Editors’ Introduction

Ronald E. Sutcliffe’s article is especially timely and relevant to today’s issues. Sutcliffe recounts the period in the 1950s during which Gallaudet, led by George Detmold, an administrator brought in from Cornell University, sought accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools as a fully qualified institution of higher education. Fifty years later, Gallaudet went through another time of self-examination and intense scrutiny by Middle States. Sutcliffe points out the steps taken to achieve accreditation and suggests that they were important in throwing off the yoke of paternalism and low academic expectations that had marked the institution’s previous history.

GEORGE DETMOLD BECAME the dean of instruction at Gallaudet College in 1952. He was hired with the primary charge of revamping the college program so that it could be accredited within five years. Detmold was able to enact multiple reforms and carry out many changes in the face of controversy and dissension from (mostly hearing) educators at schools for deaf students throughout the United States. His persistence in implementing his vision amid discord and conflict earned him the title of “reformer,” even as these adaptations transformed deaf America. Without the transformations he enacted, the deaf community in which we live, and even how we live, might have been very different.

Until the 1960s, deaf people were not able to live as independently as they do today. Most depended on hearing people for help in carrying out basic life functions, such as applying for jobs or calling the doctor. Hearing people who could sign offered interpreting services, usually gratis, but often with strings attached in the form of “advice” for the deaf person. During this period, the administrators of state schools for the deaf, all of whom were hearing, were often officially recognized as the voice for deaf people. Networks of hearing people in deaf education were so powerful that most deaf individuals perceived themselves as vulnerable in the face of the influence these hearing people could wield. Deaf people protected themselves in part by avoiding going against the administrators, many of whom were their supervisors in their places.
of employment. While there were some national organizations comprised of and serving deaf people, the officers tended to be teachers at state deaf schools who had little or no desire to agitate for deaf people’s rights, particularly if this meant challenging their hearing supervisors. All in all, “the deaf community accepted the general community’s view of deafness as a pathological condition.”¹

Such paternalistic and subservient attitudes might be incomprehensible to many today, but it is worth noting that even Percival Hall, president of Gallaudet College from 1910 until 1945, commented to a young deaf man who wanted to earn a doctorate degree, “Oh, you cannot. It is hard enough to earn a bachelor’s degree.”² Despite these beliefs, attitudes, and barriers, many Gallaudet graduates had successful careers, which at that time were limited mostly to teaching, serving as dormitory house parents, and printing. The latter two did not require college training, although printing offered better pay than the other professions. Few deaf Gallaudet graduates worked in the scientific or business arena, as a consequence of their low expectations for success and their limited career prospects.

When Leonard Elstad became the president of Gallaudet College in 1945, succeeding Hall, the school’s facilities were in poor shape and far from adequate.³ Elstad requested that the Federal Security Agency of the Office of Education hire a consultant to carry out a study of the college’s future prospects in order to justify the existence of the school and sup- port his petition for funding to upgrade Gallaudet’s facilities. The consultant hired, Buell Gallagher, was also charged with determining the extent to which the federal government was responsible for the education of deaf students.⁴ While Gallaudet’s enrollment was then 220 students, Gallagher determined that it could increase to 5,600 if deaf people attended college in the same proportions as hearing people.

Gallagher’s report noted further that fifteen of Gallaudet’s twenty faculty members had earned their master’s degrees from Gallaudet, suggesting too much “inbreeding” in the professorship.⁵ The college justified hiring so many alumni by stating that they were trained to teach deaf students, emphasizing their knowledge of deafness rather than the subject matter they taught. Their actual knowledge of deafness, however, is questionable. Many people graduating from Gallaudet’s teacher training program assumed that deaf students could not think in the abstract. As a result, professors and hearing graduates of the college who became administrators and teachers of deaf children across the country lowered the academic rigor of the curriculum to make it easier for the deaf to read.

Among the long list of Gallagher’s recommendations was that Gallaudet should hire faculty with expertise in the subject matter area in which they taught, rather than simply focusing on good sign skills.⁶ He also emphasized the need for new and improved facilities to meet expanded student enrollment, which in turn would aid Gallaudet’s quest for accreditation. Congress agreed to provide $10 million for this
expansion.

In 1952, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the accrediting agency responsible for colleges in the geographical area in which Gallaudet is located, issued a discouraging report. Middle States said that the college’s chances of accreditation were slight because of the paucity of library and laboratory facilities, the dearth of equipment, and the inadequacy of faculty members with expertise in the areas in which they were assigned to teach. In response to this report, Gallaudet hired George Detmold from Cornell University, where he had been assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He was recruited from a post-doctoral program at Columbia’s Teacher College because of his vision of what a college should be. Detmold had no experience or knowledge of the deaf community and no ties with any schools for deaf students when he was hired. He was given five years to get the college accredited; otherwise, support from Congress would be compromised.

Detmold faced many obstacles to securing accreditation. Most Gallaudet professors believed that deaf students were not as intelligent as their hearing counterparts. One even told him that the deaf students had “frozen minds” and that they could not think in the abstract. Another professor thought that abstract ideas could not be taught in sign language. In the course of his evaluation of the college’s needs, Detmold found that most course offerings were at the high school level. An example was the use of *Life*, a weekly pictorial magazine that used simple and uncomplicated words, as the required reading for the Social Science course. The professor ordered *Life* because he believed that “the deaf couldn’t read but liked to look at pictures.”

Ignoring the prevailing orthodoxy, Detmold determined that the deaf students he encountered were bright and that he needed to change the attitudes held by their professors. Superintendents of schools for deaf students, friends of Elstad, criticized him, telling him that Detmold was deluded to think that deaf students could ever be “liberally educated.” However, Detmold plowed ahead and redesigned the general education curriculum to bring courses up to college level. He also reassigned the faculty so that they taught in the areas in which they had expertise. Going against the way in which Gallaudet had generally hired faculty, he recruited sixteen people with doctorate degrees. These new faculty members included his good friend from Cornell, William C. Stokoe, who was hired to teach Chaucer. Detmold encouraged Stokoe to examine how deaf people could think in manual code (sign language), and this eventually led to Stokoe’s great discovery—the recognition of American Sign Language as a valid language, separate from English.

Detmold’s changes received significant resistance from the faculty, and the students also objected vociferously when they realized that they would be required to take more advanced and demanding courses. Irving Fusfeld, the dean of the college who had hired Detmold, also advised against accreditation because the college was too
“special.” However, President Elstad held firm, reassigned Fusfeld to be a vice president for research, and replaced him with Detmold as dean of the college. The clamor eventually died down when both faculty members and students realized that the changes were for the better, and that upon graduating, students were being offered better jobs with more prospects for advancement.

Gallaudet was able to attain initial accreditation in April 1957 because of the changes that Detmold initiated and carried out, and it has maintained its accreditation ever since. At the same time, the college increased its enrollment and constructed more buildings. The increasing enrollment resulted in accusations of lowered academic and admissions standards from some of the superintendents of the schools for the deaf, who could not believe that their graduates who were accepted at Gallaudet were actually college material. Many educators of deaf students also questioned the students’ capacity to complete college-level courses, including such literature classes as on the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

To quell the controversy, all school superintendents and selected alumni were invited to a two-day meeting with the college’s Board of Directors (now known as the Board of Trustees) to air their criticisms of the college in the fall of 1962. Twenty-one people appeared to testify. Most objected to the points raised in the Gallagher Report that recommended the upgrades in the academic programs for deaf students. The school superintendents also questioned the hiring of faculty with doctorates who were not specifically trained to teach deaf students, wondering if these new professors could communicate at all and how they could teach deaf students in their subjects. They also criticized the college for establishing research offices that were headed by people without back-grounds in deafness. They were disappointed with Detmold for not having people with knowledge of sign language working to develop a sign language dictionary, but rather that he took the completely opposite approach by having Stokoe, who had no background in ASL, do the re-search on the language. After hearing the complaints and allegations that the college had been lowering its admission and academic standards in English class recent years, two consultants from the Middle States Association were hired to review the accusations. They reported that the entrance scores of the recently admitted students were not significantly different from the scores of those admitted twenty years before. The consultants also determined that Gallaudet was now educating and graduating students who had received a creditable college education, and that the college, while not perfect, was performing competently.

Since that time, Gallaudet College has become a university and has produced many graduates who have gone on to graduate school, a rare accomplishment before the arrival of Detmold. Many Gallaudet graduates have earned their doctorates, and a sizeable number have gone into a wide range of professions, including in the medical, legal, political, and business worlds. Even more importantly, most of those schools whose superintendents were so vocal in criticizing Detmold’s reforms in the college are now headed by deaf individuals, many of them Gallaudet graduates.
George Detmold had faith in the ability of deaf individuals to think for themselves, live their own lives, and not depend on others. He was the reformer who enabled the changes in Gallaudet, and subsequently in the wider deaf community, that allowed us to live on our own terms now, as independent and self-sufficient individuals who can be professionally and gainfully employed in all manner of occupations.

During his tenure as the dean, he encouraged deaf people to seek and pursue doctorate degrees, and the first Gallaudet graduate in modern times to earn a doctorate, Richard M. Phillips, did so in 1969. Detmold resigned from the deanship and became a drama professor in 1970. He began directing Shakespearean plays at Gallaudet in 1957, which eventually opened doors for deaf actors to enter into acting professions. Detmold retired from Gallaudet in 1974 and moved to Florida in 1976. As time passed, the deaf community, including those who had previously criticized him, began to appreciate Detmold’s exemplary work, which had made such a difference in the community. In 1992, the Gallaudet University Alumni Association presented him with a special citation of recognition and honor. The university also bestowed an honorary degree on him in 1996. He died on August 12, 2005, at 88. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery for his service in the Army during World War II.

Notes


2. Thomas Mayes, personal communication to author.


4. Ibid., 60.


10. Ibid., 32.
11. Ibid., 31.


