Postscript: Gallaudet Protests of 2006 and the Myths of In/Exclusion

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On October 13, 2006, the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department arrested 133 Gallaudet University students, staff, and alumni, the largest number of university arrests in the United States since the 1960s. The arrests occurred amid weeks of building and campus lockdowns, hunger strikes, a sprawling tent city, rallies, and a two-thousand-person march to the Capitol. At a time when many university faculty across the nation lamented apathy on campus, Gallaudet University students orchestrated a massive protest that garnered national media attention and forced the Board of Trustees to meet their demand that the president-designate be removed before taking office.

What could possibly have sparked such widespread activism? The very causes of the protest were themselves a principle site of vigorous debate. Unlike the 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) movement, which rallied behind the well-defined issue of selecting a deaf president for a deaf university, the 2006 protests were far more complicated and overdetermined. The Gallaudet Protest of 2006 could only be fully explained through a feature-length documentary film or book-length analysis with writers from all perspectives engaged in a critical collaboration with the issues. Such a volume would be able to lay out the escalation of events from the initial protests in May to the campus lockdown in October and the Board’s capitulation. Such a volume would also describe the relevance of the protest in this particular historical moment. What do the protests say about Deaf political life in 2006 and beyond?

While it is still early to define the legacy of the 2006 protests, they do clearly dramatize issues simmering throughout the pages of Open Your Eyes. In fact, many of the contributors to this volume were deeply involved in the protest—on both sides. Some were members (and even president) of the Board of Trustees, while others were Gallaudet faculty members who played significant roles in the coalition of protesters, the Faculty Student Staff and Alumni (FSSA) coalition. What’s more, the figure at the center of the controversy, then-Provost Jane Fernandes, provided financial support for, and participated in, the Deaf Studies Think Tank that gave rise to this volume.

Given that many of the debates and issues in this volume were dramatized before a national audience when the manuscript had already been delivered to the publisher, it seems only fitting that a postscript be added—not to advocate for one side or the other, but to delve into the minutiae of this or that event, but to take a wide-angle lens on the protest, to place it in a historical, cultural, and political context.

One of the most striking and relevant issues is the widespread disagreement on the
very reasons for protest in the first place. The University administration asserted that the protest erupted out of a deep cultural anxiety about radical changes wrought by medical and technological advances, such as cochlear implants, that offer deaf people opportunities to become immersed into the hearing world rather than in the separate culture revolving around American Sign Language (ASL). Dr. Jane Fernandes, who is deaf though she grew up speaking and did not learn ASL until the age of twenty-three, symbolized a future that her critics were resisting. According to this line of reasoning, she was not culturally "Deaf enough" to be the public face of Gallaudet University.

Protestors denied these claims, citing the fact that 82 percent of the faculty asked for the president-designate's resignation or removal from office, which is especially significant given the fact that only 38 percent of the faculty are deaf, out of which only a small portion are native users of ASL. Instead, the protestors' grievances included a long list of concerns: the lack of diversity among the finalists, the Board of Trustees' lack of responsiveness to students of color, the persistence of audism on campus, and the appearance of an unfair search process that led to the appointment of a widely unpopular, internal candidate. These issues brought together a broad-based coalition of students, faculty, staff, and alumni who decided that the problems with the administrative system of Gallaudet that surfaced through the search process were worthy of vigorous dissent. As Deaf lawyer Kelly Brick writes, "The Deaf President Now protests in 1988 installed a deaf person as president, but they did not reform this almost 150-year-old entrenched bureaucracy of paternalism."4

Whether one accepts the administration's or the protestors' version of the sources of the protest—or some mixture of the two—the fact is that, for a short time, much of the nation did indeed open its eyes to Deaf Culture talking. Concepts like audism and d/Deaf cultural wars entered American households. From the outside, issues such as "not being deaf enough" must have puzzled and troubled readers. Articles and editorials in Time, Newsweek, USA Today, the Washington Post, and the Boston Globe-Mail excoriated the protestors for engaging in a radical form of identity politics. The view from the inside of Gallaudet, however, reveals a far more complicated view of the protests, one that undeniably involves, but does not revolve exclusively around, identity politics.

The critique of identity politics, especially as described in this volume by Lenard Davis, is that identity is not a fixed, stable notion, rooted in a single defining element, such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, or language skill. Upon closer observation, the protest did not revolve around any one single axis of identity. While the Deaf President Now protest was led by four white, Deaf Deaf student leaders, the 2006 protests were led by a coalition among whose prominent figures were hearing, hard-of-hearing, late deafened, late learners of ASL, and ASL-fluent individuals. The dissenters knew as well as anyone that there are many ways to be d/Deaf (and to be hearing, for that matter). Some protestors pointed out the irony that DPN was more rooted in single-axis identity politics than the 2006 protests that included resistance to racism and paternalism and a lack of shared governance and administrative transparency. It has been argued that the 2006 protests were a result of coalition politics more than identity politics.

While this may be the case, paternalistic administrations are present on many campuses, and yet there have been no successful protests from what nearly American University President Benjamin Laduer was dismissed from his position for improper expense accounting and was given a severance package of $1.75 million dollars, there were no widespread protests. So what is unique about the Gallaudet activism? What would go so far as to politicize the football team, which was responsible for escalating the protest from a single locked down building to the entire campus? What would inspire over seventy tent-cities to be erected across the nation? Why would so many alumni return for a homecoming celebration that was cancelled by the administration, only to be replaced with a march on the nation's Capitol?

In order to understand this unique phenomenon, one has to appreciate the near mythic role that Gallaudet University plays within the Deaf world. It is the only plot of land in the entire world where Deaf people may have direct access to higher education through a signed language. Historically, Gallaudet has been a bastion of signed-language instruction even during a time when all residential schools in America banned ASL, promoting the possibility that Deaf people could be educated in a manner, as Joe Murray would put it, coequal with hearing counterparts. Further, Gallaudet's position is unique in the history of ideas, as it appears to fulfill an enduring human dream of a society that exists without recourse to the voice. In the seventeenth century, John Bulwer speculated on the benefits of an institution of learning based exclusively in gestural language. In the eighteenth century, Rousseau mused on the possibilities of a society in which "we would fully express our meanings by the language of gesture alone."5

In the nineteenth century, when philanthropist Amos Kendall donated land for the founding of the National Deaf-Mute College, which would become Gallaudet University, he helped create a homeland where a signed language would flourish. Placed in this historical backdrop, we can begin to appreciate why Gallaudet serves as a sacred space—an Aztlán or Mecca—within global Deaf and signing communities.

Given the deep cultural connection to Gallaudet, the protests of 2006 bring into focus the larger dreams and desires of a people as they are elaborated through a vision of what Gallaudet should and could become. Whether or not the protestors were justified in pinning the future of their vision on the dismissal of Jane Fernandes is a complex and contentious question that is beyond the purview of this postscript. Yet if we are to understand the current Deaf cultural climate, we must recognize and name the deep yearning for a better Gallaudet that was expressed through the protest. There is an undeniable sentiment that the disruption of the presidential selection process was the first step in a larger reformation, not only for Gallaudet University but for the future of Deaf education in America and beyond.

The vision of the future is for Gallaudet to become a truly bilingual institution that explores and promotes the cognitive, cultural, and creative benefits of a bilingual education (in this case, ASL/English) to the wider world—both d/Deaf and hearing. As such, Gallaudet should explain, through example and research, to parents, educators, and doctors the wisdom of nurturing, rather than suppressing, ASL in deaf people's lives. The message coming from Gallaudet should be seen, loud and clear: signed languages are a vast human resource, and there is no better place to witness their wealth than on the ninety-nine acres of plot of land in northeast Washington, D.C.

The problem, however, is that Gallaudet University had never taken a clear position on ASL/English bilingual education. With the Deaf community looking to Gallaudet as a
he concept of bilingual education, they received nothing but mixed messages. Twenty years after Deaf President Now, many administrators, staff, faculty, and students are only marginally literate in ASL—and worse, many hearing people do not even bother to sign in public, rendering Gallaudet at times no different than any other hearing university. The lack of ASL skills and basic Deaf cultural protocol at Gallaudet is a systemic problem that has been buttressed by long-standing curriculum and policy issues. There had never been a requirement that students—or faculty and administrators for that matter—for- mally study ASL. Ironically, Gallaudet students are expected to write college-level English, but many of their teachers often cannot produce elementary school-level ASL.

Critics charged that the lamented state of communication on campus is a result of the administration’s unwillingness to take a clear position on the mission and strategic goals of the university as they relate to ASL/English bilingualism. When it became clear that the university would be under the long leadership of another administrator who had presided over years of hand wringing over what to do with ASL on campus, protesters felt that it was time for a change. Members of the Deaf community could not sit idly by for another couple of decades without taking a clear position on difficult issues affecting the lives of deaf people for generations to come. Dissenters were much less concerned about when Jane Fernandes learned ASL than they were with her commitment to ensuring that children in future generations would learn it earlier than she did. As Provost, Fernandes oversaw the creation of a Strategic Plan for the university that failed to take a position on bilingualism, and worse, critics charged, that she unnecessarily pitted inclusion against bilingualism.

Under Provost Jane Fernandes, the university’s Strategic Goal number one was for Gallaudet to model “what it is to be an inclusive deaf university in all aspects of its operations, academic and community life.” To clarify, the strategic objective offered a definition of “inclusive deaf university” that was longer than the objective itself:

The term inclusive deaf university refers to an academic institution of higher learning that is comprehensive and recognizes the diversity among deaf and hard of hearing people—in cultural identification, language and communication choices, audiometric measures, age of onset, use of amplification technology, school experiences—and in age, gender, disability, racial and ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, and social-economic class.

Clearly, no one would argue against the spirit of inclusivity; after all, the authorizing legislation for Gallaudet University—the Education of the Deaf Act (EDA)—mandates that Gallaudet educate the nation’s deaf and hard-of-hearing population; significantly, this mandate exists regardless of cultural or educational background. Shifting demographics show that fewer deaf students are educated in residential schools, while more are receiving cochlear implants and educated with little exposure to signed languages. Given these cultural shifts, an “all-inclusive deaf university” appears to be a wise and well-intentioned position to take.

However, the objection was not about inclusivity itself, but about what was not included in the strategic objectives and mission of the university; that Gallaudet was, in “all aspects of its operations, academic and community life, an all-inclusive bilingual university.” While many other universities, such as the University of Ottawa and the University of Pithmung, openly embrace bilingualism as a defining element, Gallaudet seemed poised for another president and Board to skirt the issue under the banner of inclusion.

With the assistance of the Washington Post editorial staff, the Gallaudet administration of L. King Jordan and Jane Fernandes was able to frame the discussion that protesters who argued for a stronger presence of ASL were being exclusionary cultural “absolutists” who wished to retreat into a bunker of signed language. When pitted against the feel-good rhetoric of inclusion, defenders of bilingualism faced a difficult rhetorical task—to point out the perils of inclusivity as envisioned by the Gallaudet administration, and to demonstrate that bilingual education, done correctly, actually means greater inclusion and enhanced academic rigor and accountability.

The perils of Gallaudet’s approach to its all-inclusive strategic plan and mission were identified not only by protesters but also by commissioners from Gallaudet’s accrediting body, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). Noting the fragmentation over the mission of the university, commissioners sensed that the university mission lacked focus as it was “trying to be all things to all people.” A concrete indication of the perils of inclusivity could be found in the university’s Communication Policy, which defined ASL in the following way: “The term American Sign Language is to be used in an all-inclusive sense and includes signs expressed in English word order, with or without voice” (emphasis added). Such a definition is not only symbolic of the systemic denigration of ASL, critics charged, but academically embarrassing. Clearly, ASL and English are in daily contact at Gallaudet, but they are distinct languages, a revelation that came about, ironically, at Gallaudet University over four decades ago. Researchers in the hundreds of linguistics programs across the country who work on signed languages would scoff at Gallaudet’s definition of ASL. Gallaudet’s historic unwillingness to commit to a position, critics claim, has potentially harmed its image as a prestigious, let alone credible, institution. Imagine the public consternation if Gallaudet were to define English “in an all-inclusive sense that includes words expressed in ASL word order.”

The Communication Policy, which was revised in the spring of 2007, was indicative of a larger, systemic problem of accountability fostered under a spirit of trying to be all things to all people. Faculty who were deficient in ASL skills and who voiced could simply claim that they were meeting the needs of students under an anything-goes policy. If faculty, staff, and students were never held accountable for communicating clearly—certainly a worthwhile goal at a university—then how could a climate of academic rigor be cultivated? Clearly, it is not radical to claim that sound pedagogical strategies would include using an intelligible, grammatically correct language. Though students’ skills may not be up to par, they should have the benefit of being guided toward more sophisticated expression. Thus, while the rhetoric of inclusivity often sounds good, if it is not infused with higher standards and accountability, the result is often lack of effectiveness.

Due to its unique status, Gallaudet could afford to proceed on its own terms for nearly a century and a half. Without a culture of assessment and improvement, Gallaudet gradually lost touch with higher education’s movement toward a more rigorous and
systematic collection of direct evidence of student learning. While reports of student learning were generated, the Gallaudet administration did little with them, as they did not always paint the desired picture. Rather than centralizing and focusing on institutional assessment, the Jordan/Fernandez administration failed for two years to replace the director of institutional research who retired in 2004. Further, a 2001 MSCHS report required Gallaudet to overhaul its undergraduate general studies curriculum and reform its faculty governance system. By the time of the Periodic Review Report in 2006, it had become clear that the administration and faculty had failed to follow these mandates of the university’s accrediting body.

Then came the protests and the media reports of low academic standards. Suddenly this venerable institution, and progressive federal experiment signed into being by Abraham Lincoln, was under the scrutiny of news watchers across the nation, including members of the MSCHS. This negative publicity came at a time when the U.S. Department of Education (located within a fifteen-minute walk from Gallaudet) was threatening to take over accreditation from regional bodies and Gallaudet had received an unfavorable evaluation from the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB). One particularly damaging news article in the Washington Post ended with a Gallaudet administrator pointing out, in response to the negative evaluation from OMB, that at least Gallaudet is fully accredited. Now the very credibility of independent accrediting bodies was brought into public view. Not surprisingly, Gallaudet received notice that it would be visited by the MSCHS. After two site visits and various reports, MSCHS voted in June to place Gallaudet on probation—while recognizing that significant progress had occurred under interim President Robert Davila, it was not enough and the pace of change was not sufficiently rapid.

While nine months’ time is too soon to be writing the legacy of the 2006 protests, clearly the most dramatic and far-reaching legacy is not the removal of Jane Fernandes, but the catalyst of sweeping reform at Gallaudet University. While no university wishes to be placed on probation, there is clear sentiment that such negative attention may be the best thing that could have happened to Gallaudet. No longer can this acclaimed institution afford to operate under the immunity of its uniqueness. It must reinvent itself if it is to remain relevant in the twenty-first century.

Change at Gallaudet University: Toward Inclusive Bilingualism

As a result of the MSCHS’s demands that Gallaudet address issues of mission, shared governance, campus climate, and academic rigor, Gallaudet must find its way out of the existential crisis in a big hurry. It is now doing so, with the help of an ultimatum—without accreditation students will not come, and the United States Congress would likely not grant appropriations to an institution without students. Suddenly Gallaudet found itself with a rare opportunity: with the imperative that it must begin anew, faculty, staff, students, and administration have banded together in a cluster of working groups. In the course of a few months, Gallaudet University has undergone a thorough review of its mission and vision statements and has completely overhauled its undergraduate general studies curriculum. During this intensely productive, all hands on deck time, Gallaudet is redefining itself for the future, which has implications for the future of the Deaf world.

As the Working group on the University Mission met for the first time, we looked at ourselves, we looked at Gallaudet, and we asked: Who are we? Who do we serve? How do we serve them? In answering these questions, two answers became very apparent: we are bilingual and we are diverse. What emerged from community feedback were mission and vision statements that proclaim what we have been all along: a bilingual university. The new mission, which was approved by the Board of Trustees in August 2007 reads:

Gallaudet University, federallychartered in 1864, is a bilingual, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals through American Sign Language and English. Gallaudet prepares its graduates for career opportunities in a highly competitive, technological, and rapidly changing world. (emphasis added)

In order to emphasize its mandate to educate all eligible deaf and hard-of-hearing students, Gallaudet’s vision statement commits the institution to offer a welcoming, supportive, and accessible bilingual educational environment for teaching and learning through direct communication, and to embrace diversity within the deaf community by respecting and appreciating choices of communication while guiding students through their process of linguistic and cultural self-realization.

The spirit of the new mission of Gallaudet is to create a model of inclusive bilingualism, where Gallaudet welcomes all qualified students from the wide variety of educational backgrounds, with varying degrees of proficiency in ASL and English. The difference, however, is that the university commits to supporting its members in developing bilingual proficiency during their time at Gallaudet. This would place Gallaudet directly in line with a host of other bilingual universities. As the European Centre for Higher Education notes, “significant proportions of students in the bilingual institutions are not bilingual when they enter the university. The university can play an important role in helping individuals from both language groups to become bilingual... Part of the challenge is therefore to ensure that students can quickly operate in a bilingual environment, which requires a number of special measures, including intensive language courses when necessary.”

While there was strong support indicated for the new mission of Gallaudet, among its faculty, staff, students, and alumni, there are those who claim that any embrace of ASL is tantamount to cultural segragation, placing Gallaudet out of step with the rest of the world. The Washington Post editorial staff, for example, counsels that Gallaudet “must expand its mission in an era when many deaf children receive cochlear implants and have options beyond sign language.” Michael Chorost, author of Rebuild: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human, goes so far as to claim that the signing Deaf community and Gallaudet should resign itself to the death of ASL and focus on “innovating new ways for everyone to hear, using technology.” While these authors
would defend their positions based on current and projected demographics, they operate under the false assumption of technology and signed languages. They betray a deep cultural fear that somehow learning a signed language has detrimental effects for deaf people and should be avoided at all costs. In an age when parents are responding to research showing the benefits of bimodal bilingualism for their children, when hearing college students are learning ASL at unprecedented rates, and when hearing linguists are conducting sophisticated research on signed languages, deaf people are routinely counseled against learning signed languages. If signed languages are good for hearing people why would they be detrimental to a deaf person with a cochlear implant? Wouldn't it be better to have two languages than one? The ironies of such positions are obvious: advocates of an English-only education are claiming that a bilingual education for deaf people is exclusionary. However, as the European Center for Higher Education claims, "the continuous use of two working languages is viewed as a central element in the mission of the university to promote a broad intellectual and social outlook." Those who become bilingual in English and ASL would have access to two languages, one of which is capable of rich and clear visual and spatial discourse, a boon to students fortunate enough to watch a master signer describe photosynthesis or map out macroeconomic theories in clear grammatical space.

By building a greater presence for ASL, Gallaudet is not segregating itself for cultural or political reasons, but expanding the rigor of its curriculum, pedagogy, and standards. The evolving reasons for a defense of ASL, then, are not only about cultural preservation, but about critical pedagogy, visual-spatial cognition, and the economic vitality of Deaf people, which together will bring about a strong Deaf public voice that commands an audience.

Yet this is only the beginning of a cultural and academic exchange that must put Gallaudet firmly on the map of intellectual life in America. As Frank Becher writes in this volume: "Indeed, even standing on the public stage is not enough. For deaf life truly to be heard there (for a subaltern voice truly to speak and no longer be subaltern) the very terms of discourse on that stage—its very 'alphabet'—would need to be transformed." Such a transformative public voice, it is believed, may only come about when ASL gains a presence that demands attention. This future vision of Gallaudet is one that will incubate and encourage all of the ways that Deaf ways of being and signed languages can deeply affect a wide spectrum of academic and creative practices.

Instead of repeated curricula and ways of knowing, Gallaudet should be out in front, taking the lead in understanding the unique insights that Deaf people and other sign language users have on, among a host of topics, visual language, visual learning, filmmaking, art, graphic and Web design, theater, literature, architecture, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, communication studies, public "speaking," and the rhetorical art of gesture. Each of these fields could be transformed by opening up to Deaf ways of being.

Gallaudet University, for example, has recently received a prestigious National Science Foundation Learning Center grant, known as Visual Language and Visual Learning, the purpose of which is to "gain a greater understanding of the biological, cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and pedagogical conditions that influence the acquisition of language and knowledge through the visual modality..." Later the National Science Foundation considered the insights from Deaf people to be a scientific and empirical asset; otherwise it would not have awarded Gallaudet a grant of $3.5 million dollars over the next ten years. This learning center will contribute insights into this overlooked realm of human learning from the institution that should know more about visual learning than any other. In addition, Gallaudet University has invested in a three-year project to explore the notion of a Deaf architecture—not on the functional ADA level, but on deeper phenomenological and aesthetic levels where building designs may embody Deaf ways of being. How could such designs—the hallmarks of which are open spaces, special attention to light, and curvilinear form—be welcoming and splendid designs for all humans?

These two projects mark only the beginning of a Gallaudet University that assumes a much larger role in the intellectual life of higher education. Through the lens of the particular phenomenology of a Deaf being-in-the-world, what other fields of inquiry and creative production could be transformed at their base? The first and perhaps most significant will be a more thorough and sustained investigation into Deaf/sign language filmmaking. What could all filmmakers learn from the insights and practices of those who live, think, and love in signed languages that bear homological affinity to film language? One may ask, given such potential, why hasn't Gallaudet produced more accomplished filmmakers? The answer to this question also contributed to the protests of 2006. Jane Fernandes was widely criticized for effectively dismantling the film production program at Gallaudet. Given that film is now the only way to document ASL, a lack of support for a film program was interpreted as lack of support for the growth of ASL.

Part of the impatience on the part of protesters is the feeling that Gallaudet has been squandering its greatest resource, its raison d'être. With the appointment of Fernandes, Gallaudet seemed poised to continue its lack of commitment to signed languages evident under the Jordan administration. Protesters thought that, by now, Gallaudet should have been able to correct what Pierre Desloges described in 1779 as a human irrationality: "I cannot understand how a language like sign language—the richest in expressions, the most energetic, the most incalculably advantageous in its universal intelligibility—is still so neglected and that only the deaf speak it (as it were). This, I confess, one of those irrationalities of the human mind that I cannot explain."

For better or worse, there is a desire that the leader of Gallaudet University become the spokesperson, the surdus vox populi, who could embody the future of deaf education through a fluent and eloquent signed language—to demonstrate the academic benefits of signed language in deaf education nationally and internationally, and to instill in the cultural climate of America that Deaf people and their signed languages are largely misunderstood and underestimated human resources. More than ever, the Deaf community senses the urgency to make the case, not only why America needs Gallaudet University, but why the world needs Deaf people and their signed languages.

Notes
1. I would like to thank David Armstrong for his feedback on this manuscript.