

Black Deaf Discrimination at Gallaudet University

Black deaf students face a dual form of discrimination that is specific to their intersecting identity of being black and deaf and the educational system does not always shelter them from it. Their blackness indicates that they will face racism and their deafness indicates that they will face ableism. Gallaudet University, a university based in Washington D.C. that was specifically made for and by deaf individuals, aims to shelter deaf students from ableist discrimination. Gallaudet offers a setting where deaf students make up the majority which allows for signing and other accommodations to become commonplace. There is an emphasis on hiring deaf administration and staff, a promotion of deaf history focused classes and majors, and the inclusion of ASL to accompany English as the campus's official dominant language. All in all, Gallaudet holds a great emphasis on promoting the safety of its deaf students. However, where Gallaudet thrives in promoting anti-ableism, it completely stumbles in the face of restricting racism. Gallaudet's black deaf students have been continuously let down by the institution. Almost as soon as black deaf students have been allowed into the institution they have been met with outright racism and rejection. Following George Floyd's murder, Gallaudet University has attempted to rebrand away from their racist history, but their actions are largely performative. In the following essay I will list Gallaudet University's notoriously racist actions that occurred in the past and more recently. Next, I will elaborate upon the university's attempts at atonement which have come across as insincere. I connect these points to illustrate that, as one of the most prolific deaf institutions in the world, Gallaudet must do better by its black deaf students.

Gallaudet has a long history of racism toward its black deaf students starting almost as early as their first admission in the 1890s. The Kendall School was a deaf K-12 school for children and a part of the Gallaudet institution. In the 1890s, prior to integration rulings, black

children were allowed to attend, and fourteen black children did. However, pretty quickly following the admission of those black students, white parents began to “complain ... about the intermixing of students ... [and] object strenuously to the presence of these students” (Jowers-Barber 2008). The white children began to echo the complaints of their parents, harassing the black students and creating an incredibly unsafe environment. The Gallaudet administration caved to those complaints, moving the group of black deaf students to The Maryland School for the Colored Blind and Deaf in 1905. Black students would go on to not be allowed to enroll in Gallaudet until after Louise B Miller, a black mother, sued so that her child could attend Kendall School. Following her win, black students in the grades K-12 were still not allowed to peacefully coexist. The first group of black students that were allowed to come to Kendall School after Miller’s win was a group of twenty-four students. They were not allowed on campus and were segregated to a black division of the school which had inferior conditions. The black division of the school closed down after two years following the Brown vs. Board of education decision, pushing those black students into the white division. However, those twenty-four black students were explicitly prohibited from receiving their diplomas even when their white classmates did. Gallaudet’s history of racism does not end with those twenty-four students. Gallaudet’s oldest fraternity goes by the name of Kappa Gamma. Unfortunately, Kappa Gamma has a notoriously racist history. As part of their uniform they would wear robes and pointed hoods that resembled KKK robes. Alongside that, the fraternity was photographed doing what they claimed to be the ‘Bellamy salute’, which is identical to the nazi salute, while pledging. Even worse, for a long period of time these members faced no repercussions for this act. Steven Florio, a past member would go on to admit that he ““dress[ed] as a Nazi,” wearing the robes and performing the salute when he was a member” (Burke 2021). In Florio’s

admittance, the true intentions of the fraternity can be seen, highlighting the insidious and racist nature of the act. Steven Florio went on to be head of the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, a very prolific position which his racist actions did not impede him from obtaining. Segregation and KKK attire, unfortunately, would not be the end of Gallaudet's racist actions.

Gallaudet's present day still runs rampant with racism. Gallaudet's administration does not take the plights of its black students into account which adds onto their racial stress. In 2019, a group of Black students from Gallaudet came together to make a capstone project, a youtube video by the name of 'Dear You'. This video featured eight black students who told stories of racist encounters they've had on campus. There are a number of trends seen in their video. The most prominent one being the Department of Public Security's racism. DPS holds an implicit bias against black students. A number of stories feature the student being stereotyped as aggressive. One man only wanted to go to his friend's dorm room to check on his friend but was prevented by the DPS. Upon insisting that he only wanted to check on his friend, a DPS officer wrongfully interpreted the man as aggressive and restrained him. One man had gotten into an argument with his roommate, but was keeping his cool. However, the roommate called him the n-word and so the man pushed him, however, the push was notably not even harsh enough for the roommate to fall down. Unfortunately, a DPS officer watched the entire interaction, and despite seeing the roommate call him a slur, only sought to intervene when the black man mildly fought back. The student stated the following:

My roommate didn't fall. He was not in danger. .. DPS decided to bullrush me ... He used incredible force. He hit my head over two times with his forearm ...He decided to yell

"Stop resisting!" when I was not resisting ... I was taken to jail for Domestic Violence over a push. (7:34)

This instance of police brutality is despicable and demonstrates the DPS's bias towards labeling black students as aggressive. The student only pushed his roommate one time, yet received an unparalleled response of aggression from the officer due to his bias. Dear You elaborated upon more acts of racism committed by DPS. One student was recorded while unconscious, two students received unprompted and aggressive threats of arrest, and another student had his side of the dorm randomly searched for drugs while his white, stoner, roommate's side remained untouched. Racism does not just occur when the DPS are around. The campus is rampant with micro-aggressions, such as BASL being treated as an illegitimate form of sign by white professors and students. The campus is also rampant with outright aggression, such as the time in 2018 when white students walked around campus in blackface signing the n-word. Furthermore, the graduation statistics of black students demonstrate the racial stress that black deaf students are forced to encounter daily while on campus. While the statistics of black women are not known, "the percentage of students who graduate within six years of starting, for Black Deaf and hard-of-hearing men was just 26.8%," (Lane 2025). This statistics means that black deaf men have a less than thirty percent chance of graduating from the four year institution within six years. In fall 2018, notably following the incident where white students wore blackface, the graduation rate went to less than 15%. That number is incredibly small and because of that it is undeniable that Gallaudet's racist environment negatively impacts its black deaf students' wellbeing and ability to graduate. Lane's article, *Deaf and hard-of-hearing Black men face steep graduation challenges* delves deeply into the lives of several black men that faced difficulty graduating, however the article has a specific focus on a black hard of hearing man named

Antonio Heckstall. He found the Gallaudet environment particularly distressing, he stated that “[He] always felt as if [he] was the odd one out in every room [he] walked into” with his skin color being a contributing factor of the othering feeling. Heckstall eventually went on to not graduate because of financial issues, yet stated that “if [he] had a more positive experience, [he] could have graduated”. Heckstall even cited the day where white students walked around in black face as a day when he considered transferring. These recent instances of racism take a toll on the mental well-being of black deaf students and lead to systematic differences in black deaf education with low graduation rates serving as a specific example. Racism actively harms a significant demographic of Gallaudet's population; it is horrific that up until recently Gallaudet has done very little to stop it.

In recent years, Gallaudet has come under heavy criticism for its racism against its black students and because of that criticism, Gallaudet has attempted to make amends. Their primary form of making amends is by acknowledging their wrongdoings and creating new black deaf centered resources. In June 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, the picture of Kappa Gamma doing the Bellamy salute and wearing robes similar to those of the KKK resurfaced and began to circulate online. Roberta Cordano, the president of Gallaudet University, made a statement denouncing Kappa Gamma, stating that “[Kappa Gamma has] become the face of systemic racism in [Gallaudet's] community” (Burke 2021). This public condemnation demonstrated Gallaudet's attempt to atone for their wrongdoing by allowing racism to thrive on campus. Cordano's speech resulted in the fraternity being suspended and several alumni members losing jobs or promotion opportunities due to their association with Kappa Gamma. Secondly, Gallaudet University acknowledged the twenty-four black deaf students who they sent away to the Kendall Division. The University hosted a graduation service for the set of

twenty-four students who were deliberately restricted from receiving diplomas. Gallaudet labeled these students as the Kendall 24. Prior to this graduation, none of the twenty-four received a Gallaudet diploma, so Gallaudet hosted a graduation where they could finally receive one. Significantly, the child of Lousie B Miller, the woman who sued to allow her kids a place at Kendall, was able to attend. Other children of the Kendall 24 also came to take a diploma in place of their parents who passed. The graduation occurred on July 22nd, 2023, a date that, to Gallaudet University, would henceforth be known as Kendall 24 day. Gallaudet University also released an official proclamation acknowledging their wrongs and offering apologies for the Kendall 24 being denied diplomas. Gallaudet's Board of Trustees proclaimed that "Gallaudet deeply regrets the role it played in perpetuating the historic inequity, systemic marginalization, and the grave injustice committed against the Black Deaf community" Later on in the proclamation, Gallaudet specifically states their wrongdoing of withholding diplomas from their black deaf students. This proclamation publicly demonstrated Gallaudet's awareness and acknowledgement of their racism. Interestingly, Gallaudet uses the word 'played' as if to imply their perpetuating injustice against the black deaf community only occurred in that one historic instance. However as noted in the actions of the DPS against black students during the 2010s and into the present, one can see that this is not entirely true. Moving forward, Gallaudet has made efforts to create black deaf centered spaces on their campus. The Center for Black Studies was established in 2020 on Gallaudet's campus. That center helped to create a Louise B. Miller Memorial Black Studies Minor which was established in Fall 2022. The Center for Black Studies is run by a black deaf woman and essentially works to educate others about the black deaf experience. It is undeniable that Gallaudet has acknowledged many of its past wrongs and is

actively working to make a difference, it is just debatable how much their atonement for past deeds has aided present day black deaf students.

Despite Gallaudet's attempts at atonement, there is still much more work to be done to make Gallaudet university a safe space for black deaf students. Gallaudet's administration may have acknowledged racist parts of its history, but it is very selective with what part of its history it acknowledges. The history surrounding the Kendall 24 not receiving their diplomas was very publicized, which made it difficult for Gallaudet to ignore their racism and therefore they were forced to speak about it. Similarly, the picture of Kappa Gamma saluting in robes and pointed hoods was widely publicized, meaning Gallaudet was basically forced into making a statement about it. Their acknowledgement of Kappa Gamma occurred days after the murder of George Floyd when many public institutions were making statements against racism, so Gallaudet making a statement shouldn't be considered a brave move, it was the norm of the time. Moreso, Gallaudet's condemnation of Kappa Gamma shouldn't be understood as the university taking accountability. The president stated that the fraternity was 'the face of systemic racism in the community' which less so resembles the university taking accountability, and more so resembles the university blaming all of its racism on one fraternity. Gallaudet went on to suspend Kappa Gamma, which gives the general public the impression that with that one fraternity on campus shut down, all racism would go with it, which isn't true. Gallaudet University only talks about their racism when it receives lots of media attention, racist events that go under the radar do not earn attempts at atonement. For instance, the youtube video 'For You' which discusses students and the racism they faced on campus by DPS, received no attempt at atonement. The video came out in 2019, was a project for a class, and received 4,000 views on a college campus that only had 1,700 students so it is very likely that it would have been seen by someone in the

administration, yet no public apology came. In fact, as seen in Collin's article *Police Brutality at Gallaudet University* none of the students who told their stories were even reached out to by the director of DPS. Gallaudet atones for racist events that happened decades previous but does not give the same thoughtfulness to recent events. For instance, there are almost no articles about the day in 2018 when white students walked around campus in black face, but there have been several articles, cosigned by Gallaudet personnel, that talk about the Kendall 24 or Kappa Gamma's racism. The Gallaudet administration has certainly attempted to atone for their misdeeds, but that atonement is aimed at decades in the past rather than the present day.

Gallaudet has a long history of racism. That racism takes many forms whether it be in the past with segregation, or in the present with charges of police brutality faced by the DPS. Gallaudet University has made attempts at atonement but those attempts are rarely aimed at the present needs of its black deaf students. In one of the most prolific deaf schools in the United States, black deaf students should not have to encounter racism daily due to their administration's lack of care for their present needs. Gallaudet university needs to recognize its harm to current day black deaf students and do work to ensure that they remain safe on campus.

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