

But, We Have a Philanthropy for That!

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Many fraternities and sororities hold community service and philanthropy projects to support charitable organizations or people in need. Members take time out of their schedules to support people in their communities and take pride in doing these events. However, when considering those who need support, how many chapters look inward toward their own membership? How many chapters think about the potential new members they recruit? As fraternity and sorority champions, how do we educate and train our members to create a place that is inclusive to members who have a hearing loss, a speech disability, or use American Sign Language (ASL)? Are we prepared, or even willing, to work with potential new members and current members who identify with being Deaf or have a disability? As fraternity or sorority members, we are adept at providing support to others, but what about our own members?

According to Gallaudet Research Institute's independent analysis of available federal statistics on hearing impairment, "anywhere from 3% to 14% of the people in the United States have some kind of hearing loss, with a large share being at least 65 years old" (Mitchell, 2005). The data is hard to classify because defining a hearing loss and defining a culture are two separate items that do not appear on standardized census questionnaires. In fact, the 2000 census question combined hearing loss with visual disability.

I am a Deaf fraternity man. I went to a Deaf University and joined an international fraternity, and we were the only Deaf chapter within the fraternity. At Gallaudet University, we have eight fraternities and sororities, three of which are inter/national organizations while five are local Deaf fraternities and sororities. Chapter meetings, recruitment events, and even Ritual are held in ASL. For those three inter/national organizations, we had to translate our Ritual and practices into ASL to fit the language needs of our members. Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and California State University – Northridge (CSUN) both have Deaf programs and a large concentration of Deaf students who join fraternal organizations. Some of these organizations are solely composed of Deaf ASL users, while others are a combination of hearing and Deaf members.

At Gallaudet University, we had chapter rooms in one of the student services buildings as part of Greek Row. Each of the eight organizations has a room to host chapter meetings, a space to call their own, even decorate to display their colors and pride. Walking into the room, you would see the chairs along the walls of the room as if we were making a runway show. The executive board would set up in the front of the room in a "slight smile" shaped formation. We would have designated "mirror interpreters" on both sides of the aisle, and the room was properly lit for all to see. Mirror interpreters are assigned persons on each side of the aisle who would essentially mirror (copy) the person speaking across from them to ensure those who might have a blind spot could access the conversation visually. For Ritual, if it required candlelight, we placed the candle close to the signer's hands and face to make sure we all could understand. We would assign brothers to be Deaf interpreters to communicate to brothers who may have a visual disability or be Deaf-Blind. I share this with you to illustrate that what may

seem foreign or unique to many was normal for us. We did it without thought or hesitation, making sure all members were able to access the information.

Creating an inclusive environment for potential new members, current members, and even alumni does not have to be costly. For example, at recruitment events, if you discover a person has a hearing loss or speech disability, chat with them one-on-one via pen and paper, a tablet, a cell phone, or even by learning ASL (if they know it). Creating an inclusive space is more about being committed both mentally and emotionally to living your values, taking the time to educate yourself on the needs of your brothers and sisters, and understanding who they are as people. Utilizing person-first language and allowing folks to disclose when they feel safe is a huge step in creating a supportive environment. Person-first language means the person is emphasized first, then the disability. For example, Suzie Q has a disability, not Suzie Q is disabled.

The ACPA (College Student Educators – International) Standing Committee on Disability (SCD) compiled resources for professionals to use when working with people who identify as Deaf or as having a disability. The following is taken from the SCD webpage:

When you meet a person with a hearing disability:

- Speak clearly and distinctly, but do not exaggerate. Use normal speed unless asked to slow down.
- Provide a clear view of your mouth. Waving your hands or holding something in front of your lips, thus hiding them, makes lip reading impossible. Do not chew gum.
- Use a normal tone unless you are asked to raise your voice. Shouting will be of no help.
- Speak directly to the person, instead of from the side or back of the person.
- Speak expressively. Because persons who are deaf cannot hear subtle changes in tone that indicate sarcasm or seriousness, many will rely on your facial expressions, gestures and body language to understand you.
- If you are having trouble understanding the speech of a person who is deaf, feel free to ask him/her to repeat. If that does not work, then use paper and pen.
- If a person who is deaf is with an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is deaf — not the interpreter (Standing Committee on Disability, 2003).

For more resources including tips on how to communicate appropriately with persons with a disability, as well as how to create inclusive spaces, check out the following:

<http://www.myacpa.org/sc/scd/Disability%20Info/tipscover.html> and
<http://www2.myacpa.org/resources2>.

The biggest barriers to working with people with a disability or a hearing impairment are individual's attitudes. A positive attitude and a willingness to learn go a long way. So the next time you host a community service or philanthropy event, stop and ask this question: Could a person that I meet at these events join our organization and be a successful member?

References

Mitchell, R. (2005, February). *Gallaudet research institute*. Retrieved from <http://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/deaf-US.php>.

Standing Committee on Disability. (2003, April 7). *Tips for effective communication*. Retrieved from <http://www.myacpa.org/sc/scd/Disability Info/tipscom1.html>.