

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Politics and Education at Gallaudet

To the Editor:

The situation at Gallaudet University is complex. Your article on accreditation issues there is based on an oversimplified frame of reference that doesn't address the fundamental issues....

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet visited Europe in 1815-16 to become acquainted with deaf-education methods in England and in France. The educational philosophy in England was based on the premise that focusing on speech and lip-reading skills for deaf students to produce semiliterate and semilingual graduates was an acceptable goal because they would supposedly need only minimal language skills to work at low-level jobs in industrial settings.

In France, however, oral skills were correctly seen as having secondary, not foundational, value in deaf education, since deaf students were able to develop fully normal linguistic and cognitive skills by use of sign language and written language. Thankfully, Gallaudet chose this approach and hired a French teacher who was himself deaf, Laurent Clerc, to help establish a school for the deaf in Connecticut in 1817.

When I. King Jordan became president of Gallaudet University, he publicly supported the validity of Deaf culture and American Sign Language. But soon, in what he evidently saw as a practical maneuver to placate members of Congress, he adopted the position that there are [""]many ways to be deaf.[""] Jane K. Fernandes would have supported that position had she become president....

In 2006 it was actually Jordan and Fernandes who were preoccupied with perception and politics, not the protesters. The protesters wanted Gallaudet's new president to be a skilled administrator who would have the courage to focus on substantive educational issues.

The purpose of integrating American Sign Language more deeply into the curriculum at Gallaudet is to enable the students to achieve a better overall education, not merely to provide a cultural identity. In today's information age, deaf students need ASL more than ever— to help them think more abstractly and also to help them develop better fluency in written English. The dark days of pandering to the misperceptions of the general public and accepting anything less than the full development of normal cognitive and linguistic skills for deaf students are now a thing of the past.

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