

# Diversity and Inclusion Report

## American Sign Language and Interpreting Education

The American Sign Language and Interpreting program is actively engaged in ongoing efforts to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. The program builds students' understanding of the language and culture of Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind citizens. The aim is to promote awareness and social justice so that these vulnerable, misunderstood, marginalized, and highly diverse community members are included in the fabric of society.

As with all second language learning programs, ASL students acquire translingual competence in the American Deaf community's heritage language – American Sign Language – and develop transcultural competence in community norms and its culture, its sociolinguistic variety therein. Students investigate the traditions, history and lived experiences and practices from a unique language community and culture that is vastly different from their own, and gain understanding of diverse cultural perspective. By interacting and engaging with Deaf community members and organizations, they develop attitude of empathy and tolerance as well as gain a reflective understanding of privilege and identity issues. Students explore further the ramifications of visually acquired and gesturally produced languages as well as the profound implications for society as a whole of learning from a culture and a community whose experience of the world is visual, not auditory.

Members of the Deaf community have a common experience of being marginalized and misunderstood as 'disabled', although they are also a cultural linguistic minority. ASL users are widely diverse in their lived experiences which arises from their race, ethnicity and family traditions, gender, due to age of onset of deafness, ethnic and family traditions. Students in the program majors and minors are introduced to the rich history, culture and lived experiences of Deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind people in our society through foundational and NU Core courses such as Deaf People in Society and Deaf History and Culture.

As students become aware of Deaf people's unique dual status as members of both a cultural linguistic minority group and a disability group, they learn about a broad societal misunderstanding of Deaf people's minority language and culture – their lived experience – and the resulting barriers to educational and economic opportunity, leading to a lower SES. Although passage of legislation like the ADA, unemployment and underemployment still disproportionately affect Deaf community members, even when they may hold university degrees.<sup>1</sup> Only 39% of U.S. working-age adults who are Deaf or hard of hearing are employed, compared to 55% of their hearing counterparts.

With these foundations, students in the major go on to study the professional discipline of sign language interpretation and translation, or to combine education in ASL and Deaf studies with Psychology, Linguistics, Human Services, or Theatre.

Professional ASL-English interpreting is a skill and service that supports Deaf, hard of hearing, and Deafblind people's efforts to participate, be recognized, and contribute to civic society equally at all levels.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/12/662925592/deaf-and-unemployed-1-000-applications-but-still-no-full-time-job>

The mission of the ASL program itself is twofold:

- 1) To instill awareness about Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind people's rich contributions to our diverse, multi-cultural, multi-lingual society and
- 2) To prepare students for careers in sign language interpreting, or in related professions, where their linguistic and cultural knowledge, and professional skills will advance social equity and resilience in the American Deaf Community.

The four-decade presence of the ASL program on campus raises visibility and awareness of the minority population of ASL users in society. This is because several of our faculty Deaf themselves and are from varied racial and otherwise underrepresented backgrounds. All faculty are at a minimum, bilingual in both ASL and English and some have multi-lingual and multicultural competence.

For our students aiming to work as sign language interpreters – or for those studying ASL and a related, combined discipline such as Human Services, Psychology, Linguistics and Theatre –their education demands ongoing reflection of personal and professional ethics at the intersection of self and other, of standpoint, and privilege (based on audiological status, race, gender and gender-identity, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation). Students are exposed to ongoing engagement with local Deaf Community members in class and through program activities.

Faculty regularly:

- invite speakers from diverse backgrounds to campus to give lectures/interact with students.
- provide students with a respectful space to talk about their respective cultures and backgrounds, the backgrounds and cultures of the Deaf people they interpret with and give 'voice' to, while focusing on topics that are linked with social issues and social justice initiatives.
- Assign videos in American Sign Language and reading materials or English source text that raise issues pertaining to audism and oppression, as well as social justice issues impacting Deaf people who are Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, or LGBTQ. Issues of diversity, inclusion, social justice, and racism -- and facilitate pre- and post-film discussions.

## **Curriculum**

The following courses and learning opportunities reflect a sampling of diversity, social justice, and anti-racism themes and topics that we incorporate in our curriculum:

- Deaf people in society:
  - Students explore ethnocentrism- how and why people behave in an ethnocentric way and what drivers there are for ethnocentrism.
  - Guest speakers bring awareness about diverse experiences of Deaf, hard of hearing and Deafblind people in society, such as "Deaf Immigrants of Color in Deaf Education".
- ASL Linguistics
  - Students learn about the impact of school segregation in the US on deaf people's language variation
  - Students learn about policies for language planning that have negatively impacted deaf people's normal acquisition of their rightful community signed language and how such policies contribute to language deprivation, as well as how this impacts language use and attitudes and prejudices against deaf people within and from without the American Deaf community.

- Deaf Culture and History
  - Students learn about the rich history of American Deaf people, and the cultural traditions and norms expressed by members of society whose values and worldviews are shaped by using a visual language.
  - They learn about protests and controversies that have shaped Deaf community values and community members struggles to examine audist and racist practices within and from without the community throughout history, resulting from school segregation, rallies and protests that demand deaf people's rights, and current events related to Black Lives Matter movement and the Gallaudet university fraternity scandal (anti-Semistist, racist traditions for decades).

## Interpreting Coursework

- Students in their experiential Ethical Fieldwork and Practicum courses observe interactions and participate in interpreted interactions with a large variety of Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind stakeholders to promote inclusion and accessibility, as they build competency towards professional work after graduation as ASL- English interpreters.
- Interpreting skills courses (5 of them) are structured around discourse text types (interactive dialogue, narratives, expository lectures, scripted texts, and persuasive texts), and all of these courses integrate authentic source texts of many genres using a multicultural, multiliteracies approach. We instill an understanding about linguistic diversity, and multimodal forms of linguistic expression and representation, and that language shapes one's worldview.
- Continued dialogues are held about power, privilege, and oppression to be able to identify power structures that exist when one enters and works in interpreted situations (racism, ableism, sexism, etc.)
- Ethical tenets that ground the work of professional interpreters are explored in every skills class but are further expanded upon in our Ethical Decision-making course and two field applications courses (Fieldwork and Practicum). Students learn and practice being able to empathize with different perspectives, values and ways of living and learn how to make informed decisions while interpreting that impact equity and do no harm.

As emerging professionals, students actively participate in reflective dialogue around anti-racist work exemplified by questions such as,

- How do we pro-actively nurture our colleagues and students of color?
- "What do I do consciously, as an interpreter/colleague, to actively encourage students/people/friends/colleagues of color to succeed in all that they wish to do?"
- "What do I do (unconsciously) as a White interpreter/colleague that limits or holds back students/people/friends/colleagues of color?"

## Extracurricular Engagement

ASL faculty members work with students to organize events that focus on diversity and inclusion. These are some examples:

- The National Deaf People of Color (NDPC) conference was also a collaborative effort/event planned with the NU African American Institute faculty in order to raise visibility of the NU ASL program within the African American and Deaf communities and their networks. (The 2020 conference was cancelled due to COVID-19 but is planned for 2022.)

- Deaf World Lecture Series: in collaboration with Boston University's Deaf Studies Program, we hosted two lectures addressing diversity and inclusion issues in the Fall 2020: "Committing to an Equity and Inclusion Lens in Our Work" Kyle Amber Clark, Chief Equity Officer at The Learning Center for Deaf Children; "The Right to Be Deaf", Deaf Historian and Disabilities Scholar, Assistant Professor of Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University.
- The annual Marie Jean Philip ASL poetry, storytelling and art competition, which draws in deaf young students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and students learn about the diverse issues and experiences of Deaf and Deafblind people
- Varied community forums are held and students are expected to attend and engage with the topics presented, such as a 2020 "Deaf Woke" event where a hard of hearing Black dancer with the famed Alvin Ailey dance company shared her experiences of being Black and deaf in the professional dance world, or a Fall 2020 panel discussion of Elitism, Racism and anti-Semitism in the fraternity traditions of Kappa Gamma at Gallaudet University and how this has shaped Deaf Community leadership in the US.

In sum, we aim to reflect diversity and inclusion in our program through direct recruitment, varied experiential learning opportunities with a range of community members, and through community connections. The recent upheaval in 2020 after the George Floyd murder and ongoing BLM protests spotlight the demands for racial justice. These events prompt our program to prioritize a continued self-assessment of our curriculum and programming to ensure we are instilling important learnings in our students around not only social justice issues impacting Deaf, hard of hearing and DeafBlind people, but also racial justice issues impacting these communities.