

## STUDENT ISSUES AND CONCERNS

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It is recognized that the already low enrollment of African Americans in colleges and universities is declining even further. This decrease in enrollment directly affects the already meager ranks of African Americans in the fields of audiology and speech pathology. ASHA's Multicultural Action Agenda 2000 and the current ASHA initiative to specifically increase the proportion of ASHA members from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds dictate that it is necessary to have a heightened effort to recruit, retain and graduate students of color. This effort must be a central concern of the academy, especially the top -level administration (ASHA, 1995). It must also be a concern of a faculty that is educated in diversity and committed to making diversity an integral part of the organization's cultural framework. Students in programs are telling NBASLH that this is not the case.

In 1974 a student with a 3.7 in the field of speech pathology received a grade of "D" from a clinical supervisor and an "A" from another supervisor during the same semester. When asked by the student's father the reason for the grade the supervisor stated: "Well, she says 'git' instead of 'get,' she does not sit with her legs under the therapy table and she parts her hair on the wrong side of her face." In 2000, a student with a 4.09 GPA is called to the phone at her externship site and told to pack her things and leave the site immediately. Her externship site supervisor had called the clinic and said that the student may be a speech pathologist one day but that today was not today not if she could prevent it. While these issues occurred almost thirty years apart, there are similarities, neither student had received any indication from the supervisor that there was anything amiss in their clinical skills, both had received "As" and positive remarks

from previous clinical experiences, both attended historically white institutions and both were students of color. One may suspect such behavior in the 70s but the fact that this is occurring now should be appalling and yet, The National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing (NBASLH) continues to receive such horror stories from across the country.

In 1994 NBASLH sponsored a conference where program directors had the opportunity to hear from the students in various communication disorder programs from around the country. The students in these programs and others perceive that support for diverse students, particularly students of color, are not deemed as important to most programs and yet diversity and multiculturalism are suppose to be a component of ESB accredited programs. The stories from students are varied but can be grouped into six major categories. These categories were derived from a book developed by the American Council of Education (1989) entitled *Minorities on Campus – A Handbook for Enhancing Diversity*.

### **Category 1: Mentoring and Information**

Although NBASLH is an organization that is 30 years old, minority students are not provided with information about the organization. Students call the national office when they discover the Website or talk to other students who have attended convention and ask “Why did I not find out about this organization before now?” or “Why do the faculty only tell us about ASHA or NSSLHA?” In one case, the student was asked why she would “waste her time” attending a convention from a fly-by-night organization such as NBASLH.

Students of color want more information about the population that they feel they will serve, other people of color. One student stated that if the white students in the program do not know about the topic (communication issues relating to people of color) or do not understand the issues associated with the topic, then the topic is not deemed as important.

Students want to be mentored by faculty who are interested in multicultural issues. As one student stated, when I asked if the professor could provide me with the names of an African American speech language faculty interested in research in multicultural population, the professor told me that he did not know of any African American faculty.

Students have also stated that NSSHLA is perceived as the “white student” organization that reflects the beliefs of the faculty concerning issues of diversity. In historically white institutions, students who are unable to gain support from the faculty in presenting multicultural issues within NSSHLA have identified this perception. While NBASLH and NSSHLA are working to change that image, this is a perception that still exists.

### **Category 2: Issues of Discrimination**

Discrimination does not always have to be overt and often, especially in fields such as speech pathology where evaluation can be as much subjective as objective, covert discrimination can take place. Discrimination, as defined by Webster, can be any act or word that can be perceived by another as discriminatory. Issues and examples that students report are often comments or actions that erode self-confidence, and reduce academic achievement (ASHA, 1995).

An African American student in a class is asked to stand up and demonstrate AAE (African American English) to the class. The student, while African American, is not an AAE speaker. Issues of diversity are not stressed; discussions do not occur as to how issues concerning assessment and treatment may be modified based on the cultural background of the client. Discussions of multiculturalism are considered as after-thoughts or asides and often deal with negative attitudes and perceptions of the race. Cultural differences are often defined in terms of race with the perception that everyone in that race shares the

same culture. This is not the case; there are many cultural variations within any given race.

Students feel that they are not viewed as real peers because of faculty attitudes. The students have stated that faculty act as if they (minority students) should be grateful that they were allowed to enter the profession. Students do not feel welcomed nor do they feel that their diversity is valued within the department. It takes a strong student to survive within many of these programs. Their strength, they say, is not their GPA but their ability to maintain their sense of self-worth in the face of adversity.

### **Category 3: Perceptions of Academic Capabilities**

Perceptions of academic abilities are also issues for students. There is a, according to students of color, a perception on the part of faculty that that because of their race, they are not as smart as their white counterparts, that academic inabilities are inherent. A student reported going to a faculty member because she was having difficulty in the class and was told that all minority students have difficulty with writing, reading and math which makes academics difficult. She was asked to consider another major, when what she asked for was clarification of the subject matter. Students have reported that they are being counseled out of the profession when they ask for help and yet when their majority counterparts have problems, they are provided with special help and assisted in completing class work. Students had stated that professors do not consider differences in processing information, differences in the retention of that information and how there may be cultural differences in the way individuals prefer to interact with teachers and other learners. These students are viewing learning styles as a question of preference rather than of absolutes. The assumption should not be that "different" equals inferior or less valuable. Students are asking for the opportunity to exercise their preferred learning style as well as develop their weaker styles without punishment.

#### **Category 4: Discrimination in Clinical Practice**

Perceptions of discrimination have also been reported in clinical practice. Students have reported different standards for students in terms of dress and speech patterns. An African American male student with a hair style known as dreds or dread locks in which his hair is long is told that in order to continue in clinic he must cut his hair, while another male student who is white is told that if he pulled his hair back that it could remain long. Dress policies must be used consistently. Students of color report an inability to receive the same caseload or practicum choices as their majority counterparts. Students are still being told that because they are African American they speak AAE; this judgment is made without an assessment. Students of color are also being told that they must receive speech therapy before entering the clinic in order to eliminate their dialect pattern.

#### **Category 5: Financial Responsibility**

Students of color may also be looking at issues of financial responsibility from financial aid being based on GRE scores to lock-step graduate programs that do not condone “part-time” students who are attempting to work as well as attend graduate school. Federal monies that had been earmarked for minority populations were no longer available and programs had not replaced these monies from university funds.

#### **Category 6: Institutional Environment**

Finally, for students, the campus itself may exhibit an environment that may make students feel away from the mainstream. Students are asking for university environments that are equitable and hospitable. Students who are feeling unwelcome or alienated from the mainstream of the campus community are unlikely to remain. Students are asking for adequate financial/human resources from the university and written information about the university and the communication department’s diversity statement. What is the statement? How is the statement reflected with actions not just words? What is the policy for

grievance and resolution for a dispute? Can a student who describes the behavior of a faculty member or department as being discriminatory be told that a law suit will be filed against her for slander? Is information routinely provided by faculty about grant writing, research opportunities, or other programs that are available to students of color?

While the information provided above is anecdotal, it is happening. For every one report we receive, there are probably two to three others that are not reported to anyone, the individual simply leaves the profession. It has been said that these students leave because the profession is not “attractive,” the attraction does not seem to be a factor for the white student as undergraduate programs continue to grow and applications to graduate school continue to increase. Actions on the part of programs speak louder than words. Students are looking for more than just announcements of good intentions. Students are seeking a cohesive faculty and program – one that is educated in diversity and supported by a commitment from the institute. Students are looking for recruitment practices that embrace diversity, equitable opportunities for entrance into a program based on more than just a score on a standardized test, financial support, and mentoring. In conclusion, students are asking for an environment that is involved in valuing diversity as an integral part of the program’s cultural framework.

### References

American Council on Education. (1989). *Minorities On campus--A handbook for enhancing diversity*. Washington, D.C.

American Speech and Hearing Association. (1985). *We can do better – Recruiting, retaining, and graduating African American students*. ASHA Special Report.