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## From Interpreting Student to Deaf Interpreter: A Case Study of Vocational Identity Development

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# **From Interpreting Student to Deaf Interpreter: A Case Study of Vocational Identity Development**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research indicates that the development of a vocational identity is critical to the process of adult maturation and for creating a sense of purpose in one's life. Deaf individuals in the United States are increasingly interested in establishing a vocation in signed language interpreting, despite workplace obstacles experienced by other oppressed and marginalized populations. Career identity has been examined in several professions, but little is known about the factors underlying the vocational identity development of Deaf interpreters. To address this gap, the researchers adopted a case study approach to explore the experiences of two Deaf students during their first semester in an undergraduate interpreting program. We analyzed video recordings of interaction between the students and a Deaf instructor, the students' responses during an end-of-semester interview, and the students' biographical information. Taken together, the data reveal factors that shaped their paths as interpreters including: (a) educational background, (b) professional experience, (c) bilingual and bicultural fluency, (d) personal identity, and (e) guidance from a Deaf instructor. This paper illuminates how two Deaf students who engaged in separate but interlocking paths developed a vocational identity as interpreters – or changed course – in their career trajectories.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Conversations with Deaf interpreters (DIs) often include descriptions of various obstacles encountered in their professional lives that are strikingly similar to hurdles experienced by other oppressed minority groups. Writers have envisioned employment obstacles present in the U.S. through the use of various metaphors. For example, Booth et al. (2003) described the “sticky floor” phenomenon in which female employees find themselves stuck at the bottom of the wage scale because of delays in launching their careers. For Deaf people, the “sticky floor” may manifest in entry barriers to training opportunities in the interpreting profession. To illustrate, not until 2015 did the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) adopt American Sign Language (ASL) as the conference language for all communication, including training sessions, at national conferences, an issue that some non-deaf RID members hotly contested. Closer to home, Deaf interpreters report that state-level RID chapters frequently offer workshops only in spoken English. Such language barriers deter Deaf individuals from seeking formal training and opportunities for social learning alongside their non-deaf peers (Forestal, 2005; Mindess, 2016; Vold, 2013). Thus, the specialized

training needed to attain DI certification often requires investing in long-distance travel and other out-of-pocket fees, which can delay the ability of DIs to command competitive wages. An added deterrent to achieving professional status is that many states with interpreter licensure requirements do not offer exceptions for DIs without certification, again restricting DIs from valuable on-the-job training and gainful employment as interpreters. The sticky floor may interfere with or delay DIs' perception of themselves as interpreters.

Another barrier for minorities in employment has been described as the "glass ceiling," the condition in which female employees struggle to advance in their careers while their less-qualified male co-workers quickly outrank them (Cotter et al., 2001). For DIs, the glass ceiling may be manifested in the lack of acknowledgment for their achievements (e.g., degrees, certifications, work experiences) that are commensurate with non-deaf interpreters.<sup>1</sup> Even when DIs academic credentials and certification are acknowledged, the employment ceiling can remain relatively low. Hiring agencies can perpetuate restrictive views about the types of assignments that are appropriate for DIs, limiting them to interpreting only for certain groups of people, within specific settings, or in a particular role (Cokely, 2005; Mindess, 2014; O'Connell & Lynch, 2020). As glass ceilings are artificial constructs created by society, within the interpreting profession and Deaf communities, they can limit DIs from expanding their opportunities.

Another potential obstacle for DIs has been referred to as the "glass escalator," a term initially coined to describe a situation in which males are fast-tracked to higher positions in primarily female-dominated professions (Williams, 1992). DIs may experience the glass escalator effect when their non-deaf colleagues accept assignments in specific settings, particularly high-profile assignments, despite industry best practices for working with DIs (Adam et al., 2011; Brick & Beldon, 2014). Williams (1992) describes how females and other oppressed minorities are often sidelined for promotions, a situation often experienced by Deaf interpreters.<sup>2</sup> The glass escalator is reflected in the tacit acceptance of non-deaf interpreters to take or replace spaces best suited for Deaf people, for example, interpreting between two signed languages, doing translations into a signed language, or becoming ASL instructors within an Interpreter Education Program (IEP).

DIs experience the "sticky floor," "glass ceiling," and "glass escalator" barriers because both Deaf and non-deaf consumers are unfamiliar with the rationale for working with DIs. In point of fact, a needs assessment of interpreters conducted by the National Interpreter Education Consortium (NIEC) revealed that DI employment barriers are attributed to "an overall lack of awareness in the field regarding Deaf interpreter services, and the value of the resource" (Schafer & Cokely, 2016, p. 7). Others have noted a consistent lack of employment opportunities for DIs over the years (Dively, 1995; Forestal, 2005; Ressler, 1999), a situation that has been documented in the United States (Mindess, 2014), Denmark (Mindess, 2016), and Ireland (O'Connell & Lynch, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, "non-deaf" points only to individuals' audiological status, not to cultural or linguistic identity.

<sup>2</sup> We note that Williams revisited the topic of the "glass escalator" in a 2013 publication in which she acknowledges the need to address the impact of intersectionality, including racism, homophobia, and class inequalities. We suggest that other identities, including audiological status, need to be considered as well.

Brick and Beldon (2014) have suggested that the lack of advancement becomes systematically ingrained in the profession when non-deaf interpreters show resistance to working with DIs. In some cases, non-deaf interpreters feel threatened when paired to work with a DI (Mindess, 2016), which may insinuate that the non-deaf interpreter is not skilled enough to work independently. Thus, non-deaf interpreters may fear losing work to DIs (Mindess, 2016) or do not understand the skills DIs bring to the work (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). Such biases by non-deaf interpreters may exclude DIs from interpreting assignments that would be better performed as a team (Bentley-Sassaman & Dawson, 2012; O’Connell & Lynch, 2020). Even the labels “Deaf interpreter” and “Deaf interpreting” are problematic for several reasons. The term “Deaf interpreter” can result in confusion, misunderstanding, and resistance since consumers may make the erroneous assumption that signed language interpreters must be able to hear in order to interpret (McDermid, 2010; O’Connell & Lynch, 2020). These terms emphasize the audiological status of the individual who is interpreting rather than the specific skill set brought to the work.

Despite such obstacles, Deaf people in the United States are increasingly enrolling in academic programs with the aim of becoming professional signed language interpreters. However, to date, little is known about the process in which Deaf individuals develop a vocational identity as interpreters. Unexplored questions include the circumstances that influence Deaf students to consider the interpreting profession, the type of support needed by Deaf students in interpreting programs, and the perspectives held by these Deaf students. In this study, we apply the lens of vocational identity development, a frame used in examining other professions, to explore the career trajectory of Deaf students in an IEP.

We adopted a case study approach, which is often used in interpreting research (Conrad & Stegenga, 2005; Halley, 2020; Swabey, Nicodemus, Taylor, & Gile, 2016; Wessling, 2020) to examine the experiences of two Deaf undergraduates enrolled in interpreting courses at Gallaudet University. Analyzing data from video-recorded instructional sessions, student bios, and interviews, we considered the factors that shaped the students’ budding vocational identities. The aim of this study was to gain insights into how Deaf students establish an identity as interpreters and prepare for challenges in their chosen career.

## **BACKGROUND AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The DI holds a unique position of being both the consumer and the interpreter within the Deaf communities. The review of the literature considers the vocational position of the DI within the background of the sign language interpreting profession and its Deaf interpreting research.

### **THE SIGNED LANGUAGE INTERPRETING PROFESSION**

Throughout most of its history, signed language interpreting was a profession populated primarily by non-deaf people, with DIs occasionally serving in a voluntary role. However, over the years, events in the U.S. gave rise to interpreting becoming a viable vocation for Deaf people.<sup>3</sup> Various

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<sup>3</sup> Deaf bilinguals had long served as language brokers in language contact situations between non-signers and members of Deaf communities (Adam, et al., 2011); thus, Deaf bilinguals’ transition into becoming professional interpreters represented a logical progression in the field.

definitions for the term *Deaf interpreter* have been put forth (e.g., Adam et al., 2014; Boudreault, 2005); however, the processes and scope of DIs work is a work in progress. Focus on Deaf interpreting was advanced by the work of the Deaf Interpreting Work Team sponsored by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) from 2005-2020, the establishment of the National Deaf Interpreters (NDI) association in 2017,<sup>4</sup> and the growing presence of DIs in universities, courtrooms, Video Relay Service (VRS) centers, and other settings (Russell, 2018). Increasingly, DIs are seen across the country providing linguistic access for highly visible events, such as legislative proceedings, political rallies, and press conferences. As a result of these changes, Deaf people have become aware that interpreting can provide a career path that capitalizes on their bilingual and bicultural proficiencies.

The demographics of Deaf interpreters and non-deaf interpreters in the U.S. differ slightly, as shown in data collected by RID and the Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI). In the mid-2010s, the RID testing cycle for several interpreting assessments, including the Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) examination, had expired or were nearing expiration (Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf, Inc. [RID], 2016a). As an initial step in updating the assessments, the Caviart Group, LLC ([Caviart], 2016, 2019), a testing development company, worked with RID and the CASLI to disseminate separate Job/Task Analyses (JTAs) to Deaf interpreters and non-deaf interpreters. The data collected from both JTAs led the certification committee to develop a new combined generalist test released in 2021.

The data collected during the JTAs (Caviart, 2016, 2019) resulted in responses from 216 DIs and 3,186 non-deaf interpreters. In comparison to the membership data during the years that corresponded to the JTAs, the response from DIs represented was comparable with the 317 registered Deaf RID members (RID, 2019), while the response from non-deaf interpreters represented a minority of the 15,411 registered non-deaf members (RID, 2016b). As found through the JTAs, the average age of the DI respondents was 41-50 years, while non-deaf respondents skewed slightly younger, averaging between 31-50 years of age. For educational attainment, 34% of DIs reported holding an associate degree or higher, whereas only 15% of non-deaf interpreters reported the same academic status. Overall, DIs were more likely than their non-deaf counterparts to have graduate attainments, with over half of the respondents holding doctoral degrees (6%) or master's degrees (50%). The JTAs also collected ethnicity and identity data from the DI and non-deaf interpreters, revealing double the percentage of Black DIs over non-deaf interpreters. Of the 216 DI responses, 83% reported being white, 8% identified as Black, and 3% as Native American or Alaskan Native. Of the non-deaf responses, 88% reported being white, 4% Black, and 2% Native American or Alaskan Native. Regarding parental status, often attributed to ASL fluency, a third (33%) of the DIs reported being Deaf-parented, with the remainder (67%) having non-deaf parents. Conversely, only 9% of the non-deaf interpreters reported being Deaf-parented. Of relevance, an earlier survey of Deaf interpreters found that 89% of respondents identified as Deaf and 11% as hard of hearing (NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team [NCIEC], 2009c). This self-identification may be linked to personal identity development and hold implications for an individual's readiness to become a professional interpreter.

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<sup>4</sup> The website for National Deaf Interpreters is found at <http://www.nationaldi.org>

## VOCATIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Vocational identity development refers to an individual's emerging pattern of interests, goals, abilities, and talents, which provide a framework for a specific career trajectory. Caza and Creary (2016) define vocational identity development as a complex, multidimensional, and developmental construct regarding how an individual enters a field, navigates the world of work, and negotiates various professional relationships. The formation of one's vocational identity is a pivotal juncture in life, symbolizing the point at which people attempt to actualize their emerging self-concept and integrate the past and present aspects of themselves in the arena of work and career (Burke, 2006). Thus, acquiring an adaptive, flexible, self-focused vocational identity has been found to contribute greatly to career success and life satisfaction (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Developing a vocational identity is especially salient for college students. During this time, the students' initial career perceptions may be in flux based upon external factors and personal characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, disposition, socioeconomic status, experience, training, and ego strength (Wong & Kaur, 2018).

What influences the development of a vocational identity? Green (2020) points to the importance of psychological well-being on career selection, particularly having a strong sense of autonomy, a history of positive relations with others, a clear purpose in life, and overall self-acceptance. External factors, such as socioeconomic status and monthly family income, have also been correlated to the positive development of a vocational identity (Koo & Kim, 2016). Further, engagement with apprenticeships has been shown to help individuals form a robust vocational identity (Chan, 2019; Vaughan, 2017).

Finally, the importance of role models can be fruitful in guiding career selection, especially during an individual's formative years (Gibson, 2004; Quimby & DeSantis, 2006). Thus, both external and internal factors contribute to the development of an individual's vocational identity. Unfortunately, for members of marginalized groups (e.g., women, BIPOC, Deaf people), obstacles such as the so-called sticky floor, glass ceiling, and glass escalator can negatively impact the development of a healthy and sustainable vocational identity.

## RESEARCH ON DEAF INTERPRETING

A small but growing body of research on Deaf interpreting has been published on such topics as educational programming for Deaf interpreting students (English et al., 2020; Forestal, 2005; Morgan & Adam, 2012), history and norms of Deaf translation (Cole, 2019; Stone, 2009), ethics of DIs (Sheneman, 2016), and Deaf interpreting practices (Adam et al., 2014; Boudreault, 2005; Forestal, 2014; Nicodemus & Taylor, 2014; Swabey, Nicodemus, Cagle, & Beldon, 2016). In 2009, the NCIEC produced reports on three separate studies of DIs (NCIEC, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c), which were later consolidated and summarized (NCIEC, 2010). Based on the results, the work team identified five domains that are necessary for Deaf interpreting: (a) Foundational Competencies; (b) Language, Culture, and Communication Competencies; (c) Consumer Assessment Competencies; (d) Interpreting Practice Competencies; and (e) Professional Development Competencies.

In a related study, English (2020) analyzed video-recorded data from a panel discussion of five professional DIs to examine cognitive aspects of Deaf interpreting. The panel participants repeatedly pointed to the critical formative experiences necessary to become a successful DI. The

participants defined Deaf extralinguistic knowledge (DELK) as the prerequisite cognitive ability present in DIs that equips them with exceptional proficiency in conveying linguistic and cultural meaning between a signed and spoken language.

Taken together, these studies identify competencies and formative experiences needed by professional DIs. We note however that assessments for these competencies are not currently available, nor do interpreter education programs require these criteria for admission. At Gallaudet University, requirement for admission into the undergraduate program involves achieving a designated level of ASL fluency determined through a formal language assessment (the ASL Proficiency Interview or ASLPI), demonstration of summarization skills, and written application materials. The aim of its program is to develop the competencies described by NCIEC.

In this paper, we explore the variables that influence interpreters in developing a vocational identity. As suggested earlier in this paper, forming a vocational identity as a signed language interpreter or translator can be personally and professionally challenging for DIs, a situation also found outside the U.S. In a phenomenological study of five DIs in Ireland, O'Connell and Lynch (2020) found that DIs' perceptions of themselves as interpreters were solidified when they had the requisite training and qualifications. However, this perception was eroded by interactions with non-deaf interpreters, deaf clients, and public figures (e.g., police, courts, health care personnel). In such encounters, the DIs reported a sense of exclusion, invisibility, or being fixed in a role that impeded their full realization and autonomy as DIs. To our knowledge, only one research study has examined identity development in non-deaf signed language interpreters. Using a phenomenological approach, Hunt (2015) examined seven non-deaf interpreters regarding their professional identity development. Hunt's participants reported that their core identity, beyond their professional identity, was transformed by forging solid relationships with members in various Deaf communities. Ironically, the non-deaf interpreters in Hunt's study reported identity development via relationships with Deaf people, while the DIs in O'Connell and Lynch's study reported that their professional identity was eroded through interactions with non-deaf interpreters, among others.

Gaining entry into a field may be one of the most challenging aspects of an interpreter's vocational identity development. Grigg (2010) analyzed data from 28 survey responses and 19 interviews in an exploration of DIs' induction into the interpreting profession. She identified four primary pathways for the professional entry of DIs: (a) academic programs, (b) engagement in professional development activities, (c) encouragement from interpreters, and (d) requests from consumers. In a related study, Cole (2019) found that some Deaf individuals first became engaged in translation work after receiving requests to translate written English theatre scripts into ASL, an activity that led some Deaf translators into the interpreting profession. An expansion of induction opportunities would open avenues for DIs to enter the interpreting profession more readily.

As stated earlier, individuals seeking a meaningful vocational path are aided by having a sense of well-being, a purpose in life, a degree of self-acceptance, and a history of positive relationships (Green, 2020). How individuals develop a Deaf identity is a critical topic that is beyond the scope

of this article,<sup>5</sup> but we note Holcomb's (1997) observations that the personal identity development of Deaf individuals is crucial to their growth of a positive self-concept (e.g., congruence, competence, worth). We note that recent studies show that the Deaf community is not a monolith; rather, Deaf people develop intersectional identities that differ from one another (Leigh & O'Brien, 2019). We can reasonably assume that Deaf interpreting students develop both their personal and vocational identity by cultivating their sense of self-worth and confidence about the challenges they will face in their career journey. Further, reducing the sense of stigma felt by DIs (O'Connell & Lynch, 2020), welcoming DIs' contributions to the interpreting profession (English, 2020), and developing key relationships with Deaf people (Hunt, 2015), may result in a shared professional identity between DIs and non-deaf interpreters.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the development of personal and vocational identities are important milestones in life regardless of one's background. However, the development of both identities may be especially salient for Deaf individuals whose identities are shaped by diverse familial, social, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This study adds to the literature regarding the factors that influence Deaf individuals to pursue signed language interpreting as a vocation.

## METHOD

In the fall semester of 2019, eleven students, including two Deaf students, registered for an undergraduate Fundamentals of Interpreting course at Gallaudet University. The instructors for the course, Dani Hunt and Brenda Nicodemus, individually met with the two Deaf students (Stephan Kennedy and McKenna McGough) at the beginning of the semester to discuss the possibility of adding a third instructor who is Deaf. Based on the students' feedback, the instructors invited Margie English, an experienced DI and doctoral student, to join a co-instructor in the course, focusing on creating, implementing, and assessing the students' work.

The qualitative data presented in this case study are taken from three video-recorded sources, including: (a) instructional sessions with Margie throughout the semester, (b) bios produced by the students, and (c) individual interviews with Margie at the conclusion of the semester. All of the data were produced in ASL and translated into written English by the authors. The instructors and the students collaboratively created this paper based on their shared experiences during that semester. See Figure 1 for a screenshot of the five co-authors during an online meeting.

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<sup>5</sup> For further literature on Deaf identity, see Chapman and Dammeyer (2017); Chen (2014); Glickman (1996); Leigh, Marcus, Dobosh, and Allen (1998); among others.



**Figure 1.** Image of Co-Authors



*Note.* Top row from left to right: Brenda Nicodemus, Margie English, and Dani Hunt. Bottom row from left to right: Stephan Kennedy and McKenna McGough.

### **STUDENT #1 – STEPHAN KENNEDY**

The first student in the case study, Stephan,<sup>6</sup> is a vibrant 61-year-old Deaf white male with an easy-going manner and a ready smile framed by a perfectly trimmed white beard. Born and raised in the southwestern U.S., Stephan initially attended a residential school for Deaf students where ASL was used for instruction and social interactions. In high school, he transferred to a public school and attended without the provision of interpreting services. Thus, Stephan was initially unaware that interpreting was a professional career until he graduated and enrolled in a community college. Later, Stephan worked with interpreters in his position as an outreach professional in both Texas and California. After moving to Seattle, DeafBlind community members encouraged Stephan to provide interpreting services, launching his involvement in the interpreting profession. After taking some limited training on Deaf interpreting, Stephan took the RID knowledge and performance evaluations in 2016 and achieved the CDI<sup>7</sup> credential. After relocating to Atlanta, and later Washington, DC, Stephan continued interpreting.

### **STUDENT #2 – MCKENNA MCGOUGH**

At the time of this study, McKenna<sup>8</sup> was a 20-year-old hard-of-hearing white female who grew up in the southeastern U.S. With her ginger hair and blue nail polish, McKenna exuded artistic energy that reflected her interest in theatre and the performance arts. During her elementary and high school years, McKenna was mainstreamed in public schools without interpreters. During this

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<sup>6</sup> A brief introduction by Stephan in American Sign Language is available at: <https://t.ly/3px1>.

<sup>7</sup> As seen in some of the quotes in this paper, interpreters and educators have traditionally used the CDI certification as a way to identify DIs. We note, however, many working DIs do not hold the CDI certification.

<sup>8</sup> A brief introduction by McKenna in American Sign Language is available at: <https://t.ly/2nzI>.

period, she developed rudimentary sign skills by participating in Deaf events and studying ASL through classes offered by a non-deaf teacher at her high school.

McKenna's first interaction with an interpreter was during her sophomore year at college. Professionally, McKenna held no experience as an interpreter but had translated various texts and scripts from English into ASL as a theatre volunteer. Table 1 summarizes the students' demographic information.

## DATA AND DISCUSSION

Five main topics emerged in the data regarding Deaf students' vocational identity development in relation to their engagement in an IEP: (1) motivations for enrolling, (2) past and present experiences, (3) an ASL environment, (4) being a Deaf student, and (5) having a Deaf instructor. Each subheading below contains excerpts of students' comments that exemplify one topic and a brief analysis of the remarks.

### MOTIVATIONS FOR ENROLLING IN AN IEP

During individual end-of-semester interviews, Stephan and McKenna were asked why they decided to major in interpreting. Stephan explained that he had already been working as a certified interpreter for several years. Still, he felt a need to have a more robust academic framework in interpreting to feel more confident in his work. As Stephan explains,

I moved to Washington, DC soon after becoming certified by the RID. I contracted with several interpreting agencies and was being called to interpret in various settings; however, as I interpreted in increasingly diverse environments, I realized that I needed a stronger theoretical foundation.

**Table 1.** *Students' Demographic Data*

Characteristics	Stephan	McKenna
Age	61	20
Self-reported identity	Deaf	Hard of Hearing
Gender	Male	Female
Ethnicity	White	White
Age of ASL acquisition	4	15
Source of ASL acquisition	Deaf school peers, residential staff, and teachers	Non-deaf high school teacher

Parents' audiological status	Hearing	Hearing
K-12 educational setting	Primarily residential school for the Deaf, some public school	Mainstreamed program in public schools
First encounter with professional interpreters who were hearing	Community college	High school
First encounter with professional interpreters who were Deaf	Adulthood	College
Worked as an interpreter before entering training program?	Yes	No

Stephan continues by expressing feelings of being limited when talking to professional non-deaf interpreters with whom he was working. He states,

I was learning on the job, figuring out what to do as I went, but I often felt uncertain. At times hearing interpreters asked me for my thoughts and feedback regarding our work together, but I wasn't sure how to express my ideas about our experiences.

Conversely, McKenna decided to pursue interpreting without having any prior work experience as an interpreter. Theatre initially sparked McKenna's interest in interpreting. Specifically, she pointed to having an epiphany during a Deaf West Theatre<sup>9</sup> performance. McKenna states,

I've always been drawn to theatre and wanted to focus on that, but I felt I needed something else as well. Then during my junior year of high school, I saw Deaf West perform the play *Spring Awakening*. Their work in translating for the Deaf performers really hit me, and I thought, 'I'd like to do that!' It seemed to blend all of my interests.

Uncertain how to transform her interests into an actual career, McKenna gained further insights when she met with a Gallaudet University academic advisor who opened her eyes to Deaf interpreting as a potential vocation. McKenna explains,

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<sup>9</sup> Deaf West Theatre is a non-profit arts organization based in Los Angeles that combines American Sign Language and spoken English in its theatrical productions.

Before I went into the interpreting program, I knew absolutely nothing about DIs. I met with an advisor who asked me, ‘Will you be a Deaf or hearing interpreter?’ I was like, ‘Deaf interpreting is a thing?’ I didn’t know that, so I did some research and felt a growing interest in becoming a CDI. I finally understood that interpreting was not only for hearing people.

McKenna was not fluent in ASL, but her hearing capabilities were becoming increasingly apparent. As she gained exposure to signed language, she began to see possibilities that she had not considered. She reflects,

I never could hear fully anyway, so I decided to go for a major in interpreting. I was scared about trying and working only in sign, but I thought, ‘Heck, why not try?’

*Discussion.* Stephan’s entry into interpreting reflects several of the typical pathways described by Grigg (2010). Stephan was initially encouraged by DeafBlind people to interpret for them, an activity that Stephan engaged in tentatively at first. He then pursued professional development activities in interpreting, including DI workshops and the CDI credentialing exam. Through his life and work experiences, Stephan held competencies recommended by the NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team before entering the Gallaudet interpreting program; however, he was not confident in his professional skills. With the encouragement of his Vocational Rehabilitation counselor, Stephan decided to enroll in Gallaudet’s interpreting program. These actions were stepping stones that led to strengthening Stephan’s emerging vocational identity.

Like many undergraduates, McKenna was experimenting with possible majors and, in that journey, decided to pursue interpreting as a potential career path. Despite her audiological status as a hard of hearing person, McKenna envisioned she would work in the same manner as a non-deaf interpreter. She dove headlong into an academic program for training interpreters, one potential entry approach described in Grigg’s (2010) study. Unlike Stephan, McKenna did not have the DELK competencies recommended by the NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team, that is, she did not yet hold bilingual and bicultural fluency, had no prior experience in interpreting practice, nor did she have knowledge about the professional world of interpreting. Despite not holding the identified DI competencies, McKenna brought her own set of lived experiences as a hard of hearing person to her training. In recognition of McKenna’s experience of “deaf body”<sup>10</sup> (O’Brien, 2021, p. 3), the admissions committee granted McKenna provisional acceptance into the program, which would be re-evaluated after one semester.

#### **EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPED A DEAF INTERPRETER IDENTITY**

Stephan and McKenna were asked about experiences that led to their vocational identity development as an interpreter. Stephan responds,

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<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the theories of Lefebvre and Bourdieu, O’Brien (2021) argues that having physical and sensory experiences different from those of hearing peers leads to the development of a different habitus, or “deaf body.”

Deaf individuals bring formative experiences of being Deaf themselves to being an interpreter, but they also bring different backgrounds. For example, I went to a Deaf school where we used ASL with the dorm staff, but the teachers in the school used the Total Communication<sup>11</sup> approach. However, the critical issue is how Deaf people have formative experiences with oppression, facing barriers, and language impoverishment. Those shared experiences of being Deaf lead to a strong bond.

While a student at the residential school, Stephan often served as an ad hoc language broker, which provided him with early experiences in language transfer between ASL and English. As Stephan states,

When I was in school, I was doing a lot of ‘interpreting’ for my classmates to help them understand certain things being discussed. Doing that was one of my formative experiences.

Stephan also mentions his rich interactions with a wide variety of Deaf people, which he regards as invaluable to interpreters. Stephan comments,

Deaf or hard of hearing people who have had limited interaction with other Deaf people will need self-reflection. I had to consider what I had learned and apply my own experiences to my work. I had to decide what I could use as a DI and what didn’t apply to my work. Interpreters have to understand decision-making issues, ethics, boundaries, and how to sort through their experiences and use them for each assignment. In a sense, I needed to examine my own life experiences.

Finally, Stephan summarizes his ideas about having formative experiences as a bilingual person, the need to be linguistically flexible, and hold cultural awareness of norms in various Deaf communities. He states,

A part of that formative experience leads people in the work and matching consumers’ needs. If DIs don’t have exposure to various Deaf communities, they might be limited to only working with a particular type of Deaf consumer.

McKenna brought with her a much different set of formative experiences than Stephan. Her progressive hearing loss began at age four after McKenna had already acquired spoken English; thus, she grew up with what she calls a “hearing orientation” to the world. McKenna shares her process of learning ASL during her high school years, stating,

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<sup>11</sup> Total Communication is a philosophy of educating children with hearing loss that simultaneously incorporates all means of communication – sign language, natural gestures, fingerspelling, body language, listening, lipreading, and speech – as a means of access.

A hearing woman taught my ASL classes in high school, and frankly, she didn't really teach ASL. It was more signing in English word order. Occasionally, the teacher would talk about how ASL was different than Signed English.

Theatre played a significant role in McKenna's personal and professional identity development. Through theatrical experiences, she began learning how to consolidate the two parts of herself – one that relied on her status as a person who could, with accommodations, function in an auditory environment, and another part that was coming to terms with her status as a hard of hearing person. As McKenna shares,

I hate the automatic assumptions that people make about what I can't do. I like the 'what if' approach to figuring it out. I am naturally loud when I speak on stage because I can't monitor my speech volume. But the point is that I really enjoyed that mix of hearing and Deaf actors where both groups are equitable, and one is not considered better than the other. We just need to figure out how to work together.

McKenna expands on her thoughts of her shifting identity, saying,

I'm hard of hearing, but growing up, I felt hearing because I didn't know ASL. When I learned ASL, that opened a different part of me. I realized I could function in both the hearing and Deaf worlds. I like both, and I feel I have two halves. The first Deaf person I met was at Gallaudet when I was a 16-year-old high school junior. I saw how much I had missed, and I realized another part of me was opening up. I felt cheated. I realized that I had taken a deficit view about being Deaf, like most hearing people do. I didn't understand the culture associated with the word 'Deaf.'<sup>12</sup> Now I really have a feel for what being Deaf means. I'm hard of hearing based on my hearing level, which means I can hear some things, but I can also sign.

McKenna suggests that her particular background would help her become an interpreter, citing the changing demographics within the Deaf community. She reflects,

Most Deaf people are not from Deaf families. I see many people who struggle with acceptance from their hearing families. In fact, many Deaf people feel it's unfair that they didn't have Deaf parents. Maybe as a person who also didn't have a Deaf family, I could make Deaf consumers feel comfortable. I also experienced having parents who didn't know sign and I spoke growing up. I accept that I didn't have that experience of ASL growing up and others experienced that as well.

Thus, like Stephan, McKenna feels that the lived experience of being hard of hearing could be beneficial for bonding with future interpreting consumers. However, unlike Stephan, McKenna did not raise the issue of bilingual fluency as a prerequisite for becoming an interpreter and instead

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<sup>12</sup> McKenna's comment reflects a longstanding division between viewing Deaf people from a medical, pathological perspective (a problem to be fixed) vs. viewing Deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority (a collective to be celebrated).

pointed to sharing similar experiences that only Deaf or hard of hearing interpreters may be able to understand. She states,

DIs connect with Deaf consumers better because of already knowing how they grew up. So, most of the time, they can relate as individuals because it's like, 'Oh, I've been in your shoes, in that situation.' That creates a degree of comfort and relate-ability, like 'I know you understand me, and that influences how we communicate.' Maybe I've experienced that exact same situation, and that brings a degree of relief and comfort, instead of just, 'Crap, another hearing interpreter.'

*Discussion.* The formative vocational experiences of Stephan and McKenna could hardly be more different from one another. Their comments reveal that their backgrounds affected how they identified and conceptualized their role within the interpreting profession. Stephan's experiences with interpreting were unfolding at a time when the field was becoming professionalized (Cokely, 2005). Given his educational background, it is not surprising that Stephan was initially unaware of interpreting, especially Deaf interpreting, as a viable vocational choice. Once he had identified interpreting as his career goal, Stephan stated that his lived experience as a Deaf person was critical to his success and, further, that his status in the Deaf community positively impacts his relationship with consumers.

Conversely, at Gallaudet University, McKenna began to accept her identity as a Deaf person, a critical step in personal identity development, according to Holcomb (1997). McKenna brought an optimistic attitude to interpreting, seeing a benefit in her formative experiences in a mainstream program. She correctly noted that, like herself, many Deaf individuals have not had early exposure to ASL through their families or in the educational setting. Rather than feel intimidated by her upbringing, she concluded that her life experience would parallel that of many Deaf consumers, thus potentially qualifying her for work as a DI with that niche set of consumers. McKenna's perspective highlights her notion that DIs need only share the lived experiences of struggling for communication access as a shared background to be successful. However, bilingual fluency that was developed at a young age still serves as the backbone for these lived experiences and allows for the provision of interpreting services to a larger Deaf audience by being more likely to capture the nuances of variations within ASL.

#### **THE INFLUENCE OF AN ASL ENVIRONMENT ON PERSONAL IDENTITY**

At age 61, Stephan had already had many life experiences that shaped his cultural identity as a Deaf person. Upon his arrival to Gallaudet University, Stephan expressed surprise at the broad array of Deaf students on campus who had much different linguistic and educational backgrounds than his own. As he observes,

After graduating from the Deaf school, I was on my own. I moved away from home and immediately sought out the Deaf community. I was working as a teacher's aide, and I could still feel the influence of hearing people in my life in the way I signed. I started to let go of that and move into more natural language use. As I was out in the community more, I was signing more. My Deaf identity was becoming solid through my use of ASL, which was *my* [Stephan's emphasis] language. Entering Gallaudet was a good experience because I met students who had been mainstreamed, plus hearing students, teachers, and so on.

In some regards, McKenna represents the type of Deaf student that Stephan mentioned encountering at Gallaudet University. Since McKenna had received her education in a mainstream program, her signed language skills were based on seeing non-deaf interpreters who, according to her, learned ASL “from a book” rather than through language contact in the Deaf community. Only after seeing interpreters who exhibited a high degree of ASL fluency did McKenna begin to understand the diversity and richness of signed language. As she states,

My interpreters used ‘textbook ASL’ but didn’t really have experiences with the Deaf community. But in DC, I saw interpreters who had outstanding signing skills and knew Shakespeare, for example. I was blown away and started to learn ASL so fast.

McKenna’s comments reveal that she was developing a personal identity as a Deaf person while still grappling with explaining who she was to both Deaf and hearing people. She muses,

My way of explaining my identity is a bit flipped. When I’m around members of the Deaf community, I tend to identify as hard of hearing. I’m Deaf, yes. I’m ‘big-D Deaf.’<sup>13</sup> Yes, I’m involved with the Deaf community, Deaf people, and Deaf culture, yes. But to be specific about my identity, I still say I’m hard of hearing. I guess it’s my way of being explicit about my hearing level. I can still hear. I can speak. I can lip read. I can function in hearing culture.

McKenna continues,

But in the hearing community, I say I’m Deaf. Technically, I’m hard of hearing, yes, but in general, I’m Deaf. My identity is ‘big-D Deaf,’ and sign language is my language. I try to explain to people that there’s not just one way to be Deaf. There’s so much diversity in the ways to be Deaf. I think I’m a perfect example of how I don’t match the ‘typical’ Deaf norms, so I represent that there is no one way to be Deaf.

As McKenna considers her identity, she concludes with the following remarks,

People have said to me, ‘You’re not Deaf enough because you can hear.’ I never felt I could identify as Deaf, but the interpreting program really helped me to understand that a variety of people identify as Deaf. That being Deaf is personal and that it is precious and important. You don’t have to fit one mold to hold a Deaf identity.

*Discussion.* Once again, Stephan and McKenna differ, specifically in their linguistic backgrounds. Interestingly, when Stephan came to Gallaudet University, he was surprised to see the variation among students who had not had his ASL-rich background. Following Holcomb (1997), Stephan had already solidified his self-concept within the Deaf community. For McKenna, though, Gallaudet University opened her up to the DEAF-WORLD (Lane et al., 1996) for the first time, an experience

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<sup>13</sup> “Big-D Deaf” refers to the convention of writing “deaf” with a capital D (as in Deaf) as a means of identifying as a linguistic and cultural group with norms that are independent of the non-deaf community.



she embraced with relish. McKenna's profile is of an individual who had been mainstreamed until arriving at Gallaudet University. In her narrative, she explains that she is still working through labeling and defining herself as a "Deaf hard of hearing person." Her experience reflects Holcomb's (1997) argument that to develop a self-concept as a Deaf adult, children need access to various Deaf role models and cultural experiences during their formative years. Developing a personal identity leads to psychological resiliency, which according to Green (2020), is revealed in a person's level of autonomy, healthy relations with others, self-acceptance, and a purpose in life.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF AN IEP ENVIRONMENT ON VOCATIONAL IDENTITY**

When asked about the experience of being a Deaf student in an interpreting program that has been historically based on the needs of non-deaf students, Stephan comments,

It is clear that the program is designed for hearing students, and I have to do more work to make up for that imbalance. I have to learn how hearing people interpret and then learn how a DI interprets. From time to time, I'm given an assignment that meets my needs as a DI, but most of the time, there's a massive difference between us.

At the same time, Stephan expresses positive feelings about being in this program, stating,

I'm getting benefits. It doesn't entirely fit my needs, but I'm definitely benefitting. Now I understand the interpreting process, various models, perspectives of hearing interpreters, teaming dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and so on. I can be more effective when working with a hearing interpreter – and DIs too. It has helped me to understand better who I am as a DI.

McKenna expands on the idea of how her personal and vocational identity were intersecting as she enrolled in interpreting classes, stating,

It's a little bit hard to discuss because everyone says that the program is designed for hearing people, but I felt I could learn from [non-deaf students] as well because they had their own calling for why they became interpreters. It was nice to learn about their different backgrounds and what signs they used. Then, I can contribute my own experience for us all to become better interpreters. It helps the [non-deaf] students to learn about people like me who have lost their hearing. Now, I'm in class with a certified DI, Margie, and McKenna, which helps me plan for professional interpreting experiences. But I learned a lot from the hearing students too, who work so hard.

*Discussion.* Among the early obstacles that Deaf and other students from underrepresented groups in the interpreting field face is enrolling in a program that has not been designed to meet their specific needs. Stephan and McKenna noted that interpreting programs have traditionally been geared toward white, non-deaf students. Although positive about their experiences, both Stephan and McKenna found issues with being among their non-deaf peers.

## THE IMPACT OF HAVING A DEAF INSTRUCTOR IN THE IEP

The students were asked about having a Deaf instructor who was also a certified interpreter. For Stephan, this was the additional support he needed to learn to trust his instincts and strengthen his continued learning. He states,

Working with her was a huge benefit! We were able to connect because of our similar experiences. Without Deaf students in my classes, I find that I'm second-guessing myself and wondering if I'm doing the work right. Without that support, I feel off-kilter. Hearing students are supportive too – don't get me wrong. I appreciate their support, but it's not the same as having a DI there.

McKenna also found her experiences of discussing her assignments with DIs, including Margie to be of great benefit to her learning. Her remarks echoed McKenna's comments, adding,

Brenda and Dani realized that I needed more support to learn what I needed to know. When I worked with Margie and Stephan, I felt my needs were being met.

McKenna continues to enthusiastically reflect about having a Deaf instructor and another Deaf student in her interpreting classes, stating,

Working with a CDI was really great! I could ask Stephan and Margie about their experiences of working as a CDI. I heard stories about how it works, what skills are needed, and what attitude I needed as compared to hearing students.

*Discussion.* The data reveal that focused attention with a Deaf instructor influenced Stephan and McKenna's vocational identity as interpreters. Stephan and McKenna's comments support the literature by Gibson (2004) and Quimby and DeSantis (2006) that point to the critical importance of role models in the process of career selection and identity development, especially during a student's formative years. Having an instructor who was Deaf served to mitigate Stephan's feelings of being "off-kilter" or "second-guessing" his work as an interpreter. McKenna reported that having a Deaf role model helped her envision the type of work she would be doing that would be different from her non-deaf peers.

## ON THE FUTURE

To conclude the end-of-semester interview, both Stephan and McKenna were asked about their goals for the future. Stephan wants to continue his interpreting work with the addition of the theoretical foundation he was seeking. He states,

I plan to work as a full-time interpreter. I hope that this degree brings me to a better understanding of the cognitive processes entailed in interpreting. I want to be more comfortable teaming with hearing interpreters and engaging in professional dialogue, becoming more confident in 'interpreter talk,' the field's jargon, and participating as a full colleague in the work. I would also like more specialized training, such as in legal settings, and can envision myself training interpreters as well.

As the semester ended, McKenna faced different decisions. She learned that she had not successfully achieved the ASL proficiency rating required to continue in the program. McKenna reflected on her future goals, stating,

I no longer plan on becoming a full-time interpreter, which is what most people want when they major in interpreting. I just wanted to use interpreting skills for theatrical purposes. I'm sad that I had to drop the program, but I'm happy to focus solely on theatre. The program specifically teaches interpreting skills. They are good skills to know, but it's not altogether what I want.

*Discussion.* As the semester drew to a close, the two students chose different vocational directions. Stephan continues to pursue interpreting and even began to conceptualize various roles he could pursue in the profession. McKenna realized that interpreting was not the right fit for her and opted out of the program rather than trying to re-apply at a later time. As the students face their futures, it becomes clear that several factors, including their formative experiences, educational background, personal identity, and interaction with a Deaf role model, combined to shape their process of vocational identity development.

#### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

As with any research, this study had limitations. First, the study included only two Deaf students, both of whom are white, and only examined their experiences in one class that was composed predominantly of white non-deaf students. Thus, we make no claims that these findings can be generalized to all Deaf interpreting students. Indeed, a thorough look at vocational identity development in DIs and Deaf students warrants a larger participant pool that includes people from diverse backgrounds conducted over an extended period.

Further, we note that the data for this study were collected and analyzed primarily by the course instructors, which may have affected how candid the students felt they could be in their remarks; however, this situation may have been ameliorated by the collaborative nature of the study.

Despite these limitations, we believe this paper offers valuable insights into the importance of DIs developing a vocational identity and the factors that facilitate that process. Although researchers described potential obstacles for DIs, prior studies suggest establishing a strong vocational identity can bolster individuals to move beyond the inevitable roadblocks that are encountered in their careers.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to investigate the process of vocational identity development of two Deaf students who were enrolled in a signed language interpreting program. We explored the students' growth over a semester by examining their original motivation for pursuing a career in solving, their formative experiences before taking coursework, and their perceptions of engaging with a Deaf instructor. Prior studies of non-deaf individuals indicate that developing a vocational identity requires the integration of past and present selves in relation to a future profession. Likewise, our study revealed that Deaf students drew on their past experiences to envision themselves as professional DIs. Further, studies indicate that internal states such as emotional health and self-

acceptance play an important role in the development process, a finding that is corroborated by our study.

Prior studies also reveal the importance of establishing professional relationships through internship and apprenticeship programs (Chan, 2019; Vaughan, 2017) as well as mentoring by role models (Gibson, 2004; Quimby & DeSantis, 2006). Our study mirrors these findings by documenting the importance of students' associations with Deaf interpreters, Deaf role models, and Deaf instructors. An important finding of this study is that Deaf students are powerfully shaped by their personal identity development as Deaf individuals as a precursor to developing a vocational identity as an interpreter. Further, the findings suggest that the collective lived experience of being Deaf, referred to as Deaf extralinguistic knowledge (DELK), may be crucial for developing an identity as a professional DI.

Based on current trends, the interpreting field will continue to see growing numbers of Deaf people wanting to become professional interpreters. One implication of this research is to provide insights for interpreter educators about the processes that underlie the vocational identity development of Deaf students. With increased sensitivity to the factors that promote vocational identity, instructors can create more inclusive learning environments by incorporating Deaf instructors and mentors, guest lectures by CDIs, instructional materials that contain models of CDI work, among other strategies.

While DIs' presence in the interpreting profession is a positive advancement, many questions regarding admission into educational programs and training protocols for Deaf and hard of hearing students remain. Some would argue that DIs typically come from Deaf families or attended Deaf schools with a rich sign language environment. Some would claim that DIs should only be native signers with a rating of ASLPI of 4 or 5. Should hard of hearing or Deaf non-signing interpreting students be taught in the same manner as a hearing second language learner or should they be treated more like the Deaf students who are fluent signers? What formative experiences are predictive of success in becoming a professional DI? How can interpreting programs draw on the required competencies reported by Deaf interpreters when making admission decisions about Deaf students? What is the role of Deaf instructors in interpreting classrooms, specifically in guiding Deaf students? What knowledge beyond the navigation of barriers in the signed language interpreting profession do Deaf students need for the development of their vocational identity? Critically, for this paper, what is the best way to support Deaf individuals in developing their vocational identity as interpreters and, ultimately, to thrive in the profession? We suggest that each of these questions warrant further examination.

In the introduction, we cited employment obstacles often faced by marginalized groups that impact the development of a healthy and sustainable vocational identity. The students in this case study also reported grappling with similar challenges. Both students are continuing with their professional journeys, albeit in different directions. As we conclude this paper, Stephan has been accepted into the graduate program in the Department of Interpretation and Translation at Gallaudet University. McKenna is seeking internship opportunities to complete the requirements for a bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts. These developments are encouraging because establishing a vocational identity extends one's individual strengths and values to career selection, ultimately affecting a person's overall satisfaction with life.

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