collective Deaf community who share a common language (ASL) and common values, norms, and behaviors. They often celebrate and cherish their deafness because it affords them the unique privilege of sharing a common history and language. They do not look at themselves as people who have lost something (i.e. hearing) but as people with a beautiful language that emulates any other language.

*Hard of Hearing* – This term is often used to refer to people with a hearing loss who don't fit into the standard "Deaf" category. These people may or may not use ASL, but they generally feel more comfortable within the hearing community. There are several ways that the deaf community determines whether they feel a person is Deaf or hard of hearing, but the important thing is how individuals feel about their own identity.

*Hearing Impaired* – This term is often used by the media and the general hearing society to refer to people with a hearing loss. But within the Deaf community, this term is likened to an insult because it fails to appreciate the cultural and linguistic privileges shared.

*Deafened* – It can be very traumatic for individuals who spent the majority of their lives as hearing to either suddenly or progressively lose their hearing. These individuals face unique challenges in finding new ways to communicate effectively with their family, friends, and colleagues. Some may eventually, albeit in limited ways, become involved with the Deaf community.

#### **Guidelines for instructors:**

- 1) Expect the same from culturally Deaf students as you would from hard of hearing or hearing persons. They all need to be able to handle the same course load.
- 2) It's okay to feel some anxiety with a Deaf student who uses ASL to communicate. This should not cause you to make drastic changes in teaching style unless it interferes with the ASL user's ability to get information from interpreters (e.g., turning off the lights completely during the movies). In this case, allow the interpreter to bring a small lamp or dim the room lights enough to allow the student to still see the interpreter. Better yet, use a closed captioned version of the movie.
- 3) Find out the preferred communication mode (e.g., interpreters, C-Print™, CART, speech, etc.). These may be different within and outside of the classroom.
- 4) Some culturally Deaf students want to complete their tests in an alternative format (e.g., oral tests using ASL interpreters or extended test times). It is best to consult with the disability service provider for your school's policy on this issue.
- 5) Don't assume that all culturally Deaf people want additional accommodations besides interpreters/notetakers/C-Print™/CART. If you feel that the student will ask, then wait for him/her to ask. If he/she does not ask, then go ahead and ask if additional accommodations are necessary.
- 6) For a Deaf person using an interpreter, give him/her time to answer your question because the language needs to be translated into ASL and vice versa.
- 7) Notice or ask students which labels they prefer to use to identify themselves (Deaf, hard of hearing, hearing impaired, etc.).
- 8) When using an interpreter, speak directly to the Deaf person.
- 9) Explore other support services such as Video Relay Interpreting (VRI), etc.
- 10) Do be an ALLY in working with students and their accommodation needs.

Please note that these guidelines aren't meant to be an inclusive list in working with culturally Deaf/ASL users, but a starting point for a better working relationship.

For more information, contact:

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