



## Selected Proceedings from the 2001 annual conference of the International Leadership Association, November 1-4, Miami, Florida USA

Empowering Deaf Communities in Developing Nations  
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As we enter the 21st century, we need to step back and consider the human side of the technological revolution that took place in the second half of the 20th century. The technological advances of the last decades have significantly enhanced the lives of deaf people in the United States. Many new devices such as special phone equipment called TTY and vibrating beepers enable deaf people to overcome the isolation that might otherwise result from their deafness. However, we need to keep in mind the oppressive reality of deafness outside the United States. Although American deaf people are part of the communication revolution and American deaf colleges<sup>1</sup> and employers<sup>2</sup> are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act<sup>3</sup> (ADA) to accommodate individuals with disabilities, deaf people in developing countries are still cut off from society. In developing nations the incidence of deafness continues to rise due mostly to poor health conditions and lack of prenatal care. Deaf people in developing nations also lack access to education. The World Federation of the Deaf,<sup>4</sup> an international non-governmental and non-profit organization that promotes the rights of deaf people worldwide, estimates that high illiteracy rates are very common among deaf people in developing nations since fewer than 20% of deaf children attend school regularly.

According to the most recent data published in 2001 by the World Health Organization<sup>5</sup> "... 250 million people in the world have disabling hearing impairment (moderate or worse hearing impairment in the better ear). Two-thirds of these people live in developing countries." In today's global economy, there are many challenges but also many opportunities. One of the

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main challenges results from the growing tensions generated by social injustice. In 1999 Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez, former president of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate addressed those tensions<sup>6</sup> by asking a simple question: "How much poverty can democracy endure?" We must expand our concept of democracy to ensure the right of self-determination of people who have been neglected or denied the chance to live a dignified life. Once we start thinking and acting globally in a genuinely humanistic way we will begin to ensure that those who are most vulnerable due to sickness or poverty will have equal opportunity to have access to most educational, financial and technological resources. The key to making the best out of the challenges of globalization resides in nurturing the appropriate leaders by promoting participative leadership at all levels and within the national and international communities. This paper will discuss two empowerment strategies that proved successful to enhance leadership skills among members of two very special communities, the American and the Costa Rican deaf community. Since we are practitioners, we will let our strategies speak for themselves. We will integrate the theoretical discussion within the description of each empowerment strategy and we will conclude by making recommendations about ways in which leadership is nurtured and by sharing suggestions to engage hearing and deaf people alike in improving the lives of deaf individuals in developing nations.

The first empowerment strategy that we will discuss consists of an email discussion group, which grew out of the commitment of Andrea Shettle, one of the authors of this paper, to promote the self-empowerment of deaf people in developing nations. The listserv is called DeafINTL<sup>7</sup> which stands for Deaf Empowerment and Advancement Fellowship INTERNATIONAL List. DeafINTL was initiated in August 1998 and it targets people who are interested in facilitating the empowerment of deaf communities in developing countries. It enables 200 subscribers from more than thirty countries to exchange information and ideas and to draw upon the knowledge and the resources of subscribers from other countries. It includes subscribers from the United States, Ethiopia, Canada, Australia, the Czech Republic, France, Spain, Costa Rica, England, Brazil, South Africa, Sweden, Finland, Peru, and many more countries.

A review of some of the topics discussed though DeafINTL can give a sense for the ways in which this listserv nurtures the impetus towards leadership among the subscribers by providing them with opportunities to become agents of change within a wide variety of contexts. Here are some of the topics: "I'm in Turkey. Help! Is anyone willing to come here and do volunteer work?" "I'm in Ethiopia. How can I lure interns to our country?" "I'm going to Peru in a few months. How can I contact some deaf schools there?" "I'm in Brazil and we want to set up a TTY relay service here so that deaf people who use TTYS can communicate with hearing people on the phone. How do other countries do it?" "I'm studying in the United States and I have a deaf sister in the Himalayas who has never gone to school. How do I help her?" Here are some of the outcomes that resulted from those postings. One subscriber did volunteer work in Turkey and made an important contribution to improving literacy among children of the local deaf community. One subscriber in Ethiopia was able to obtain advice from another subscriber on how to help the local deaf community members with substance abuse problems. Subscribers about to visit developing nations were able to make contacts in the target country before leaving home and improving the effectiveness of their interaction. A subscriber looking for advice on establishing a new TTY relay service in Brazil was able to get feedback from subscribers in other countries.

As we discuss the effectiveness of DeafINTL as an empowerment tool we also need to discuss its limitations. One of the limitations is that many deaf individuals and organizations that could benefit from networking with other people who are committed to improve the lives of deaf people in developing nations are not able to gain access to the listserv due to lack of technological resources. Many have no computers or old computers; old computers but no

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modems; poor phone systems; no electricity in rural areas; etc. Other limitations are that some of the subscribers in developing nations have little time to actively participate because they must work at two jobs just to survive. Some subscribers also report that it is easier to contact people in other countries by email than it is to communicate with other deaf leaders with whom they share advocacy work who live twenty miles away. The difficulty results from a corrupt postal system, unreliable or non-existing means of transportation, and phone lines that frequently don't work. Also, even if the phone system in their country were more reliable not everyone can afford a phone line, and only an extreme small number of deaf people in developing nations own the TTYs that would allow them to use phones independently. This means they must rely almost exclusively on the assistance of middle class and wealthy hearing relatives and friends to use the phone at all. In addition to the communication barriers described above, there are other challenges to the effectiveness of DeafINTL as an empowerment tool to develop leadership skills among potential deaf leaders in developing nations. Not too many subscribers fit the profile and some of those who are deaf participants from developing nations are not currently living in their home countries because they are studying in developed nations. Despite its limitations, DeafINTL seems an excellent environment to encourage participative leadership by nurturing meaningful communication and responsible decision making among deaf and hearing people who are concerned about improving the lives of deaf communities in developing nations.

The second empowerment strategy that we will discuss in this paper is a partnership-based model between academic institutions and non-profit organizations that serve the American and the Costa Rican deaf communities. This model was successfully piloted from 1998 to 2001 with a three-year grant that one of the authors of the paper, Dr. Cristina Berdichevsky, received from the Funds for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), an agency of the US Department of Education. Supplemental funds from FIPSE are currently being used to build on the successes of the Costa Rican program and expand to Mexico in an attempt to broaden the scope of our initiatives and establish what we call "international deaf partnerships", an environment which fosters deaf empowerment through exchanges across nations.

Despite the efforts of international exchange offices to comply with the spirit of the ADA, American deaf college students do not have the same access as their hearing peers to study abroad experiences that are a regular feature at most colleges. American deaf and hard of hearing students face two main barriers for fully participating in existing exchange programs: insufficient exposure to foreign language learning and scarcity and high cost of qualified interpreters abroad. In order to provide American deaf college students the opportunity to gain the global awareness and the cross-cultural sensitivity required to become more marketable in today's shrinking world economy, the Department of Foreign Languages at Gallaudet University established a partnership with two Costa Rican organizations that serve the Deaf: PROGRESO (a resource center on deafness at the University of Costa Rica) and ANASCOR (the Costa Rica National Association for the Deaf). The purpose of this partnership is twofold: to strengthen post-secondary education for the deaf in the United States by providing American deaf and hard of hearing students more meaningful opportunities for foreign language learning and global awareness; to enable Costa Rican deaf students and American deaf students to come together and learn from each other and develop and practice leadership skills that will result in the betterment of their own lives and the lives of the members of their local deaf communities.

The original model, the FIPSE funded "International Internships for Deaf College Students" Project piloted a cooperative educational one-semester exchange program that combined an internship in the student's field with courses offered through PROGRESO at the University of Costa Rica for the American deaf students and a semester's study and summer teaching practice at Gallaudet for the Costa Rican deaf students. As documented by evaluation data,

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American deaf students who participated in the program acquired sufficient proficiency in Spanish and in LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language) to be able to communicate with their Costa Rican host families and to fully benefit from their internship abroad experience. They also gained a deep understanding of Costa Rican culture and the cultural sensitivity required to work with the growing Hispanic deaf community in the United States. Outcomes for the Costa Rican exchange students included the opportunity to become proud about their identity by sharing their sign language and culture. They also had a chance to improve their education and their understanding of issues that affect the global deaf community. The assessment of the impact of the FIPSE project on the returning American interns' as well as on the Costa Rican exchange students' outlook on life and on their interest in global issues has been compelling. No specific data has been collected to measure the impact on their leadership potential but anecdotal evidence suggests that by participating they have tested their skills of leadership and begun to see themselves as leaders. In fact, Franklin Torres, one of the interns who completed his internship at a school for the deaf in San José is about to graduate with a Master's in Deaf Education and is planning to teach Hispanic deaf children. Upon his return from Costa Rica, Franklin pursued graduate studies while working as an assistant at the Center for Global Education at Gallaudet; he has also shown his leadership potential by taking the role of coordinator for Latin America at the incoming international deaf cultural festival known as "Deaf Way II", which will take place at Gallaudet in July of 2002. Similarly, Leonel López, one of the Costa Rican exchange students has benefited from his experience at Gallaudet to become more aware of his own potential as a leader. Leo, who is completing a degree in Computer Science in his home country but who loves theatre, took advantage of his stay at Gallaudet to learn more about theatre production. Leo was given the opportunity to direct a production at Gallaudet and has been invited to "Deaf Way II" as a promising young artist.

One of the authors of this paper, Andrea Shettle, a Gallaudet graduate, took advantage of the Costa Rica program to practice leadership in action. Andrea went to Costa Rica from January through March of 2000. She worked with a classroom of eight deaf children ages eleven to fourteen in self-esteem development and leadership skills. The children's favorite activity was when she brought pictures of fifty one deaf adults and four hearing adults and she asked the children to guess who were deaf and who were hearing. The children, who did not often meet deaf adult role models, were astounded to realize that so many deaf adults even existed. They were further amazed to see that deaf adults can have successful careers and that they can even become presidents of a deaf university. Andrea also gave a leadership workshop to a group of sixteen deaf adults active in the Costa Rica National deaf association (ANASCOR). The objectives of the workshop were to increase individual self-confidence; to improve ability to work together as a team to solve common problems and to support participants' ability to develop individual, group and community goals. Participants met all day for five consecutive Saturdays and one Sunday and received a certificate from Gallaudet and a certificate from PROGRESO. Some of the activities included trust-building activities, communication games, solving common problems ("alligator board", "electric fence") and discussing participants' goals for the deaf community of Costa Rica, barriers, and ways to overcome those barriers. The workshop generated many positive results. Some of the outcomes included that participants bonded and developed teamwork skills; one participant found the courage to suggest establishing a LESCO class for parents at her school; participants agreed to establish a new ANASCOR committee on leadership.

As we conclude this discussion about strategies that have proven successful to empower deaf communities in developing nations, we cannot forget the lessons in solidarity taught by those who gave their lives to save the victims of the recent terrorist attacks. For better or for worse, developed and developing nations need to come together to end inequality which will bring justice and peace. The first step in that direction is about to happen as international and

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American organizations such as the World Bank and USAID are looking at including people with disabilities in their programs. The timing is also right for each and every one of us to stay vigilant to ensure that disabled individuals' human rights are respected nationwide and worldwide.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The ADA contains five titles. Titles II through V apply to college students with documented disabilities. Under the provisions of the ADA colleges and universities, regardless of whether or not they receive federal funds are required by law to ensure that disabled students have equal access to academic success. [\[return to text\]](#)

<sup>2</sup> For information about the legal protection provided to employees under the Americans with Disabilities Act, visit:  
Facts about the Americans with Disabilities Act. <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-ada.html> (10 Jan.2002). [\[return to text\]](#)

<sup>3</sup> The full text of the ADA is available at:  
The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.  
<http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/regs/statutes/ofccp/ada.htm> (10 Jan.2002). [\[return to text\]](#)

<sup>4</sup> For information about deafness worldwide, visit:  
World Federation of the Deaf.  
<http://www.wfdnews.org/> (10 Jan.2002). [\[return to text\]](#)

<sup>5</sup> In order to better understand the impact of deafness worldwide consult: World Health Organization. [http://www.who.int/pbd/pdh/pdh\\_home.htm](http://www.who.int/pbd/pdh/pdh_home.htm) (10 Jan.2002). [\[return to text\]](#)

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Arias (1990). "How Much Poverty Can Democracy Endure?" *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 9(23), 6-10. [\[return to text\]](#)

<sup>7</sup> In order to learn more about this listserv, visit Deaf Empowerment and Advancement Fellowship INTERNATIONAL List  
[http://DATA.CLUB.CC.CMU.EDU/~red\\_trek/deafintl/](http://DATA.CLUB.CC.CMU.EDU/~red_trek/deafintl/) (10Jan.2002). [\[return to text\]](#)

### Biography

*Dr. Cristina Berdichevsky is an Associate Professor in French and Spanish at Gallaudet University. Cristina is the Project Director of the FIPSE funded program "International Internships for Deaf College Students". FIPSE ( Funds for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) is an agency of the US Department of Education. Originally from Argentina, Cristina is committed to improving the lives of people in developing countries.*

*Andrea Shettle has a BA in Honors English and a Masters in Social Work from Gallaudet. In 1991 she established the "International Deaf Education and Advancement Fund" which gives tuition scholarships to deaf students from developing nations who are committed to return home and work with their local communities. In 1998 she initiated DEAFINTL (Deaf Empowerment and Advancement Fellowship INTERNATIONAL List), an e-mail discussion list (listserver) to share information among deaf people in developing countries. In 2000 she conducted an 11-week leadership training to the Costa Rican deaf community. She is considering pursuing a degree in International Development.*

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