Original Research

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Staff Perspectives on Deaf and Hard of Hearing College Students' Alcohol Use

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Abstract

A predominant health issue at colleges and universities is alcohol use. This is also true for deaf and hard of hearing college students. Key stakeholders who observe and witness this alcohol dynamic are staff. Researchers used a semi-structured qualitative guide to interview Gallaudet University staff (*N* = 26) to learn about their perspectives on and experiences with student alcohol use. Through thematic analysis, they identified several dominant themes that were then grouped into the three levels of the social-ecological model. First, they identified intrapersonal factors, including fear of missing out and coping strategies. Second, they identified interpersonal factors such as communication, school environment, social networking in and among schools for the deaf, social isolation for mainstream students, social dynamics, and peer pressure. Lastly, they recognized the impact of university-wide (community) factors, including tradition, education, intervention, and alternative activities. Staff showed themselves to be a valuable source of data on this student-related phenomenon and helped illuminate the alcohol issue at Gallaudet University. Educators can use this insight to address this issue on a social-ecological level.

Introduction

Research on alcohol use among deaf and hard of hearing college students is limited. A survey in 2019 showed that 82% of Gallaudet University students drink, 65% drink two or fewer times a week, 55% have engaged in

binge drinking, and that, overall, alcohol-related consequences (blackouts, missed classes, suicidal ideation, harm, etc.) are prevalent (Southern Illinois University, 2019). Another study, though dated, also showed that students experienced consequences as a result of use (Mason & Schiller, 2009). A more recent study confirmed consequences and showed as well that deaf and hard of hearing students may have avoidance-type coping habits and thus their drinking was riskier (Baschnagel & Bell, 2023). Due to higher amounts of alcohol being consumed, researchers found, that substance abuse among deaf and hard of hearing individuals may be greater (McKee et al., 2019). An older study revealed that alcohol was the primary substance for which deaf and hard of hearing individuals were receiving treatment (Moore & McAweeney, 2007).

Key stakeholders who observe and witness the alcohol dynamic on college campuses are staff. As other researchers have noted, staff demonstrate knowledge, insight, and experience in terms of working with students on alcohol-related incidents and trends (Brown & Murphy, 2020; Gabremichael et al., 2019; Jackson & Sundaram, 2021; Rana et al., 2022). University staff have a role in ensuring students know how to use alcohol safely, promoting protective behavioral strategies (Brown & Murphy, 2020) and providing an environment that reduces risk (Dresler & Anderson, 2019). Researchers note that universities set a tone that influences the alcohol culture on any given campus (Leontini et al., 2017) and it is staff who establish the alcohol prevention programming and policies. Staff address conduct issues and provide support; as a result, they have an emic perspective that has been seasoned by experience and training. They are also able to address the institutional response (Jackson & Sudaram, 2021), identify behaviors they have noticed, and suggest ideas for intervention (Rana et al., 2022). Further, staff are ultimately responsible for university decisions that set the tone and determine services provided to students (Davies et al., 2017; Kollath-Cattano et al., 2018; Leontini et al., 2017). Many staff at Gallaudet University are deaf and hard of hearing themselves and are former students, which further connects them to the community and the alcohol issue. As a way to understand the alcohol issue better at Gallaudet University, researchers interviewed staff to learn about their perspectives on and experiences with the phenomenon of alcohol use among deaf and hard of hearing students.

Methodology

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1981, 1999) social-ecological model as the theoretical basis, researchers conducted a qualitative case study with staff who work with deaf and hard of hearing college students. Through a review of literature in the field, researchers identified a priori themes to design the questions. These included risk and protective behaviors, negative experiences growing up, experiences accessing communication, alcohol education, access to social opportunities, family engagement, impact of peers, and alcohol-related consequences. The researchers used these themes to design questions and then grouped the questions into the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and university (community) levels of the social-ecological model.

The primary researcher conducted one-on-one interviews in American Sign Language over Zoom, which were recorded and transcribed into English. Researchers used member checks to triangulate the data; 42% ($n = 11$) of participants reviewed their transcripts, and none offered corrections. In addition to the transcripts, the interviewing researcher used field notes to record comments and an audit trail to track and record all aspects of the study. The study was approved by the Internal Review Boards at Walden University and Gallaudet University. The original study presented a large volume of data, from which researchers extracted the data to develop this article.

Participants

Researchers used purposeful sampling to recruit staff participants, through a printed flyer posted on campus, a flyer emailed to staff distribution lists, a post in the Student Affairs newsletter, and announcements at staff meetings. Participating staff were required to be at least 21 years old, currently employed at Gallaudet

University, and working directly with students. Researchers excluded any staff with a direct reporting relationship. All participants gave consent in English through email and then in American Sign Language at the beginning of the Zoom interview.

Data Analysis

Researchers used thematic analysis to review and classify the data. They sought deep immersion with the data and used several layers of coding, starting with descriptive codes, with the goal of being in vivo as much as possible, and then moved to a second round, using concept and pattern coding. Once the researchers finalized the themes, they organized them into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and university levels of the social-ecological model. The researchers then interpreted the data and shared it with thick description so the reader would be able to have a full sense of the findings.

Results

There were 26 staff participants, representing a variety of positions at Gallaudet University, from the faculty, administration, athletics, counseling, health services, public safety, residence life, student affairs, student conduct, and support services. All worked directly with students in some capacity. Of the total participants, 92% were deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, or deaf with multiple disabilities. In terms of race or ethnicity, 65% were white ($n = 17$); 11.5% ($n = 3$) were Black/African American; 11.5% ($n = 3$) were Asian/Asian American; and 11.5% ($n = 3$) were other Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC, including Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, Biracial or Multiracial). Participants identified as female (46%, $n = 12$), male (46%, $n = 12$), and other (8%, $n = 2$). Of the total participants, 85% ($n = 22$) had attended Gallaudet University as a student at some point.

The participants' level of knowledge of students' alcohol-related experiences coincided most frequently with the intensity and type of interaction with students. Only one staff person was generally not aware of alcohol-related issues on campus. The remaining staff ($n = 25$) provided examples and shared stories of experiences, derived either from observing the situations directly or from learning of the circumstances in meetings with students.

Intrapersonal Factors

Researchers identified two themes for intrapersonal factors, including students' fear of missing out (FOMO) and coping. Staff felt that FOMO contributed to alcohol use, in that students were afraid that if they did not go to every party and every event, they would not be a part of the social experience. Staff noted that some students, who had previously been the only deaf student in a hearing environment, may have been left out in the past, so the pressure to make up for missed opportunities was greater. Alcohol was often included in these social experiences.

Staff recognized that many deaf and hard of hearing students developed coping skills in response to the isolation of growing up in hearing homes and attending hearing schools where they did not have full access to communication and social opportunities. They observed that students sought ways to cope with their feelings and that alcohol was sometimes involved in that. Staff also connected this need for coping strategies with students' specific experiences of undergoing medical treatments and procedures related to being deaf or hard of hearing, which were often accompanied by adverse childhood experiences and isolation. These combined experiences may have increased the desire to "numb out." Social isolation and limited opportunities to experience many aspects of their lives led students to seek means to cope, including alcohol.

Staff Observations on Intrapersonal Factors

Fear of Missing Out
"A lot of students are afraid of missing out, and they want to be a part of the different things that happen: The thrill of it, the last night, the stories. Or I'll think darn, I missed it. I don't know if it's sensation seeking. Or if it's just a fear of missing out. I think maybe because they didn't experience stuff growing up."

Coping Strategies
"There's frustrations that are held in, and there might be a lot of anger held, and they're not able to express if there's no communication. Then how do they express it, how do they talk it? There's no access there. So, it causes more frustrations, more anger … They're not able to control their emotions. Alcohol is a release for that."

"A mainstream kid—people may tell them they have to fix themselves: they need a hearing aid, cochlear implant, or those different things. They may struggle with being proud … and then that may connect with alcohol and there might be negative consequences associated."

"A lot of our students have negative childhood experiences. Because they're deaf? Well, I'm not sure. Sometimes when I meet with the students, they share their experiences growing up. Does that contribute? Maybe that's one contributing factor to alcohol use."

Interpersonal Factors: Communication

Researchers identified several themes that were interpersonal in nature, including communication, school environments, social networking, social isolation, social dynamics, and peer pressure. Communication was a theme that was threaded through the interviews. Staff indicated that some students come from deaf families where there is access to communication about alcohol. Other students may be the only deaf and hard of hearing person in a hearing family or school. One participant noted, "If [family members] sign and include that person, then OK, that's an improvement. There's more access to communication there." However, staff pointed out that many Gallaudet University students come from homes where they are not able to communicate fluently with their family members, and this impacts their understanding of alcohol and related harms. When students are not able to hear what is being said in their homes, and family members do not sign, students do not access incidental learning in general and ideas about alcohol in particular.

Communication access also impacts the support students receive from their families and in their school environments. Staff noted that this access influences students' ability to navigate the social environment. One participant noted that without full communication, deaf students have a harder time accessing cues and norms and related boundaries, and this impacts social relationships. For students who experienced adversity or negative experiences, staff recognized that this was further complicated by not having the communication, knowledge, and skills to process it. Staff reported multiple ways that a lack of communication growing up impacted students, their perspectives, and their choices with alcohol. Decisions about communication were often made by students' families, and the communication that existed in students' families also impacted their values and behaviors related to alcohol.

Staff observed that the lessons families did or did not teach about alcohol were connected to deaf students' relationships with their families and their access to communication. In families with language barriers, parents were less likely to be able to help prepare their children for college or to engage in communicative educational exchanges about alcohol. Staff spoke of students who were rejected by their families or isolated from family conversations. For these students, drinking became a coping mechanism or a way to manage boredom in the home, and, sometimes, when they were at home, they would drink more. When students were drinking on campus with peers, alcohol would stimulate release and sharing of negative experiences or strong

emotions. One staff person also spoke of students from homes in which alcohol was used frequently, the impact this had on the student, and communication barriers to processing it.

In contrast, in some homes, the parents were also deaf. In these environments, communication may be easy. The acceptance of alcohol use within that specific deaf community may normalize alcohol use for students prior to their coming to Gallaudet University. Regardless of whether the family was hearing or deaf, when relationships were strong, and there were conversations about alcohol, staff observed this to have a positive impact on students.

Staff Observations on Communication

No Exchange of Information
"If they didn't have access to communication, then they might not have learned from their parents—like they've gone back and forth to ask questions and to ask why people drink or tell them that they want to drink and then have their parents tell them no. There's no exchange of information."

"One of the issues I have noticed is that the lack of proper early education, communication, and emotional connection with deaf children is far too prevalent, and this is likely a significant factor in their ability to make healthy decisions as they enter adulthood."

Loss of Incidental Learning
"Access to information, I think is different. So that kind of incidental learning [about alcohol] that I was talking about before, or a lot of things that we learn are not taught, they're caught, and I think that it's the same way … and by word of mouth, we're often sharing things that we do learn to help us. … Deaf students don't seem to come with the same information and skills, relatable skills that hearing students seem to have. And I think a lot of that is caught [and] not even on purpose. It just happens that you learned this or you've heard of this someplace."

"If they were the only one in a mainstream environment without social opportunities … they lose the incidental learning. Doesn't matter if a person can hear or talk in a group, but they still miss a lot of information while socializing, so that might impact their ability to understand information related with alcohol and to apply it."

Communication Differences
"Deaf always have the feeling that they're different than hearing people. I'm different than society. Now there's much more of a positive framing on that because you see deaf people everywhere on TV and music and stuff. … But prior to that again, yes, there's a communication issue. Even if you go to a school for the deaf, you have a hearing family, you still go back home to that family and you have to shift. Or you have a deaf family and a school for the deaf, and then you go out in the hearing world and then you don't know what to do. There's still oppression in one way or the other. … So, there's always that feeling of I must adapt to my surroundings, I must think and must continually think about it."

Support System
"I think that just depends on whether you have family or friends and a support system or what that support system looks like. If you have a lot of a support system which includes access to communication, then it's good. You're probably better off, you have a better sense of how to be with alcohol; on the other hand, if you don't have a support system, you might fall on alcohol more."

Language Deprivation
"Growing up through schools for the deaf and others, [students] grew up with different access to communication and different styles of signing, and different family values, and different education. And then

some grow up with no access to communication and really suffer with language deprivation. When students have experienced language deprivation, they're not emotionally equipped to handle conflict, they're not prepared for conflict resolution."

Expression of Feelings
"If there's no communication, there's no dialogue. They never learned the skills to manage their feelings and experiences related to the trauma or process it or work through it with counseling. Then dependence on alcohol or to use as a coping skill may increase."

Interpersonal Factors: Previous School Environments

Staff recognized that Gallaudet University students come from many different school backgrounds, including schools for the deaf, mainstream programs, and a mixture of these, and that these impact the students' experiences with alcohol. Staff perspectives on whether certain high school environments had more exposure to alcohol were mixed. One staff member noted that there is no statistical difference between students from schools for the deaf versus mainstream programs in terms of the conduct violations related to alcohol seen at Gallaudet University. Though staff had different perspectives on where there was greater access to alcohol, two consistent themes emerged related to school environments: social networking through schools for the deaf and social isolation for mainstream students.

Staff Observation on Previous School Environments
"Gallaudet comes with a very diverse background. A range of individuals from deaf families, deaf schools who have access to ASL—all the way to the other end of the spectrum, to somebody who's deaf and grows up alone in the mainstream with a non-signing family. ... For example, the child who's alone growing up in the hearing family, hearing school, and everything around them with no signing, joins Gallaudet University and then wants to learn more signs, and become part of that group, so they may feel like drinking."

Social Networking at Schools for the Deaf
Whether students at schools for the deaf have more access to alcohol may depend on the school and the social circles therein, according to staff. A consistent theme, though, was the networks students developed prior to getting to Gallaudet University. Staff suggested that these established relationships allowed students to transition more easily to Gallaudet University. In addition, if their high school groups were accepting of alcohol use, there may be more expectations to drink. The intimacy in these relationships also may increase the pressure to drink. Some staff had a sense that the closeness of the social groups in which students grew up generated a mindset of knowing only what was acceptable to that group. One participant felt that, when alcohol was acceptable—perhaps expected, group members were limited by this perception, which prevented them from recognizing other options and thus caused the behavior to continue.

High school students who had established drinking behaviors continued these behaviors at Gallaudet University and then used alcohol to connect with others. Staff also observed that students share drinking stories with students still in high school during visits home on breaks, as well as on social media. Some of the staff felt that, because of the smallness of the community, the communication among these networks is strong, and when alcohol is an accepted behavior in any given circle, it is seen by others and may become an expectation for students attending Gallaudet University. This experience is different from that of mainstream students, who are often isolated from peers.

Staff Observations on Social Networking at Schools for the Deaf
"There's less nervousness about meeting new people because they are more likely to know each other, whether through family, friends, or different high school deaf tournaments getting together. So that's less time needed to get familiar with each other."

"There's peer pressure to drink with them. Or sometimes the deaf community is so small that we all know each other, and so we get so comfortable with each other that when we drink, we probably think it's OK to do this and that with each other."

"During winter break, [Gallaudet students] are all off for a month, whereas the school for the deaf is still in session. So, a lot of them will go visit. … And they might tell the students it's fun and that they've partied. And then the students going through high school, they can't wait for their time to come, and they look forward to doing the same things. So when they're at Gallaudet, they're ready to go."

"If students have been told by peers and others while at other deaf schools that Gallaudet is 'a party school,' then that can become part of their internalized expectations."

"Now with technology and social media, they can see [the partying] … it's more of like seeing everything right there and everyone knowing each other well. … And so the more they know the people, the more they think to themselves that they'll do that too."

Social Isolation for Mainstream Students
In contrast to students from schools for the deaf, staff shared that students who grow up as the only deaf and hard of hearing student in a family and school have a different experience, one that is sometimes removed from social networks. One staff person recognized that for some students, "If you're mainstream, you go through an interpreter, so all the information is controlled through the interpreter," including alcohol education and social interactions. Another participant noted that family support and the quality of their mainstream school system have an impact on many aspects of deaf students' experience, including alcohol education. For many of these students, since they did not have the same access to social experiences growing up that students at deaf schools do, coming to Gallaudet University may be more overwhelming. This may be their first experience with full access to communication everywhere. These students may need to make a bigger adjustment, and some still may struggle to find their group. Others may connect with peers more easily, and sometimes alcohol is a part of this.

In addition to the Gallaudet University environment being new and different to many mainstream students and their needing to adjust to this, some staff felt that mainstream students also do not have the same preconceived expectations and knowledge of Gallaudet University that students from schools for the deaf are likely to have. Though mainstream students may be unfamiliar with Gallaudet traditions, their knowledge regarding alcohol may vary. While mainstream students have often had very different experiences from those of students from schools for the deaf, staff reported that all these experiences intersect to impact the social environment at Gallaudet University.

Staff Observations on Social Isolation for Mainstream Students
"You talk to students from mainstream schools, and they didn't really hang out that much. They didn't have people to go over to this person's house, because then they had a friend group, that is too many people and it's hard to keep up with the conversations with so many hearing students. It's just such a difference with a friend group when you have that sense of isolation that you grow up with. You miss all of those little things that we share—incidental learning that we share with each other as peers."

"We can imagine where you're growing up in the hearing world. You're trying to fit into the hearing world, and then you get to Gallaudet University, and then suddenly you're supposed to fit into the signing world at Gallaudet, and there's no space or transition. One extreme to another. So much for a young brain to process."

"Mainstream kids who come and they haven't had that real social experience beforehand, they get to Gallaudet and they really want to seize all the opportunities they can. They want to drink, they can communicate, they can connect with people, and that all starts with drinking. When they get to Gallaudet University, they really want to

have opportunities that they've missed. ... They didn't get the opportunity to go to the party and drink and socialize [because of] being the deaf person. They want to finally be free and be able to move on with their life and that's sometimes dangerous, because they move on to the point where it's too much."

Interpersonal Factors: Social Dynamics at Gallaudet University

Staff noted many social dynamics at Gallaudet University that impact alcohol use and related harms. As noted, Gallaudet University is very diverse in communication backgrounds. Some students grew up surrounded by other deaf and hard of hearing people, while, in contrast, some grew up as the only deaf and hard of hearing person in their family or social network. Staff observed that this social isolation impacted some students' social skills and ability to integrate into the social scene. Staff observed that the need for a sense of belonging is very important for students at Gallaudet University. This may be especially true for some, because they grew up so isolated and removed from social support, whereas, for others, the sense of cohesiveness in the deaf community in and of itself yields a deep desire for belonging. Some staff felt this intense need for connection and belonging may lead to an increase in risky behaviors and associated harms.

Though staff recognized that the majority of students attend Gallaudet University for the whole experience, with all its academic and social aspects, there was nevertheless a common sense that a small number of students come for the social experience alone and may not intend to stay to complete a degree. Staff emphasized that the social experience at Gallaudet University provides access to communication that some students do not have in their home environments. This theme was extended by staff who indicated that some students attend Gallaudet University primarily to play sports. A variation on this theme, perhaps more positive, was that staff also pointed out that some students did not want to leave Gallaudet University. In fact, as has been noted previously, many staff are previous students; of the 26 staff interviewed, 85% (n = 22) were students at Gallaudet University at some point.

Though staff observed a high need for social connection with other students, they also noticed that some students experienced social anxiety alongside this desire and used alcohol to help manage it. Staff identified the phenomenon of liquid courage, or the use of alcohol as a social lubricant, to work through shyness or social anxiety to be able to connect with others.

Staff also saw in student behavior that being deaf and hard of hearing, having a desire to fit in, and experiencing peer pressure appear to be interconnected. There was a sense that, for students who grew up together, peer pressure is impacted by established relationships and group expectations. For other students, staff suggested, the isolation they experienced growing up causes a heightened desire to fit in and belong with other students, which in turn increases their acceptance of peer pressure. As a result, students drink more, partly because they see their friends doing it, but also because of direct urgings to join in or drink more, which they see as part of the established social dynamic.

Even within an environment where all students are deaf and hard of hearing, marginalization still occurs. Staff recognized that some students did not fit in with ease. One participant noted that students who are learning to sign or who are accustomed to using their voices to communicate may not feel they fit in easily. This struggle to connect may be more pronounced when there are intersections of identities, as is the case for students who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) and hard of hearing. Staff also recognized that students with varying abilities may feel marginalized. Students who do not drink alcohol also may have to find their groups. Staff observed that, overall, students sought to find a sense of belonging at Gallaudet University and that some used alcohol to manage social pressures or to connect with others.

Staff Observations on Social Dynamics at Gallaudet University

Coming From Isolation
"I think isolation [impacts alcohol use]. You don't really experience positive social experiences with friends and the importance of soft and hard skills. You don't get a chance to integrate that and then finally you get to a place where everybody's deaf like you and then you might do anything to fit in, to look cool to make them accept [you]. And there might not be the social skills and that might impact how the person thinks or manages and uses alcohol."

Connection and Belonging
"Gallaudet is a little bit more extreme. I think that comes from being deaf. Having that disability growing up, your family, your friends, your workplace, your school, your everything—they're different from everyone. You don't have the connection to anything. It's always that disconnect, and then when you get to Gallaudet, you're connected to everyone and that sense of community, having someone here, and then you're all connected on alcohol too. … So I think because Gallaudet is so unique, it's why that it's different than anywhere else."

"When I became skilled [at signing] that's when I started drinking the most, because I was very social. … It was the first time that I really felt like I belonged with my peers. And so I really got into partying a lot. I feel like that is common with a lot of new signers, or with people from mainstream environments who never really got to socialize with other people with similar backgrounds."

Experience
"Some people look at Gallaudet as a deaf club. … You can get education, get anywhere, but not the deaf experience, the community, the culture, the identity, people, communication, access. You can't really get at any other school. Some never had it their whole lives and then they come and they're kind of shocked and they want to continue having that experience."

"It's funny, I know students, when they go home for the break, they try to hurry back because they don't have the same experience at home."

Social Anxiety
"I notice people who don't have a big family or social group, they might use alcohol to be able to feel more confident talking with people. … I feel it impacts because people try to fit in. They want to have a sense of belonging. 'If I don't do this, will they reject me? I have social anxiety, so fine I'll join in and then that way I am not left out.'"

Peer Pressure
"Peer pressure is more, I don't know. Hearing people experience it too, but at the same time, hearing people have more opportunities to meet different people in different groups. Whereas here there's smaller groups. … Deaf tend to be a little bit more supportive of peer pressure, 'Come on, you got to be the same as me.'"

Marginalization
"They [Deaf people] might have to work harder to be like other people. [They] want to get a part of that group. You might see [certain students] as leaders and see them as good signers. [Others] might try to join along so they could be considered like them. That's another impact potentially on them. Some might not care because they just don't—they might seem as the elite group and not care, but then some might really want to be one of them."

"I know that students with disabilities at Gallaudet are not—they don't always feel like they're part of the Gallaudet community, because here deaf and hearing are separate. ASL and English is separate. And I feel like people with disabilities or additional disabilities are not fully accepted. … The status quo here is being deaf, able bodied."

University-Wide Factors

Researchers identified the following themes for the university-wide (community) level of the social-ecological model: tradition, education, intervention, and alternative activities. Researchers identified tradition as a significant theme that arose in the interviews with staff. Gallaudet University is seen as the mecca of the deaf community. University traditions are connected to this deaf community and to pride in the deaf identity. One participant confirmed, "Gallaudet is a university but it's also a big part of the deaf community. The things that happen here also happen in the deaf community, and people will know or hear about it and continue to carry it." For some larger deaf families, there may be several generations of family members who have graduated from Gallaudet University. The younger generations see the stories from their family members, but also from other community members who are alumni. As noted above, student behaviors are influenced by others through deaf community and school networking and by social media, but this also occurs beyond the interpersonal level through university-wide traditions. In addition to alumni impacting traditions, according to one participant, students from large deaf families may feel, "There's requirements I have to carry. My family used to do that, so it's my turn and I have to keep that going." These stories of the so-called glory days identify different practices and events and passing them on creates traditions. As another participant pointed out, new students learn about their parents doing, "This and this. So, in a way, the parents are enablers to their children saying, 'It's OK, I used to do that. It's not a big deal.'" The connection of these traditions to alcohol and to the partying culture increases the risks for alcohol-related harms.

Certain events tend to be more associated with alcohol than others. Staff identified homecoming and spirit week, dorm parties, and Greek events to have the highest frequency of alcohol use. Staff also recognized "bald day" (a tradition for which freshmen shave their hair), the Super Bowl, and the first and last weeks of school as events and time periods with heavier alcohol use. Some staff felt that it was not ongoing use that led to harm, but rather a special event or occasion.

Some staff felt that Gallaudet's efforts to reduce alcohol at events have been successful. They recognized that alcohol is infrequently available at events anymore, but, nevertheless, students now drink in the residence halls before and after. When reflecting on the alcohol education of Gallaudet University students, staff identified two aspects of education. The first was a sense that students need better education prior to arriving at Gallaudet University, that as deaf and hard of hearing students, they were not adequately prepared. Some staff recognized that education and communication are linked, and accessing alcohol education was also about communication accessibility. Staff felt that if students got more education on alcohol (and other subjects) in high school, they might be able to retain it better. Providing such information prior to students arriving at Gallaudet University could allow them to be better prepared not only for the social experiences but also for the additional alcohol education they would get.

The second aspect of alcohol education that staff discussed was the alcohol education that occurs at Gallaudet University. Some staff indicated that there is more of this sort of information provided now than there once was, and the programs are an improvement, but they recognized that students may not connect with the information until they have a problem. One staff member noted students may not have the experience to apply the education they get. Participants felt that students' experience, the timing, and the amount of education impacted students' ability to maximize their learning.

In addition to looking at how Gallaudet University spreads the alcohol education messaging, participants suggested using a variety of methodologies. Staff suggested courses with peers in ASL, experiential activities where students could role play what to do in risky alcohol situations, peer-to-peer education, and videos that are short and student-centered. They also recognized that students make their own choices, so preparing them to do so more safely was key. Another suggestion offered was providing and advertising spaces where students could get support, rather than addressing situations punitively. One staff member reinforced this by

recommending nonjudgmental advice that could focus on increasing students' motivation to change their drinking habits.

Not all staff agreed that additional alcohol education is necessary. One staff member felt that students get sufficient alcohol information and suggested that the challenge is addressing social perceptions and peer pressure and for Gallaudet University to invest in changing these.

Along with teaching students about alcohol and related harms, staff identified other strategies to address alcohol use on campus, categorized as intervention. Some participants felt that Gallaudet University needs to look at policies and sanctions on the subject of alcohol, increase responsiveness to student conduct, and/or heighten the level of strictness. In addition to suspending or expelling students, one participant felt the ban on hard liquor (of 16% alcohol by volume) was effective in reducing the number of students who needed to go to the hospital. Several participants felt that Gallaudet University needed to expand on this ban to become a dry campus where alcohol is not permitted at all.

In contrast, some staff members felt that Gallaudet University becoming more restrictive would prompt students to rebel and to disengage from healthy conversations with staff. Instead, these participants felt, Gallaudet University should provide more support to students and work with them to help them see the consequences of alcohol use. Providing nonjudgmental support to students, staff members felt, would generate more opportunities to help them develop healthier decision-making. One staff person did concede that providing a lot of support does not always work and that, in such situations, additional strategies are necessary.

One staff idea was to look beyond the individual student to the campus as a whole. One participant recognized the higher rates of partying and alcohol use in two residence halls, Benson Hall (housing freshmen) and Clerc Hall (housing upperclassmen), and wondered, "If we changed the physical space, if that would have any impact." This participant suggested potentially restructuring the spaces so that the Clerc Hall rooms, which include a living room space, could be allocated for students who are older, non-traditional, or academically higher-performing and less likely to use this space to party.

Other staff felt that making changes to alcohol use on campus was not about staff intervention directly, but more about ensuring student engagement with campus life. Some staff suggested it seems the students who are less involved are the ones who tend to drink more. Participants speculated that students are bored and that Gallaudet University could provide more activities to address this. Engaging students in activities and groups could occupy their time and provide students with a way to connect without alcohol. One staff member also noted that this involvement would help to keep students more "interested and motivated, and then that helps to raise their spirits up."

Staff also shared that they felt that a more robust selection of programming and activities for students would reduce the opportunity to drink. They recommended more positive activities that included physical activity. Participants suggested increasing gym and game room hours, busing students to events off campus, providing dancing at events, and providing low-cost tickets to games in Washington, DC. Staff also recommended strengthening the programming on Friday and Saturday nights. Providing more events without alcohol would give students alternatives to drinking.

Staff Observations on University-Wide Factors

Tradition
"It's a tradition. 'My family did it. My school for the deaf teachers did it. Everybody did it. I must do the same thing. It's my turn.' Maybe that's a big impact on partying culture, knowing that they did it. 'I must do it as well. I must keep it up.'"

"[Alumni] exchange stories because we have a small school, but we have a large alumnus and so historically Gallaudet University is known as a party school. … The alumni remember their partying days and they share the stories with our [students] so that's handed down through the culture."

Certain Events
"It's so hard to avoid partying [during homecoming] because it's just constant. The whole dorm is partying all night. And the music, the lights. It's almost impossible for those who don't drink to have a good night's sleep."

"One big party night tends to be where we see a lot of the harms or the results from that."

"[Students] drank a lot that night, then wouldn't drink again for a long time. [They] would like binge drink once in a great while."

Alcohol Education
"Deaf people don't get exposed about alcohol education, they're not exposed on that, whereas the hearing people do, and they experience that information earlier than the deaf community."

"In college we try to cover everything in the first week. We dump it on students and their brains can't absorb everything. … So how do we start the curriculum in high school and build it up to get ready for them to go to college?"

"I believe that Gallaudet University is more proactive in education with alcohol than in the past. … Unfortunately, students do not, either by choice or not by choice, learn the education part [until] after the fact of something happening."

Intervention
"I think we can set that hard line where you enjoy your time, but if you cross that line then you're automatically kicked out."

"I always think what we should definitely do is go with a dry campus. … We try to have conversations about alcohol use on campus, and we know that alcohol abuse is a problem, but we are still a wet campus."

"You can give them information and tools to make better decisions for themselves. … But you give them certain amounts of knowledge and information that they can decide on later to act."

"We've shifted to more, what's it called, a restorative justice approach and that's been profound. It puts the focus where it should be and gives supportive education. And students are more—they're still resistant to the idea of getting busted, but after they're busted, they feel like they're cared about. They feel more empowered."

"And some students keep on over and over and over and over, and that's my big concern. Sometimes I don't know what to do or how to help."

Engagement
"Many times, you see students who have nothing to do. They're not student athletes. They don't have any student organizations they're involved with or events to go to, so they're trying to figure out what to do next. Alcohol is a way to get to people together, so, they'll focus on that. … They must be doing something so that they don't get bored."

Discussion

Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Themes

Using the social-ecological model, researchers explored staff perspectives on and experiences with deaf and

hard of hearing college students' alcohol use through a series of interviews. Staff's emic perspective provided researchers with valuable perspectives on this phenomenon. Staff provided diverse insights in the interviews, which were organized into themes, and these were grouped into the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and university (community) levels.

On an intrapersonal level, the first theme was not wanting to miss out. Similar to studies on hearing college students (Crawford et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2017; Labhart, Kuntsche, et al., 2017; Likis-Werle & Borders, 2017), some of the staff indicated that students felt self-inflicted pressure to drink with friends so they would not miss anything. Different from the research on hearing students, some of the staff also recognized that students had felt left out growing up as a deaf or hard of hearing person, so this enhanced their need to seize social opportunities. This is consistent with the research of Olsson and Gustafsson (2022), who also found a strong need for belonging among deaf and hard of hearing students. In contrast, Frank (2017) found that deaf and hard of hearing students who grew up within a community of deaf people may already feel connected and may value collectivism. This collectivism could be related to the established expectancies staff noted. Further, this desire to belong, in combination with collective expectancies, may impact peer pressure for deaf and hard of hearing students. This would be an area for further study.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, research is increasingly recognizing the impact of isolation on mental health. This phenomenon is not new for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Trychin (n.d.) recognized how deaf and hard of hearing individuals may experience isolation when trying to engage in environments that are not accessible. Staff reported that, for many deaf and hard of hearing students who grow up linguistically isolated in their families and schools, alcohol served as a way to numb out and cope. Ryding et al., (2022) found that individuals who are disconnected from their families tended to drink earlier. Other researchers showed that deaf and hard of hearing students with less healthy coping strategies engaged in heavier drinking (Baschnagel & Bell, 2023). Other researchers showed that individuals who experience trauma (Boyraz et al., 2018), post-traumatic stress disorder, and avoidance coping skills have higher alcohol use (Boyraz et al., 2018; Freeman et al., 2020). Further, students who drank to cope were more likely to experience a higher negative impact (Baschnagel & Bell, 2023; Cortés-Tomás et al., 2022; Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Krieger et al., 2018; Stevenson et al., 2019; Wemm et al., 2018). This research was supported by staff accounts of students engaging in risky alcohol use as a way to manage their feelings and negative past experiences. Though hearing students may not experience the same communication barriers that deaf and hard of hearing students do, those who were isolated and those who had negative life experiences were more likely to associate coping with alcohol.

Though there were differing perspectives about whether students from schools for the deaf or mainstream students drank more prior to coming to Gallaudet University, two consistent interpersonal themes were a) social isolation for mainstream students and b) social cohesion and networking for the students from the bigger schools for the deaf. Prior research shows that when there are strong social networks that support alcohol use, students are more likely to drink (Crawford & Novak, 2020; Peterson, 2019). In contrast, if the social networks do not support alcohol use or are diversified by many different types of students, alcohol use is lower (Crawford & Novak, 2020; Peterson, 2019). The established norms and behaviors (Kuntsche et al., 2017; Wamboldt et al., 2019) in support of use, in combination with the group cohesion of similar people, (Crawford & Novak, 2020) tended to cause higher use. Further, students who are engaged in their communities (Boyle et al., 2020; DiGuiseppi et al., 2018; Erkskine-Shaw et al., 2017; Haardörfer et al., 2021; Martins et al., 2017; Vidal et al., 2022) and involved in organizations and school activities also tend to use more alcohol (Boyle et al., 2020), especially when affiliated with fraternity and sorority activities (Krieger et al., 2018; Ngo et al., 2019; Wamboldt et al., 2019). In addition, research shows that when college students have higher alcohol-positive expectancies (Dillard et al., 2018), already established drinking behaviors (Cooke et al., 2017; Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Haardörfer et al., 2021; Krieger et al., 2018; Moure-Rodriguez et al., 2018), and an identity as a drinker (Davies et al., 2017), they will drink more. Prior research also shows that students with tightly formed groups tend to be less careful with protective behavioral strategies and to drink in more

risky ways (Byrnes et al., 2019; Likis-Werle & Borders, 2017). Similar to the work of several researchers (Brown & Murphy, 2020; Davies et al., 2017; Gabremichael et al., 2019; Labhart, Kuntsche, et al., 2017), these interviews suggest that some deaf and hard of hearing individuals drink as a part of a connected community. Staff reported that some students who came to Gallaudet University for the community experience were more invested in the partying opportunities. In comparison to other research, when college students valued academics less, they were more likely to partake in riskier drinking (Hodder et al., 2018; Htet et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2017). The collectivist nature of the deaf community (Frank, 2017) may cause group cohesion, which increases the need to conform and pressures students to use more (Tonkuriman et al., 2019). All of these factors together heighten the risk for increased alcohol-related harms.

This research may lend insight into the diversity of thought regarding which school background impacts alcohol use the most. The answer is: it depends. Some Gallaudet University students come from a close-knit school community whose social network includes norms supporting use: established alcohol use and traditions that are handed down from alumni to upcoming students. For these students, it can be inferred that they will face more internal and external pressure to drink alcohol. This may be further heightened by involvement in Greek life or athletics, activities that are linked to higher use (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2024). This group conformity also may lead to taking greater risks when drinking. Though the combinations of experiences can be unique to deaf and hard of hearing students growing up in a school for the deaf and surrounded by supportive deaf and hard of hearing influences, the different components that contribute to the overall experience (norms and behaviors, group membership, expectancies, established behavior, and drinker identity) are also seen with hearing students, especially those with strong social connections to a university with a long history of inherited traditions.

In contrast, for students who have different school experiences, where there are lower alcohol expectancies, fewer norms related to alcohol, and a wider variety of social opportunities, there may be less pressure to drink. Yet if a student experiences isolation and does not learn healthy coping strategies, this may shift the reasons for alcohol use. For the students who experienced isolation and communication barriers as a result of being the only deaf or hard of hearing student in a mainstream school, alcohol may be used as a social lubricant or as a tool for coping.

University-Level Themes

Throughout the interviews, themes related to university-level dynamics also emerged. Consistently, participants recognized that many of the parties tended to be in two dormitories: Benson and Clerc Halls. This supports the work of other researchers, who also found more alcohol consumption in students' dormitories and at parties (Boyle et al., 2020; Krieger et al., 2018). Students' comfort with one another may present a false sense of safety. This supports research that shows students who have a sense of environmental safety were more likely to have more blackouts (Merrill et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2018). Despite alcohol not being allowed in Benson Hall, the freshman residence hall, a lot of the partying still occurs there. Though researchers found that students living in substance-free housing face less alcohol-associated risk (DiGuiseppi et al., 2020; Trangenstein et al., 2019), perhaps the intentionality of residents in choosing an alcohol-free living environment is an important determining factor. At Gallaudet University, the freshmen are mostly assigned to Benson Hall and thus put in alcohol-free housing without a choice.

While physical space has some impact on alcohol use, social media also has a role when students see partying on social media sites. A staff member reflected that seeing people one knows drinking on social media increases the expectancies of alcohol behavior and the traditions of partying that are handed down. Several researchers reached similar conclusions. They found that social media postings of alcohol-related behavior often include the positive aspects and leave out the harms and thus encourage use (Crawford et al., 2022; Tonkuriman et al., 2019).

Gallaudet University has long legacies and traditions that are passed on through generations of families of deaf people, alumni, and upperclassmen. Researchers have found that when universities have cultures and traditions associated with alcohol use that engage the community, this can perpetuate use (Foster, 2017; Leontini et al., 2017). Most participants recognized that Gallaudet University does not provide alcohol at the majority of the events, but they also recognized that students party in their rooms before and after activities. Researchers have shown that pregaming or prepartying tends to increase the amount of alcohol consumed and related harms (Labhart, Anderson, et al., 2017; Labhart, Ferris, et al., 2017; Wombacher et al., 2019). In response, Davies et al. (2017) recommend that universities host appealing alcohol-free events. When almost all of the events are free of alcohol, however, the issue arises of how to address the unofficial traditions and behaviors.

Staff experience of alcohol use being associated with certain holidays is also corroborated by the literature. Researchers found that there are trends of increases in violations at certain times of the college academic year (Barry et al., 2019; Ehlke et al., 2021; Patrick & Azar, 2018; Patrick & Terry-McElrath, 2020). Riskier time periods included the start of each semester, homecoming, and certain holidays or events, including the Super Bowl (Ehlke et al., 2021). By identifying these trends on college campuses, researchers can support educators with information and target efforts campus wide.

To address the alcohol use at Gallaudet University, staff supported educational efforts for students. One staff member discussed the importance of teaching students how to manage emergency situations. Ward et al. (2019) also affirmed this and found that students engaging in riskier alcohol use often did not know the signs of alcohol poisoning. In reinforcement of Brown and Murphy's (2020) study, staff felt that the university should teach about alcohol risk reduction and protective behavioral strategies. Unique to the deaf and hard of hearing experience, several participants in our study recommended adding components to any alcohol education program in ASL, so students could more easily access the information.

Staff also provided additional recommendations for intervention. Several staff suggested Gallaudet University should ban alcohol use, but others felt this would not be effective, which supports research showing there is no less alcohol misuse on dry campuses (Fuertes & Hoffman, 2016). Several participants noted the value of engaging in supportive conversations and using restorative practices. This aligns with research by Sullivan and Witenstein (2022), who found interactive engagement with students on the harms caused by alcohol can promote responsibility and greater learning. It also avoids some of the inequities seen in student conduct work (Sullivan & Witenstein, 2022).

Researchers' interviews with staff, seen in the light of the literature, demonstrated that the experiences of deaf and hard of hearing students with regard to alcohol are similar to those of hearing college students. The unique themes that emerged specific to deaf and hard of hearing students related to the strength of inherited traditions, experiences of isolation, and how these impact the need to belong. To quantify and understand the intersection of these dynamics with alcohol use, further research is recommended.

Limitations

Researchers interviewed a range of staff at Gallaudet University, including two professors, both of whom taught mostly upperclassmen. They worked less with new students and, as a result, had less opportunity to see the impact of alcohol in a college environment on new students. It would have been valuable to interview additional professors and to include some who work with first-year students, to learn what they saw in their classrooms and whether they witnessed the academic impact of alcohol use. Having these insights would further enrich the understanding of how alcohol interacts with the student experience. Further, researchers and educators could use this data to inform recommendations for faculty regarding how to address these issues when they encounter them in their classes.

When asked about time periods and events during which they see heavier alcohol use, staff members noted as

examples events that took place around the same time as the interviews (January—March 2023): Bald day (a traditional event where some freshmen shave their heads) and the Super Bowl. Though they recognized homecoming, dorm parties, and Greek events as being associated with higher alcohol use, it is possible that other events, such as the Rat Funeral (a traditional event to mark the end of the freshman year), spring break, and Halloween, might have gotten more attention if the interviews had been conducted at a different time of the year. Gaining this additional insight could help prevention educators target their efforts, so, for future studies, researchers suggest utilizing timeframes coinciding with the aforementioned holidays.

Recommendations

The insight that staff demonstrated revealed the level of connection they have with the phenomenon of alcohol use on campus. As a result of the themes that emerged, researchers have several recommendations. On an individual level, researchers recommend further supports for students, including individual alcohol assessment and counseling, intervention sessions when grades decline, and exit interviews that include questions on alcohol with students who withdraw from the institution prior to graduation. In addition to directly addressing alcohol use, researchers recommend providing services that address the impact of communication isolation, which in turn may impact alcohol use. These services could include individual counseling, mentoring, and programming focused on healthy coping strategies.

On a university level, researchers recommend that Gallaudet University and similar institutions establish a collaboration between Student Affairs and Student Health Services (SHS), through which staff could identify some health symptoms and behaviors frequently associated with alcohol overuse (alcohol-related harms such as headaches, vomiting, oversleeping, getting hurt, falls, unprotected sex, and missing class). These would trigger medical staff in SHS to perform a brief screening of students for alcohol misuse. If a student demonstrates risky behavior, SHS could refer for more extensive services. The student conduct system may miss students who are not drinking in a disruptive way, and awareness of these other symptoms would allow staff to provide other points of entry into support services, such as through student health services.

In addition, researchers suggest that alcohol prevention educators consider individual and group experiences unique to deaf and hard of hearing students (as presented in this study) and tailor education and interventions to be specific to these dynamics. One such experience is the sense of security students may have with peers they grew up with. Staff can acknowledge this as a perceived protective factor and then engage students in additional exploration of other protective factors and ways to reduce risky behaviors. Another example is the sense of isolation some students experience growing up. Educators can explore this dynamic with students and how it impacts social decisions, including the choice to use alcohol.

On a larger ecological level, researchers recommend that professionals who work with deaf and hard of hearing students recognize particularly the effect on the individual of being the only deaf and hard of hearing person in their family or school. Staff working with such students can attempt to understand the impact of such isolation and the barriers to communication that arise in these circumstances. Though it may not be possible for parents and school systems to ensure a deaf and hard of hearing student has similar peers, efforts can be made to help facilitate conversations in social settings and to provide more extensive services that allow a deaf and hard of hearing young person to connect with others. One example would be expanding interpreting services so that after-school activities and significant social events are included. Since students may not want adult interpreters in social spaces, schools could explore partnerships with interpreter training programs to get younger interpreters for these activities.

Lastly, to address the less healthy traditions that are passed down at an institution attended by generations of family members, researchers recommend that health educators and university administrators utilize the social diffusion theory to work with social leaders within the deaf community to acknowledge the alcohol-

related harms, take a stand against them, and push to shift behaviors. By revising expectations over time, possibly many years, as well as implementing comprehensive strategies on a university level, the community can establish healthier traditions.

Conclusion

During their interviews, Gallaudet University staff shared their perspectives on and experiences with student use of alcohol. They identified intrapersonal factors impacting behavior, including fear of missing out and coping strategies. They explored interpersonal factors, such as communication, school environment, social networking within and among schools for the deaf, social isolation for mainstream students, social dynamics, and peer pressure. Lastly, they recognized the impact of university-wide factors, including tradition, education, intervention, and alternative activities. Though not all staff agreed on the best means to address the issue of alcohol use among students, all felt that more needs to be done (except one who did not identify alcohol as an issue). Consistent with other research (e.g., Brown & Murphy, 2020; Gabremichael et al., 2019; Jackson & Sundaram, 2021; Rana et al., 2022), staff showed themselves to be a valuable source of data on student-related phenomena, including alcohol-related issues. The staff participating in this study provided in-depth experiences that helped to illuminate the issue of alcohol use at Gallaudet University. Researchers hope educators will use this insight to address this issue on a social-ecological level.

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