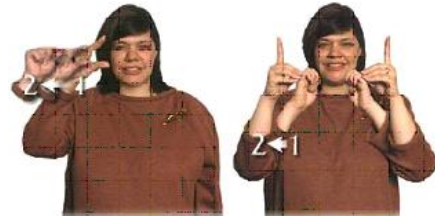


Seeing Economics at Gallaudet

by Robert F. Graboyes
Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond
Equilibria #5, 1998/99

Within sight of the U.S. Capitol stands a university whose charter bears Abraham Lincoln's signature, yet the first language of the campus is not English. At Gallaudet University, students and faculty speak American Sign Language (ASL), the language of deaf and hard of hearing people in the United States and Canada.



In September 1998, Gallaudet established a Center for Economic Education to advance the understanding of economics by deaf and hard of hearing people across the United States. The center is affiliated with the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE), an organization dedicated to improving economic literacy. The Gallaudet Center will provide economics training, materials, and other resources for K-12 teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students.



Gallaudet Center for
Economic Education

Schools across the country have increased their emphasis on economic literacy, in part thanks to newly adopted standards of learning. Adjusting to these standards can be intimidating, even to seasoned professionals. The NCEE's network of state councils and approximately 275 regional centers serves teachers and students in most of the 50 states.

The Gallaudet Center is unique among NCEE affiliates, with a clientele defined not by geography, but by curricular needs. In addition to ASL, Gallaudet students share a common culture. Deaf Culture, little known among hearing people, has its own prose, poetry, art, theater, humor, legends, heroes, villains, history, politics, etiquette, social mores, and—perhaps most surprisingly for a hearing person—music.

Gallaudet University and Deaf Education

Gallaudet University's founding was a political miracle. In 1864, relatively few Americans attended college of any kind. Many doubted the value of educating deaf people. And the federal government's finances and attention were strained by the Civil War. Yet in that year, Congress and President Lincoln established what would become Gallaudet University.

But the next century was not a happy one for deaf education. A bitter dispute raged between "manualist" educators who advocated using sign language in instruction and "oralist" educators who opposed using sign language at all. Until recently, the oralists won most of the battles. Sign language was largely barred from the classroom; for the most part, so were deaf teachers. Concurrently, inventions that brought hearing people closer together—the telephone, phonograph, tape recorder, radio, television, sound film, etc.—further isolated deaf people from mainstream culture. In particular,

the telephone had devastating economic effects on deaf people, excluding them from jobs they had previously filled.

The past few decades, though, have seen a renaissance in deaf education, accompanied by an array of new communications technologies. The portable teletype machine (called a "TTY" or "TDD") allows deaf people to converse over ordinary telephone lines. The TTY also permits deaf people and hearing people to converse over phone lines via relay operators, available in every state, who intermediate the calls in real-time. Fax machines, film and television captioning, video recorders, the World Wide Web, e-mail, and personal computers have brought previously hard-to-reach information and people within easy grasp.

Changes in laws (including the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act) and changes in hearing peoples' attitudes about deaf people have also generated new economic opportunities.

Symbolically, 1988 heralded the expansion of economic opportunities available to deaf people. In that year, Gallaudet's then-president was retiring. In its 124-year history, all of Gallaudet's presidents had been hearing, and many in the university community presumed a deaf president would be selected, symbolically shattering the limits on students' aspirations.

But the Board of Trustees stunned the campus by offering the position to a hearing person with little background in deaf education. Peacefully, but powerfully, the campus exploded, and Gallaudet burst onto the front pages of the world's newspapers. The protests shut down the university and forced the new president's resignation in less than a week. In her place, the Board appointed the university's first deaf president—I. King Jordan, previously dean of Arts and Sciences and now in his eleventh year as president.

Gallaudet University and Economic Education

Before the renaissance in deaf education, schools often presumed that deaf and hard of hearing students could not perform at the same academic level as other students. Happily, that presumption is gone. Schools today expect deaf and hard of hearing students to meet the same standards as others, and the schools' job is to provide them with the means of attaining those standards. This is true in economics as well as in other subjects.

Communications strategies aside, educating deaf students in economics entails an added complication. Gallaudet Professor Stephen Chaikind (the new center's director) explains that hearing children often pick up a great deal of economics by accident; they may learn some economics simply by overhearing their parents negotiating with car salesmen. A deaf or hard of hearing child may miss some of these accidental lessons.

**AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL):
A One-Minute Primer**

ASL IS A TRUE language, equivalent in structure, richness, and complexity to any spoken language. It is neither easier nor harder to learn than French or Arabic or Chinese. There are many sign languages worldwide, and each has a distinct grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, plus regional variations similar to the accents and dialects of spoken languages. Sign languages bear little relationship to the spoken languages of their respective countries. For example, ASL-speakers can converse easily with French Sign Language-speakers. British Sign Language, on the other hand, is unintelligible to most ASL-speakers. In certain structural respects, ASL more closely resembles Japanese, Navajo, Hebrew, and Bantu languages of southern Africa than English.

All of this is critically important when designing a curriculum for deaf students. Generally, English is their second language. This fact requires unique communication strategies—similar to those employed when teaching students from other diverse language backgrounds.

In recent decades, linguists (beginning at Gallaudet) proved that ASL is a true language—not a signed version of English. This research helped return ASL to the classroom, where it once again is an important tool in deaf education. Since the resurgence in ASL, sign language interpreting has for the first time become the work of professionals, rather than of volunteers or family members.

By chance, rising standards in deaf education have coincided with rising standards in economic education. Gallaudet University occupies a central role nationally (and internationally) in curriculum development and teacher training; its undergraduate and graduate alumni teach deaf and hard of hearing students across the United States. The university houses the Kendall Demonstration Elementary School and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf—a K-12 setting in which to develop and test new curricula, materials, and teaching strategies. The campus has state-of-the-art technical facilities for such tasks as adding captions to films. There are also regional facilities in Massachusetts, Florida, Kansas, California, and Hawaii. All of these resources will enrich the Center for Economic Education.

As a joint effort of the Economics and Education departments at Gallaudet, the center has especially strong means of advancing economic literacy. The center's agenda is still in the early planning stages but is likely to include national and regional teacher workshops, pre-service training for education students, research related to economic education and deafness, community workshops on economic topics for the benefit of deaf adults in the Washington, DC area, and curriculum development.