

What I Tried to Do at Gallaudet

I'm back in Greensboro, N.C., now, after an amazing week that began with the acceptance of the presidency of Gallaudet University and ended with my resignation. I found myself trying to get on campus to lead the university while rapidly becoming a significant player in a historic civil rights movement for the deaf.

It was a kaleidoscopic experience.

When I came to campus earlier this year, there had been, by all reports, widespread enthusiasm for my candidacy—from the faculty senate, the deans and other administrators. My exchanges with students and alumni at the time were warm, and I believed them to be receptive. A group representing the deaf was respectful, though its members did press me to explain how I might overcome the resistance I would inevitably get from some in the deaf community. I nevertheless believed I would have the assistance and trust of those on campus who doubted that a hearing person could do the job.

The search committee and the board of trustees made it clear from the beginning that many in the campus community wanted the seventh president to be deaf. They understood the symbolic importance of hiring a deaf president, but they also wanted to find a strong academic leader for a major university, whether hearing or deaf.

We recognized then that some on campus would be disappointed if a deaf president were not chosen. But nobody at the time could have predicted that this disappointment would transform into a cataclysmic national event.

With the announcement that the board had chosen a hearing president, modest demonstrations escalated. I decided to come to Washington on Wednesday. I knew as president-elect that, in the absence of a sitting president, it was my job to resolve the growing crisis. So I assumed my responsibilities four months early. I knew the stakes were high.

When I arrived I found classes halted, all entrances barricaded and the administration building barred by bike chains. The campus was under siege. The proportions of the unrest were star-

ting, but I *still* believed the principal focus of the problem was within the university's boundaries.

It was becoming increasingly apparent, however, that my office was not simply a university presidency. It was also becoming a symbol of the social stature of deaf individuals.

My strategy that first day was to ensure the safety of those on campus and to reestablish administrative authority. I wanted to prevent damage to the image of an extraordinary university and get back to the business of education. At the same time I sought to build into my presidential agenda ways to promote the civil rights of the deaf.

I had to consider many aspects of presidential leadership: the university's integrity, its constituents, the values of academic governance and advocacy for the rights and education of hearing-impaired people.

I sought, with the support of Gallaudet administrators and the chairman of the board, to establish lines of communication to campus protesters and to get the university's message to the public. I talked to the press and appeared on "Nightline," for example. I was pleased to make contact with four student leaders. I was assured that the protest would remain nonviolent. But we made no other progress.

Board Chairman Jane Spilman also introduced me to Reps. David Bonior and Steve Gunderson. There was pressure on the Hill to resolve the conflict—largely because Gallaudet's principal funding comes from the federal government, though it was chartered by an act of Congress as a private institution. It was my aim to seek congressional support for the right of a president to manage the affairs of the institution. Yet I was disappointed by widespread interference, despite our shared concerns for Gallaudet.

Remember, the courts stated in 1967 that "it would be a dangerous doctrine to permit the government to interpose any degree of control over an institution of higher learning merely because it extends financial assistance to it" and that "higher education can flourish only in an atmosphere of freedom, untrammelled by government influence of any degree."

But I also knew practical politics: in an election year with tight budgets, Gallaudet could become a cheap target.

The next day, the administrative team, the board chairman and I concentrated on gathering intelligence—from the campus, the trustees, educators, leaders in the deaf community and parents. I was also continually trying to ascertain when I could get on the campus in a way that wouldn't harm the protesters.

I formulated my options all day, with an eye to how best to restore the university to normalcy, while also furthering the laudable civil rights goals at stake. I came to realize that I could not achieve the former because the faculty, which had supported my appointment a month earlier, had now shifted its position, and neither the faculty nor students would join me, a hearing person, in governing the university.

All the while I was concerned about what my actions would mean for boards of trustees and presidents and faculties of other institutions of higher learning. I knew this was not an ordinary situation. If this had not been such a monumental event in the history of the deaf culture, I might have put the restoration of order first. That would have led me to take a very different course of action, because I deplore a state of anarchy in a university.

Thursday night I concluded that my resignation would do the most to break the deadlock and pave the way for the deaf to achieve their aim: a deaf president at their university. By doing this I acknowledged *in this instance* the overriding significance of the symbolic role of the office of president. Often, the academic and executive roles override the symbolism. That is not the case here, not now.

Regrettably, not all the implications for higher education of the unrest at Gallaudet have been sorted out. Gallaudet's very survival depends now on the restoration of order under the leadership of a president who can reach the students and faculty. The board's challenge is to clarify the school's direction and select a deaf president.

—Elisabeth Ann Zinser