



# College Readiness for Deaf Students



**NDC**  
National Deaf Center  
on Postsecondary Outcomes

## Overview

College readiness is an important goal for students, parents, teachers, schools, administrators, and policymakers. Students who are ready for college often have the skills and knowledge needed to complete their certificates or degrees in less time and without developmental coursework. Being ready for college involves a variety of factors. Academic readiness is an important consideration, but being ready for life after high school also requires nonacademic skills and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Colleges need to respond to the increasing number of students who arrive at college unprepared for the challenges of college life, especially for those who are deaf.<sup>2</sup>

## College Readiness for Deaf Students

Although college enrollment for deaf students has increased over the years, college completion has not increased to the same extent.<sup>3,4</sup> College completion for deaf people is still behind compared to hearing peers. Also, when they arrive at college, deaf students take developmental courses more often than hearing students.<sup>5</sup> Deaf students may be less prepared for college than hearing students.<sup>6</sup>

For deaf students, being ready for college is a shared responsibility between students, professionals, and institutions.<sup>7</sup> College readiness does not start right before college enrollment—it's an ongoing process of gaining knowledge and skills. Many deaf students navigate through challenges at all levels before entering college. These challenges include dealing with limited access to language and communication, reduced social opportunities, negative attitudes and biases, and the lack of qualified, experienced professionals.<sup>8</sup> High schools need to consider using many strategies for strengthening college preparation for deaf students. Colleges need to consider strategies for supporting deaf students who may be less prepared for college.

## Academic, Social, and Financial Readiness

Research about college readiness shows that academic, social, and financial readiness are essential for all students. Many key parts of readiness are similar for hearing and deaf students, but deaf students often face additional challenges in the process of gaining knowledge and skills. Deaf students also may have fewer opportunities for building readiness in these three areas:



**Academic readiness** is related to students' academic knowledge, skills, and achievements. Course completion, obtaining a high school diploma, completing an equivalency test, GPA, and standardized test scores are all different ways to show academic readiness for college and vocational training. Historically, deaf students have underperformed compared to hearing peers on measures of academic knowledge and skills.<sup>10</sup> However, low expectations of deaf students also may be preventing deaf students from reaching their academic potential. In high school, deaf students are often placed on vocational tracks instead of academic tracks for a high school diploma. Deaf students are also less likely to take advanced and college-level coursework, which is a barrier to their preparedness for

challenging coursework in college.<sup>5,6</sup> Academic readiness for college can be strengthened through exposure to college-level course material using strategies like dual enrollment.<sup>9</sup>

**Social readiness**, also known as soft skills, includes behaviors and attitudes like social awareness, social skills, time management, study skills, motivation, collaborative problem solving, self-advocacy, and leadership.<sup>11</sup> These skills, when paired with appropriate academic skills, are a bigger factor for student performance in the first year of college than entrance exam scores.<sup>12</sup> Students without strong social networks also have less access to information that helps them navigate the college environment successfully.<sup>13</sup>



When enrolling in college, deaf students may experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and academic difficulty, feel less motivated to complete college, and have less confidence in their study habits and time management skills than their hearing peers.<sup>14</sup> Increased stress, low motivation, and weak time management skills make it harder for deaf students to stay in college.<sup>14</sup> All college students are expected to manage their time, but deaf students have the additional burden of figuring out accommodations and managing an environment where they may not have full communication access. This process requires high-level soft skills: self-advocacy, understanding of rights, negotiation, resilience, self-confidence, strategic communication, and social awareness.

**Financial readiness** involves financial know-how and readiness to pay for college. Tuition, fees, and additional costs involved with college can be a big challenge for enrollment and for successfully graduating from college. Students who show financial readiness know their financial aid options, can apply for financial aid, manage their finances responsibly, and understand how to navigate student loans. Financial awareness and preparedness is an important part of the transition to college and for building strong financial habits.<sup>15</sup>



*Deaf students often have reduced access to clear, direct information about paying for college, like financial literacy programs.*

Financial aid is often complex and difficult to navigate. It requires a high level of financial savviness and willingness to navigate complicated

systems to receive grants, loans, work-study jobs, or scholarships. Only 2.8% of deaf college students have participated in a work-study job, and 33.9% have never applied for federal financial aid.<sup>5</sup> Deaf students may have reduced access to clear, direct information about paying for college, like financial literacy programs. Deaf students often have less access to informative conversations with families or peers about money, including paying for college and financial aid. In many cases, deaf students may also need to pay for additional expenses like hearing aids, assistive listening devices, or additional medical expenses. Vocational rehabilitation can be a source of financial support for deaf students, but not many deaf students are able to rely on vocational rehabilitation as a source of support.<sup>5</sup>

## Supporting Underprepared Deaf Students

As college enrollment has increased, deaf students are among a growing number of students who arrive to college underprepared. Colleges have responded to this by establishing new programs to support underprepared college students, which may include first-year seminars, appropriate placement in developmental education, early warning systems, and ongoing assessments.<sup>16, 17</sup> Some additional planning may be needed to ensure that these initiatives are accessible to deaf students.

*Improving services for deaf students cannot be a responsibility held only by the disability services office. Deaf students benefit when campus-wide initiatives increase awareness and inclusion of deaf related issues to encourage greater familiarity and positive attitudes about deaf people.<sup>18</sup>*

**Structuring support services** means understanding that underprepared students may be less likely to use support services that can benefit them.<sup>13</sup> Underprepared students may benefit from structured and consistent advising. This structured and consistent advising means that all students can benefit from support services, not just students that actively seek out support.<sup>13</sup> Deaf students also benefit from more intensive and specialized advising, especially when their advisors are familiar with the experiences and needs of deaf college students.<sup>18</sup>

**Improving campus awareness** recognizes that successful programming requires active collaboration among faculty, support services, and staff.<sup>17</sup> Strategies can include increasing accessibility at campus events and providing training to staff and faculty about accommodations that deaf people may need.

**Building learning communities**, where a group of students that take two or more classes together, is often an effective strategy to increase student engagement and can help deaf students participate fully in the college experience.<sup>16</sup> Longer periods of time working together can give deaf and hearing students the opportunity to overcome communication barriers and develop long-lasting and meaningful relationships. Learning communities can also be a formal strategy for encouraging connections between deaf students, but colleges should also consider implementing informal strategies to facilitate those important connections.

**Increasing accessibility** recognizes that the need for accommodations is an important and continuous aspect of the college experience for deaf students. Although it is the student's responsibility to start the process of receiving accommodations, colleges can make that process less stressful and more welcoming, such as educating deaf students about the range of accommodations that are available to them.<sup>18</sup>

# Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Conley, D. T. (2012). *A complete definition of college and career readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center (NJ1).
- <sup>2</sup> NDC uses the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many individuals, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, *deaf*, with the goal of recognizing the shared experiences of individuals from diverse deaf communities while also honoring their differences.
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- <sup>8</sup> National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. (2018). *Root Causes of Gaps in Postsecondary Outcomes for Deaf Individuals*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved from [www.nationaldeafcenter.org](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org).
- <sup>9</sup> An, B. P. (2013). The influence of dual enrollment on academic performance and college readiness: Differences by socioeconomic status. *Research in Higher Education*, 54(4), 407-432.
- <sup>10</sup> Qi, S. and Mitchell, R.E. 2012. Large-scale academic achievement testing of deaf and hard-of-hearing students: Past, present, and future. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 17: 1–18.
- <sup>11</sup> Byrd, K. L., & Macdonald, G. (2005). Defining college readiness from the inside out: First-generation college student perspectives. *Community College Review*, 33(1), 22–37.
- <sup>12</sup> R. J. Sternberg, C. R. Bonney, L. Gabora & M. Merrifield (2012) WICS: A Model for College and University Admissions, *Educational Psychologist*, 47:1, 30-41.
- <sup>13</sup> Karp, M. M., O’Gara, L., & Hughes, K. L. (2008). *Do Support Services at Community Colleges Encourage Success or Reproduce Disadvantage? An Exploratory Study of Students in Two Community Colleges*. CCRC Working Paper No. 10. Community College Research Center, Columbia University.
- <sup>14</sup> Albertini, J. A., Kelly, R. R., & Matchett, M. K. (2012). Personal factors that influence deaf college students’ academic success. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 17(1), 85-101
- <sup>15</sup> George-Jackson, C., & Gast, M. J. (2014). Addressing information gaps: Disparities in financial awareness and preparedness on the road to college. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 44(3).
- <sup>16</sup> Kuh, G. D. (2007). What student engagement data tell us about college readiness. *Peer Review*, 9(1), 4-8.
- <sup>17</sup> Wilmer, E. (2008). Student Support Services for the Underprepared Student. *Inquiry*, 13(1), 5-19.
- <sup>18</sup> Johnson, S. G., & Fann, A. (2016). Deaf and hard of hearing students’ perceptions of campus administrative support. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40(4), 243-253.