

Tuesday, January 23, 2008

Commentary:

Jordan said in 1998: "becoming a completely bilingual ASL-English community" is the goal of Gallaudet University

The following letter to the community by I. King Jordan in 1998 shows that the idea that bilingualism is the goal at Gallaudet is not controversial and should have never been in doubt. (See the underlined sentence in the 9th paragraph of Jordan's open letter, below.)

However, in his 1998 letter, Jordan hedged his statement about bilingualism by embedding it within an explicitly anti-intellectual frame. In an brazenly attempted act of intellectual prestidigitation, Jordan introduces a non-sequitur, attempting to imply that the existence of "many kinds of signing and many kinds of signers" is something that allegedly obligates us to avoid debating "what it should be named," so that we can supposedly "devise a valid and legitimate method to describe and evaluate what that practice is."

But, bilingualism is bilingualism. There is no such thing as "many different kinds of X, Y, Z" that would erase the fact that what exists at Gallaudet *is* bilingualism. The concept of bilingualism encompasses *all* of the ASL-English communication that occurs, whatever its style, and [whatever its variation](#). There is no need for acrimony on this point. This is not, or should not, be controversial at all.

This (in 1998) was all part and parcel of Jordan's attempt to "deculturize" Gallaudet. He wanted us to believe that Gallaudet was not created by culturally Deaf people in the mid-to-late 1800's, and that somehow nothing important happened at Gallaudet until a brand new "disability rights" movement sprang forth, ex nihilo, in 1988. As reflected in the comments of a Gallaudet administrator, Jordan attempted to put forth the untenable idea that Gallaudet is not a cultural institution, but instead is an "academic institution." (See PDF page 48 of [THIS PAPER](#)).

But there is no such thing as academics outside of culture. An academic institution *is* a type of cultural institution, as someone should have explained to Jordan years ago.

Likewise, it makes no sense to stress the idea of "communication" without also stressing the concept of language. Humans communicate by using language, and they do so within a cultural context. Language and culture go hand in hand.

Gallaudet is a great social laboratory, and in the history of the social evolution of deaf people, American Sign Language is the answer to the question of how deaf people can best communicate in lectures and spontaneous conversation.

ASL is the deaf community's answer to the question of visual communication. No amount of attempted intellectual prestidigitation is going to change that.

Jordan used the phrase "global educational and cultural center" in his infamous [January 2007 commentary](#)¹, as the phrase was included in the 2005 version of the Strategic Goals. Jordan's use of that phrase does not indicate that he understood that educational institutions are cultural institutions. On the contrary, Jordan consistently showed over the years that he had the mistaken belief that education and culture were two separate, but related, things.

According to Jordan's (mistaken) view, Deaf culture is (supposedly) something "extra" that happens in the dorms, hallways, or in stage plays at the theater at Gallaudet, or (he thought) also in Deaf people's living rooms at home or in Deaf clubs. Jane Fernandes also shared this misconception, as proven by her [January 2007 ASHA interview](#).

When Jordan said that Gallaudet should be a "cultural center," he was envisioning culture as an extra aspect, and he did not understand that education itself is a cultural pursuit. By throwing in the word "global," he was playing a political trick, i.e., he was attempting to minimize that perception of Gallaudet being the center of Deaf culture by resorting to his usual trick of resorting to broad generalizations.

This was the whole gimmick of the [2005 version](#) of the Strategic Goals. The terms "ASL," "American Sign Language" or "Deaf culture" do not appear in that version. (Amazingly, even the word "sign" does not appear!) Goal #6 stated: "...nurtures and strengthens its *position* as a global educational and cultural center for people who are deaf and hard of hearing..." (Emphasis added.) What does [the word "position"](#) mean in that sentence?

By using vague and generalized language, and hedge words like "position", Jordan was attempting to avoid recognizing the fact that Gallaudet itself is a cultural institution, just as *all* academic institutions are cultural institutions. Every school and university in

America is cultural in nature, i.e., is part of American culture. It's an obvious and uncontroversial fact that Gallaudet itself is a cultural institution, the *whole* institution, not just the dorms, hallways, and theater.

Also, it is an obvious and uncontroversial fact that Gallaudet was created by culturally Deaf people in the 1800's as a means of establishing equal treatment for Deaf people. The federal government had given land grants through the [Morrill Act](#) of 1862. To be fair to Deaf people, Edward Gallaudet argued that a college for Deaf people should be established, and this is why Gallaudet was established in the first place.

Jordan, through his constant attempted smears and distortions and misuse of language, wanted the world to believe that there was a "small but vocal minority" made up of wild-eyed extremists who were (allegedly) "denying the free exchange of ideas", etc. etc. All of this was patently untrue, of course. It was false propaganda which actually showed that *Jordan* was the person who had Machiavellian intentions, not anyone else.

It's time to stop apologizing for things which should be accepted as uncontroversially true. Gallaudet is a cultural institution. It was created by culturally Deaf people who are expansive in their outlook, not inwardly oriented, and who invite others to join in. Gallaudet is a bilingual institution and that's the way it should be, and there's nothing unusual or controversial about that.

[*End commentary*]

Footnote 1: A near-preponderance of the evidence suggests that the then-director of the in-house publishing division of the university, under Jordan, was the ghost-writer of the 2007 commentary. He retired in August 2010, nineteen months after Jordan's full retirement from the faculty.

[An Open Letter to the Gallaudet Community, from President Jordan](#)

*On The Green - A publication for Gallaudet faculty, teachers, and staff
Gallaudet University, 800 Florida Ave. NE, Washington, DC 20002-3695
Issue: December 9, 1998 - Vol. 29 No. 9*

Gallaudet's future has occupied much of my thinking in recent months. While none of us can predict with certainty what the next fifteen or twenty five years will bring, all of us understand the realities which have already begun to change what we do, and how we do it.



The three primary realities that are shaping Gallaudet's future are ones I have mentioned often in various campus-wide communications: increased accessibility for deaf and hard of hearing people, the rapid growth of technology, and demographic shifts in the country's deaf and hard of hearing population.

Accessibility and a heightened public awareness that deaf and hard of hearing people can indeed do anything but hear has led to dramatic changes in all our lives. It is now the law of the land that we have as many educational and almost as many career choices as hearing people. And with the growing number of educational opportunities online through 'virtual universities,' those choices will continue to increase. If Gallaudet is to remain the University that provides the best educational, cultural and social environment for deaf and hard of hearing K-12, undergraduate and graduate students, we must offer excellent and accessible programs at all levels.

Technology's tremendous impact on the lives of deaf and hard of hearing people cannot be overstated and will continue to increase dramatically. Yet the technology supporting email, world wide web, pagers, relay services, captioned media and real time captioning, is relatively new. Ensuring that Gallaudet stays current will be critical in preparing our students for a world we cannot now envision.

Changing demographics, however, will no doubt have the greatest impact on the future Gallaudet. We already know that a major shift is occurring in the pool of students from which Gallaudet recruits. Increasingly, students entering Gallaudet are diverse in culture, ethnicity, age, educational background, communication skills and language use. This cultural mix enriches the University and enhances our educational mission immensely. It also challenges each of us to help create a community that welcomes, embraces and knows how to educate an increasingly diverse student body.

We can all point with pride to Gallaudet programs and practices that are already responding to these new realities. Changes in all aspects of technology, increased efforts to improve K-12 education throughout the country through our national mission activities, new undergraduate programs to help students make the transition from high school to college, and new graduate programs are only a few of many examples I could point to.

Fortunately, the University has already defined the framework for these and other needed changes in the Gallaudet University Vision Statement and the statement on Sign Communication at Gallaudet University. Developed after extensive discussion and

input from students, faculty, teachers, and staff and approved by the Board of Trustees, both reaffirm the basic tenets that must continue to shape the Gallaudet University of the future- broad educational opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing students through the best visual learning environment. I remain committed to these principles and to leading the University Community in implementing them to the fullest extent possible.

That effort cannot succeed, however, unless the Gallaudet community resolves an issue that is at our very heart: barrier-free communication. As I have stated often, I am committed to maintaining an environment on campus that encourages the candid expression of ideas no matter how unpopular or controversial they may be. Debates on how all of us communicate with each other began more than a hundred years ago and no doubt will continue for a hundred years to come. That is healthy and welcome. However, the last decade of focussed discourse has not resulted in agreement on a course of action that ensures that, in every situation, we all understand and we all can be understood.

Although becoming a completely bi-lingual ASL-English community will remain our long-term goal, we must recognize the reality of the Gallaudet community today and in the future, a community that encompasses many kinds of signing and many kinds of signers. A number of phrases have been used to describe effective signing at Gallaudet- language, ASL broadly described, conceptually accurate signed English, or signing with appropriate ASL features. What these phrases have in common is the attempt to name a practice, to describe what we actually do in Gallaudet classrooms and meeting rooms and offices so that we understand each other. [*Emphasis added.*]

Rather than debate what it should be named, Gallaudet must devise a valid and legitimate method to describe and evaluate what that practice is, must set up the instructional support programs needed to achieve it, must require all members of the campus community to attend instructional programs so they become proficient in it, and must make it the norm at all University-sponsored events. The Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) alone has not been up to this task; it must be replaced with a more comprehensive system.

It is my responsibility to make sure Gallaudet is prepared for what the future holds. To do that, I believe we must act quickly, both to resolve current concerns and to plan for future changes.

Planning to Achieve Barrier-Free Communication I am resolved that we find a University-wide solution to the 'communication issue' as quickly as possible and move on. To that end:

I will convene a meeting on February 3, 1999 with board, faculty, teacher, staff, and student representatives to discuss how the Communication Statement can be implemented more quickly and to generate other ideas on how Gallaudet can live up to

our promise of barrier-free communication. The outstanding work on sign evaluation already initiated by the University Faculty will help inform our discussions that day.

I will then create a campus-wide implementation team whose charge will be to review those ideas and examine the entire range of signing and evaluation methods - the faculty sign evaluation that was used for many years, the SCPI, a language proficiency interview, student and peer evaluations, departmental and unit evaluations - and recommend an evaluation and training plan that is flexible and comprehensive enough to serve the entire campus.

My goal is to have a new training and evaluation system ready to be tested by the beginning of the fall semester of 2000.

During any transition, I will work closely with all the Vice Presidents to ensure that sign evaluation and personnel actions can continue smoothly and legally. I will also direct them to make implementation of the A-RAP Supporting Objective on communication skills (SSO 1.5) a major priority for the remainder of FY 1999 and FY 2000 so that the University will be prepared to provide appropriate training for individuals and units.

Preparing for Gallaudet's Future Gallaudet must also be prepared for the changes that will have great impact not only on this university but on higher education for all American deaf and hard of hearing students.

In the fall of 1999, I will convene a meeting of national leaders in post-secondary education for individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing so we can share our experience with technological, demographic and legal realities and identify ways we can collaborate to assure that all our programs continue to serve our students well.

In the fall of 2000, Gallaudet will sponsor a pre-Deaf Way II conference to discuss the recent history of the American deaf and hard of hearing community. The conference will bring together the best thinkers in education, history and the social sciences to examine the current and future impact of recent and ongoing changes on the lives of all of us who are deaf or hard of hearing.

What makes Gallaudet unique is barrier-free visual communication. That will always be at the heart of all we do. It is vital that every member of the Gallaudet community embody this ideal. We must also be aware of the coming critical changes which will affect every institution of higher education in the United States, and must free up our collective creative energy to respond to them. I ask each of you to join me in this important undertaking.

I. King Jordan
December, 1998

"ON THE GREEN" BACK ISSUE ON GALLAUDET.EDU:

<http://pr.gallaudet.edu/otg/BackIssues.asp?ID=138>

PDF VERSION:

http://www.saveourdeafschools.org/jordan_1998.pdf