

Chapter 8

EmBRACE the Transition: Reflections From Three Deaf Education Faculty

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, readers will meet three junior faculty in the niche field of deaf education who teach in different programs in different states. As doctoral students, they met at a field-specific conference about a decade before they wrote this chapter. Throughout the last 10 years, they have developed relationships as colleagues, friends, and now, co-authors. They share their experiences, both as individuals and as a collective, through the use of narrative storytelling and collaborative reflection. The authors reflect on and synthesize their stories with a focus on (1) the impacts of the K-12 experience on their transitions into higher education, (2) the role of the conference/organization during these transitions, and (3) the barriers and supports they encountered throughout the transitions. The chapter concludes with their advice to readers on how to emBRACE the transition from K-12 to higher education, using BRACE as an acronym for five proactive steps individuals can take to ensure a successful transition.

INTRODUCTION

The transition to higher education can be lonely and challenging for many academics. For those coming from the K-12 or PK-12 systems, the passion of teaching meets a significant challenge in balancing the additional priority demands of scholarship and service in a system that often does not clearly articulate

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3460-4.ch008

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the expectations and demands of each facet of work with transparency. Researchers have long noted issues with the process of tenure in higher education (McPherson & Schapiro, 1999), particularly among minority or minoritized faculty (Abdul-Raheem, 2016). The pressures of tenure and promotion can be exceedingly difficult if you feel alone and under-prepared.

This chapter is a reflective narrative compilation written by three junior faculty. In our stories, we share our journeys from K-12 to higher education and provide insight in how to brace yourself for the transition to higher education. While we are each currently pursuing tenure and promotion at different universities, our paths and stories are linked as faculty in the common field of deaf education. We share our stories together as an acknowledgment that we have not faced our transitions alone. Because deaf education is a niche field, which most readers are not likely to be familiar with, we begin with an introduction of our field, to provide a contextual foundation for our stories. Additionally, we have included definitions for many of the common terms in our field at the conclusion of the chapter.

Sensory disability fields (i.e., blind, deaf, deafblind) are small and isolated due to the extreme low incidence of these disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs most recent report to Congress, in 2018, there were 6,315,228 students ages 6-21 who were served under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). This accounts for 9.5% of school-aged children in the U.S. However, less than 70,000 deaf or hard of hearing (d/hh) students were served, meaning d/hh students account for approximately 1.1% of students with disabilities and less than .01% of the total school-aged population. Because there is a low-incidence of deafness in schools, only a very small percentage of teachers are prepared to provide instruction for this unique population. The number of total deaf education teacher preparation programs in the U.S. is also small and continuously decreasing, with fewer than 60 programs currently preparing teachers of the deaf (Jones & Ewing, 2002; Dolman, 2010; Paul, 2021).

Most of these deaf education programs have one to two full time faculty and employ adjuncts to teach much of the curriculum. Additionally, the programs and faculty are often placed in departments with adjacent fields such as communication sciences and disorders, ASL/English interpreting, or special education. This leaves higher education deaf education faculty isolated without support, as there is no widespread understanding of deaf education even within the field of special education (Alexander, 1992). Gardiner-Walsh and colleagues (2021) have noted difficulty among those in sensory disability fields to find work/life balance and research partners.

Although the field is small and spread out, it is also well connected despite geographical separation and isolation. The authors began their undergraduate and graduate journeys at roughly the same time and initially became acquainted at American College Educators - Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ACEDHH), a professional conference that we first attended as doctoral students, almost ten years ago. We have since developed our relationships as both colleagues and friends as we have completed our doctoral studies and each traveled similar paths to tenure track positions at research intensive institutions. Throughout the pursuit of promotion and tenure, our friendship has strengthened as we have supported one another through both similar and dissimilar experiences. In this chapter, we tell our stories, both as individuals and a group through the use of narrative storytelling and collaborative reflection.

After brief introductions to each of the authors, the chapter is organized in three sections: (1) the impacts of the K-12 experience on our transitions into higher education, (2) the role of ACEDHH during these transitions, and (3) the supports and barriers throughout the transitions. In these sections, we have synthesized our reflections on our individual and collective transition. At the end of the chapter, we have included a brief discussion of takeaways and implications for readers, as well as a list of Defini-

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