

# HIGHER EDUCATION



**Deaf Education**

**Hosted by Steven Roy Goodman, UDC-TV**

***Higher Education Today***

Deaf Education E-Booklet

Transcript of 29-minute conversation with Dr. Julie Mitchiner, Education Professor, Gallaudet University

Hosted by Steven Roy Goodman, Educational Consultant and Co-Author, *College Admissions Together: It Takes a Family*

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## Deaf Education

**Goodman:** Hello. I'm Steven Roy Goodman, host of HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY, a production of the University of the District of Columbia. Welcome back to the education program that connects you to contemporary issues, people, and institutions involved in the world of higher education.

Today, we'll be talking about Deaf Education. Dr. Julie Mitchiner is an education professor at Gallaudet University who specializes in family-centered early education. Before becoming a faculty member at Gallaudet, Julie attended Gallaudet and was a teacher at the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Center. Julie earned her Ph.D. from George Mason University.

Before we begin, let me introduce to you Amanda Eger and Ellen Schein. They are two interpreters from Gallaudet Interpreting Service. Welcome.

Julie, maybe if we can start with Gallaudet University. What does Gallaudet University do? How long has Gallaudet University been around? If you could also say a word or two about the department you teach in at Gallaudet, I think that would be helpful.





**Mitchiner:** Sure, I would be glad to. Gallaudet University is a bilingual, multicultural liberal arts institution that promotes the academic advancement of deaf and hard of hearing people. We are a leader in research, Education, Audiology, Linguistics, Deaf Studies, Deaf Culture and many other disciplines. We have about 1800 students all the way from undergraduates to the doctoral level. Sixty-seven percent of those students are deaf, from various backgrounds. We also welcome hearing students into the university. Some programs do require those students to take a proficiency exam because Gallaudet University is a bilingual institution - so we use American Sign Language and English. It is a very unique place. Deaf people come to Gallaudet and feel at home.

I work in the teacher preparation program in the Deaf Education department. We prepare all the way from Early Education and Secondary Education to Deaf Education and Higher Education.

**Goodman:** I'm hearing, but let's assume that I wanted to learn more about deaf culture. What courses would I take at Gallaudet University?

**Mitchiner:** Gaullaudet University offers a wide range of courses, all the way from American Sign Language 101 - just learning how to communicate at a basic level - all the way to advanced. You can take courses in Deaf Culture, Deaf History, Deaf Education, and so forth. You can also study the linguistics of American Sign Language and see how it has developed and look at that in conjunction with other languages. You can really take a variety of courses from different disciplines.

**Goodman:** You mentioned other languages. As many viewers of this show know, we've done a lot of programming in South Africa. One of the big controversies in South Africa centers around the use of language and that a number of students in South Africa end up studying in their third and fourth languages, not their native tongue. They might be studying a very difficult subject, but they're studying it in a language that perhaps they learned many years after they were born. How would that work in terms of somebody studying ASL at some point later in their lives?

**Mitchiner:** There has been a lot of research that deaf children benefit from having access to American Sign Language as well as English. The bilingual approach is very important. Biologically, we see that the brain can acquire multiple languages at once. American Sign Language is a full, bona fide language. It is fully accessible to deaf children. If they do have that early access to language, that early exposure, then they will have the foundation for learning a second language. Unfortunately, oftentimes deaf children when they are born [are advised by] the medical professionals to hold off on the visual language and focus on the spoken language first and use the sign language as a last resort. Those children are deprived of a visual language. Once they are exposed they are far behind their peers. It's very important to develop that first

language so that they have that foundation. The visual language is a huge benefit to deaf children and they then are able to acquire second and third languages.

Deaf Education uses multiple approaches, from the oral method only, all the way to various communication approaches, to the bilingual approach which uses American Sign Language and English.

Our Teacher Preparation program emphasizes the bilingual approach and we talk about how to use that educational approach as a bridge between American Sign Language and English so that our students can succeed.

**Goodman:** I realize that you're here representing Gallaudet, but let's assume that I lived in the middle of Indiana and I didn't have access to Gallaudet University. What would I do in terms of my educational background?

**Mitchiner:** Deaf Education in America is actually ahead of Deaf Education in other countries. There is quite a bit of a lack of understanding about deaf children, how they are raised, and how they need to be educated. Now, with technology, we're able to reach out to other communities, rural communities, as well as other countries. Each country, of course, has its own sign language and we would not use American Sign Language with them. We value their own language and we would recognize the sign language of their country. That would be the medium for teaching deaf children in another country.

**Goodman:** What about a student in the United States who is hard of hearing? Perhaps they've had that conversation with the doctor that you referenced a moment ago. How do you make sure that they don't struggle in school, if, on the one hand Dr. Jones or Dr. Smith is saying, "I want you to focus on the spoken language, not necessarily the visual language." Meanwhile the student is falling farther and farther behind in school. What is that student supposed to do?

**Mitchiner:** Fortunately, now we have a lot more research that can support early access to language, as well as spoken language. Many people think that sign language will interfere with the spoken language development, but we have biological evidence that the brain has plasticity and is able to acquire those two languages. We have educational partnerships with families and we invite role models from the deaf community to come in and mentor. Those who have cultural competence and cultural knowledge and have grown up with the culture and language can mentor [others] in how to become more visually adept and to acquire the visual language.

**Goodman:** Who are some of the role models that are part of the deaf community and deaf culture right now?

**Mitchiner:** We have a variety of people. Deaf parents who may be raising deaf children, who have a lot of experience in how to raise a deaf child in a visual environment, are wonderful role models in terms of communication, cultural identity and encouraging a positive view and identity of themselves as well as knowledge of the community. Researchers who are knowledgeable about education in general, Deaf Education, language and so forth [are role models]. They ensure that the children get high-quality education. Peers [are also role models]. Peers learn from one another. They also learn from other deaf adults. Deaf children who are raised in a monolingual environment with only spoken English who've never met other deaf people oftentimes have misconceptions of themselves that maybe they'll become hearing one day. Once they meet another deaf person they realize that they're not alone in the world and that there are other people like themselves. It is very important to have role models who are a part of their lives.

"Deaf gain" is a concept that we use. Oftentimes people have the pejorative view of deaf people that they cannot function or that they aren't able to do certain things. That just isn't the case. The deaf community really has contributed to the wider world. We call this "deaf gain." With language research we understand more about language in general. There was research on spoken language, now there's research on sign languages which has shed light on those spoken languages. Now we have closed captioning which is accessible to the world in general. The general world has learned a lot from the deaf community.

**Goodman:** Can you say a word or two about Helen Keller and Alexander Graham Bell? As I was getting ready for this segment, I kept reading over and over again about their influences on the deaf community.

**Mitchiner:** Helen Keller was deaf and blind. She was somebody who overcame the barriers that came her way. She was very successful. She learned sign language as well as spoken English and really overcame a lot of barriers. She is a great role model for the deaf-blind community and we do have many more deaf-blind students now enrolling at the university level. They are our peers. They are part of the community fully.

Alexander Graham Bell... there's so much to tell, but he was focused on oral education. He was in support of eugenics. He really wanted to eradicate deaf people from the Earth. He didn't want to see sign language being used because he believed that interfered with the development of spoken English. I'll leave it at that.

**Goodman:** Are there sports figures that some people could look to as role models in the deaf community?

**Mitchiner:** I have to admit that I don't know a lot about sports. I am proud to say that one of our Gallaudet football players is now considering going into the NFL. I know that they're right now going through recruiting and so forth and he's a wonderful athlete. I also know that Curtis

Pride, our baseball coach, was a professional baseball player. We also have the Deaf Olympics. In conjunction with the hearing Olympics, we have the Deaf Olympics that happens every four years. Deaf people from around the world come together to compete with one another. We have both winter and summer Olympics. We have a lot happening in that realm.

**Goodman:** Would you mind sharing a little bit about the hearing and non-hearing relationships that exist within your family, if that's not too personal?

**Mitchiner:** No, not at all. I, myself, come from a deaf family. Both of my parents are deaf. I have siblings who are also deaf. I have one sister who is hearing. My husband is also deaf. He also comes from a deaf family. Oftentimes you see fully-deaf families, because it is sometimes genetic. I have two hearing daughters who are fully bilingual in American Sign Language and spoken English. They are also bi-cultural. We are a family. Any family, to be successful, needs to share a language to be able to communicate with one another and to share a culture. If there are language barriers it's always a challenge to those relationships.

Ninety percent of deaf children come from hearing families, so it is a challenge for those families. There has been research on deaf families to see how they interact with their deaf children. We have learned a lot from those families in terms of visual acuity and attention-getting and we have applied those strategies to the classroom to make sure that communication is fully accessible with those students.

**Goodman:** You mentioned bi-cultural. Could you say a word or two about the two cultures that exist in your family, but also the two cultures that you're referring to?

**Mitchiner:** In the deaf community we say, "the deaf world" and "the hearing world." Those are the two ends of the spectrum. The larger society we call the hearing world. It is where we are obviously involved on a daily basis. Then we also have what we call the deaf world, where we share the same experiences, values, language, and so forth. It's very important for deaf children to experience both and to be able to have knowledge of both.

We have hearing children who have deaf parents, we call them CODAs (Children Of Deaf Adults). They need to develop their own sense of identity so that they know that they are part of both worlds - they are a part of the hearing world as well as the deaf world - so that they can have a healthy self-esteem.

My two girls know that they are part of both communities and both worlds and they are able to function in both environments. It is really a strength and it's a positive thing for them. They have two languages and two cultures. We see that very much as a benefit for them.

**Goodman:** I met somebody at a lunch who was telling me about deaf culture a little bit more than I knew. She was explaining that deaf people will often joke that hearing people are a lot

less expressive when they communicate. I hadn't really thought much about that. As we're having this discussion today, I'm speaking the way I normally speak, and I'm assuming you're speaking the way that you normally speak... and you're more expressive. Can you explain a little bit more about the roots of that?

**Mitchiner:** I would be glad to. Sign language actually involves the full body. [It involves] facial expressions as well as the use of hands; non-manual markers, non-manual grammar, and the manual grammar. Phonology, morphology, semantics and everything is present in American Sign Language just as it is in all other languages, including English.

American Sign Language is not a form of English. It is of equal status to English, just a completely different language. We value American Sign Language as a resource. [It] is the right of all deaf children to acquire. A positive view of a deaf person and a positive identity is very important for deaf children to develop.

**Goodman:** In terms of identity, one of the struggles that I know the deaf community has is around the definition of disability and whether or not a deaf child is disabled or not. I know that that is a negative term in many places. My understanding is that the Department of Education has a definition that is perhaps a little bit different than what the deaf community has.

**Mitchiner:** The deaf community sees ourselves as a language and cultural minority rather than a disability or a disabled community. We are fully-abled. We don't have any deficits. We can think critically, live and thrive just as other folks. If you don't mind asking your question again, specifically what are you asking?

**Goodman:** I'm asking about, not the definition of a disability from the perspective of somebody who is deaf, but from the definition of the government. The U.S. Government and the Education Department have a number of definitions about ways to get grants and who qualifies for certain monies for different programs. One of the things that I kept noticing as I was preparing for today was that there is not necessarily agreement, if I understood this correctly, between what a government definition of disability is and what the deaf community's definition is.

**Mitchiner:** Right. Thank you for bringing that issue up. We do not consider ourselves disabled, but in order to get services, for example interpreters or to access certain information, we do need to declare ourselves as disabled. We believe that the term "disabled" is actually a social construct. It's not about something that we can't do, it's more about what or how society views us. They label us "disabled."

We do not see it from that pejorative perspective. We see it as people who have the full ability to succeed and be full participants in society.

**Goodman:** Let's assume a student can't get to Gallaudet. Could you say a word or two about other educational institutions they would go to? I think one of the schools that has a big program is up in Rochester. I assume there are other places that one could go besides Rochester and Gallaudet.

**Mitchiner:** Before I mention those other colleges, I would like to talk a bit about K-12s, infant through high school, and so forth. There are a range of approaches from the oral approach to the bilingual approach and many in between. Deaf Education is really about how to best educate deaf children. Deaf children as individuals vary greatly. Their family backgrounds, their hearing levels, their educational experiences vary tremendously. There isn't a one-size-fits-all. It's important to look at the individual.

We have different settings. We have a mainstream setting where a deaf child may be in a hearing classroom, maybe with some support like interpreters. Sometimes we have a CART system which is a captioning system, real-time captioning. Anything that is spoken in the classroom will be shown on the text. Sometimes note takers can be provided [as well as] other types of accommodations.

There are also fully-deaf schools which provide direct communication between peers, from the teachers to the students, and so forth. Most schools for the deaf use a bilingual approach and support the use of both American Sign Language and English and that direct instruction. The content of those instructions are equal to any other school. The only difference is the teaching approach and the pedagogy.

**Goodman:** This is a show about higher education. If a student made it through high school, where would some students go to continue their education?

**Mitchiner:** Right. We do have Gallaudet University which we hope many others will come to. There are other programs as well. There are programs around the United States. There is Rochester, the National Technological Institute for the Deaf (NTID). We have CSUN which is California State University, Northridge. And, there are other programs. Deaf students can go to those programs or any other university around the United States.

It's very important that wherever they go they are given full access and accommodated in any way they need. [It's important that] they're provided with interpreters or any other way that their environment can be made visual for them.

I can give you one example of making sure that the environment is visually accessible. Changing the seating arrangement to put everybody in either a u-shape or a circle, rather than in rows, would make it much more accessible so that they could see everyone in the class. Also, for the professor to show a PowerPoint and pause for a moment so that the student can read the PowerPoint and then see what is being said. Any time there is a discussion in a seminar and



so forth, of course the interpreters are a few seconds behind, and it's important to make sure that turn-taking is paid attention to so that the deaf person can be involved equally.

We cannot assume that one-size-fits-all. We need to make sure that we fit the needs of each individual.

**Goodman:** We only have another minute or two left. Is there anything that you would like to add that perhaps I forgot to ask you?

**Mitchiner:** Actually, I would like to talk a little bit about technology. Technology has improved greatly in the past number of years and has really made the sharing of information so much easier for deaf people.

Deaf people can now be in touch with more people around the globe [including] through the video relay service, where we have an operator facilitating the communication, interpreting to the hearing person on the other end. And then we also have video conferencing, where we can use American Sign Language with whoever is on the other end. We now have smart boards and other visual technology, Document Reader... Now we have access to all this technology so that students can see the English text as well as the American Sign Language and that supports the bilingual approach.

We have seen, unfortunately, more courses that are online, have videos but not closed captioning. That is one area that we need to see improved, but it is a great benefit to have the videos.

**Goodman:** Thank you so much for coming on the show today.

**Mitchiner:** Thank you. It has been my pleasure.

**Goodman:** If you would like additional information about Dr. Julie Mitchiner, please visit:

<http://www.gallaudet.edu>

If you have comments or suggestions about HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY, please send an email to our viewer mailbox at:

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Thank you for watching. We will continue to bring you quality discussions about important matters in today's college and university world. Please join me again for another edition of HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY. I'm Steven Roy Goodman and you've been watching HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY.



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