

Acquisition of Deaf Culture and Sign Language Competencies During Audiology Training: A Student's Perspective

Jada Rosalee Wong, Fourth-Year Undergraduate Student

Faculty Mentors: Leigh Odom, PhD, CCC-SLP | Tracie Rice, AuD, CCC-A | Gloriajean Wallace, PhD, CCC-SLP, BC-ANCDs

Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) | College of Health & Human Sciences



ABSTRACT

Audiology graduate programs prepare students to manage the communication needs of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including people from the Deaf community. After a review of existing audiology programs across the U.S., there appears to be a need for the expansion of curricula in areas that would strengthen clinical care provided to cases from the Deaf community. This poster discusses training needs for audiology students--from a student's perspective--including ways to further investigate Deaf culture, the clinical use of sign language, and ASL interpreters.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the fulfillment of this poster, participants will be able to:

- Distinguish between lowercase "deaf" and capital "D" "Deaf" identity.
- List two Au.D. programs that offer courses pertaining to Deaf culture and ASL training.
- Describe one benefit of adding ASL and Deaf culture training opportunities for students interested in the profession of audiology.

DOCTOR OF AUDIOLOGY (AuD) PROGRAMS

According to the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA), audiologists are healthcare professionals who diagnose and assess balance and hearing-related differences and disorders. Often seen as the hearing aspect of the "speech-language-hearing" sphere upheld by ASHA, audiologists can work closely with hearing aid specialists, speech-language pathologists, physical therapists, and many more. Audiologists tackle multiple populations affected by hearing loss and must work accordingly with their clients to provide the best care.

In graduate school, students learn that hearing is a spectrum. A client's hearing loss can span from slight to hard-of-hearing to profoundly deaf. Audiologists train for 4 years on how to best assess their clients and be responsive doctors. Clinical deafness is heavily focused on; however, cultural deafness exists as well. This independent study dives into the number of graduate schools focusing highlighting Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL) in their programs.

Cultural competency is what makes professionals more efficient in their work (ASHA, n.d.). To become more aware of the populations they may serve, audiology students should be exposed to Deaf culture. It can also be argued that ASL should be more present in these programs to urge students to acknowledge the connections between hearing differences and language development, and the variety of cultural intervention.

DEAF PRESENCE IN AuD PROGRAMS

According to ASHA'S Council on Academic Accreditation Program List (n.d.), there are 74 accredited audiology graduate programs in the U.S. As of 2025:

- **18 programs** include studies and courses on ASL and Deaf culture for students
- **56 programs** do not include studies or courses on ASL and Deaf culture for students
- Percentage:
 - $(18/74) \times 100$:
 - $18/74 \approx 0.2432$
 - $0.2432 \times 100 = 24.32\%$
- ~24% of Au.D. programs in the United States include ASL or Deaf culture studies.



LIST OF AuD PROGRAMS*

1. A.T. Still University
2. Arizona State University
3. University of Wisconsin-Madison & University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
4. Ball State University
5. East Tennessee State University
6. Gallaudet University
7. Louisiana State University
8. Missouri State University
9. Kent State-University of Akron
10. Syracuse University
11. University of Florida, Gainesville
12. University of Memphis
13. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
14. University of Oklahoma
15. University of Puerto Rico, San Juan
16. University of Southern Mississippi
17. University of the Pacific
18. Utah State University

*Most of the colleges on this list are midwestern or closer to the east coast rather than the west coast, reflecting the accessibility and communities of Deaf civilians in certain states.

SUPPORT FOR DEAF CULTURE

Despite the small number of graduate schools that include cultural comprehension towards Deaf people, These 18 schools make sure to both educate their students and help their local d/Deaf communities. One program with exceptional coverage of the cultural aspects of deafness is the University of Memphis:

- **AMSL 6205:** 'Cultural Sensitivity for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Healthcare Settings' available to graduate students
- **The Memphis SOUND Project:** "community-based research effort that brings together residents, researchers, and healthcare professionals to better understand—and overcome—the barriers that make hearing care harder to access" (Cochlear Implant Research Lab, n.d.). This research lab gives audiology students the opportunity to interact with the Black adults with hearing loss to help provide the community with better access to cochlear implants and hearing aids. Students can familiarize themselves with different Deaf cultures and learn how to maintain their intercultural sensitivity and skills.



INCREASING AWARENESS

Audiologists and ASL interpreters have different jobs; however, they can overlap. Interpreters are there to make sure the client understands their situation and visit. This does not mean audiologists cannot interact with their clients. ASL and Deaf studies expose students to the behavior they should have when interacting with Deaf clients. Without this training, audiology students may struggle on how to manage the visitation. Something as simple as watching your client sign instead of the interpreter can strengthen the connection between client and clinician.



FURTHER INVESTIGATION

If graduate schools wish to prepare their students for healthcare, they should also have them focus on multiculturalism. The more clinicians know about who their potential clients will be, the better they will be able to serve society.

The speech-language-hearing field is constantly changing. While ASHA does not provide funding to all programs per se, the organization can encourage the idea of more funding to audiology programs to increase the presence of Deaf culture in curricula. This decision that may help positively redefine the bond between audiologists and Deaf clients. Making ASL a requirement to become an audiologist may seem like a momentous choice to some; however, learning a language of a population you may constantly serve is what promotes the idea of healthcare and intentional outreach. This was an idea I witnessed multiple audiologists speak on at the 100th ASHA Convention last year. Many developing concepts in the CSD field seem too difficult to put into practice; however, change takes time, attention, and support. Pertaining to ASHA's theme of their most recent convention, envisioning possibilities for the future should never seize if we wish to build new legacies for the sake of speech, language, and hearing healthcare and individuals in need of improving services (ASHA Staff, 2025).

REFERENCES

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). *The Profession of Audiology*. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. https://www.asha.org/students/audiology/?srsltid=AfmBOoqOBzlhOKRPMVl86dmWz94V3jrGY4ic1_rgx1HqXQETe91T3hbw
- ASHA Staff. (2025, September 13). 'Envision Possibilities' at the 2025 Asha Convention: Highlights and Program Previews. <https://leader.pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/leader.FTR3a.30092025.2025-asha-convention-programming.80/full/>
- Cochlear Implant Research Lab. Memphis SOUND - Cochlear Implant Research Lab. (n.d.). <https://www.memphis.edu/ci/memphisound/index.php>
- Council on Academic Accreditation Program List. CAA Program Listing. (n.d.). <https://apps.asha.org/eweb/ashadynamicpage.aspx?site=ashacms&webcode=caalisting&caacat=aud>
- Wong, J. (2025, April 28). *ASL & Deaf Education in Audiology Programs List - IND STUDY*.