

Audism: Systemic Barriers in Higher Education

Lloyd A. Godin

UT San Antonio

HSA 5023: Introduction to Higher Education and Student Affairs

Jessica Rivera, Ph. D.

April 4, 2026

Audism: Systemic Barriers in Higher Education

Postsecondary education is widely recognized as crucial for opportunity, mobility, employment, and quality of life in the United States, especially for Deaf and hard-of-hearing (Deaf/HoH) individuals. Historically, Deaf/HoH have been marginalized and do not have equal access within postsecondary educational systems (Garberoglio et al., 2021). There are 48 million Americans with hearing loss (Bloom et al., 2026). The number of Deaf/HoH individuals completing postsecondary education is rising. However, it is not at the same rate as their hearing peers (Bloom & Palmer, 2023). This gap is more than a difference in educational outcomes. It reveals systemic barriers in postsecondary education rooted in audism.

Audism refers to a system of beliefs and practices that privilege hearing people and hearing ways of being while marginalizing Deaf people, Deaf culture, and signed languages (Paulsen, 2016; Robinson & Henner, 2018; Wilks, 2025). It is embedded in the assumption that hearing is normative or superior. Audism has shaped higher education from the beginning. Deaf/HoH experiences are influenced by institutional policies, structures, and attitudes for students, as well as faculty and staff (Horvath, 2025; Weber et al., 2024). Institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities under The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 1990). The meaning of “reasonable” is context-dependent and inconsistent, giving rise to litigation (Barancik, 1999). While laws have improved access, they have not addressed the more profound structural injustices that Deaf/HoH individuals still experience in higher education.

Institutions typically treat accessibility as the provision of accommodation. Although institutions may meet their minimum legal obligations, they often ignore the broader responsibility of creating inclusive and equitable environments. Deaf/HoH students navigate

systems built on hearing-centered norms, expectations, and definitions of success. True accessibility demands inclusiveness, visibility, and a feeling of belonging (Palmer et al., 2019). This paper asks: How does audism operate as a structural barrier in higher education, and how does it shape access, belonging, and equity for Deaf/HoH students, faculty, and staff? The purpose of this paper is to examine the literature on audism in higher education to show how institutional policies, practices, and norms continue to reproduce inequities for Deaf/HoH students, faculty, and staff.

Defining Audism and Framing It for Higher Education

Audism is more than a simple prejudice. It is a framework that systemically privileges hearing people and culture in communication and learning. In higher education, audism appears when institutions treat spoken language, auditory access, and hearing-centered norms as the default for legitimacy, intelligence, and full participation (Wilks, 2025). Audism is intricately connected to linguisticism and ableism because all three systems privilege dominant norms of communication, embodiment, and participation. Ableism privileges minds and bodies that conform to dominant norms of functioning and participation. Linguicism favors dominant language practices, such as spoken language or written English. Audism operates within both as it marginalizes Deaf language, culture, and knowledge (Paulsen, 2016; Wilks, 2025) and positions hearing and speech as superior.

Disability frameworks in higher education often fail to recognize the specific ways audism occurs. A Deaf Studies lens more clearly explains how oppression manifests through language hierarchies, exclusion from knowledge, and institutional assumptions about how people communicate and participate (Paulsen, 2016; Robinson & Henner, 2018). American Sign

Language (ASL) and Deaf-centered research can “crip” higher education by exposing its institutional dependence on hearing norms and re-centering Deaf knowledge (Robinson & Henner, 2018).

Resisting audism in higher education requires more than just meeting basic needs through accommodation; it calls for a focus on Deaf pedagogy because pedagogy itself reflects relations of access, culture, and power (Skyer & Cochell, 2020). Therefore, using ASL, valuing Deaf ways of knowing, and centering education on Deaf experiences are necessary for evaluating higher education. The focus moves from simply including Deaf students to transforming the institution itself.

Expanding the analysis of audism shows that Deaf aesthetics challenge models focused only on access and instead support educational spaces rooted in Deaf meaning-making (Weber et al., 2024). Audism must be examined in the context of leadership decisions that either maintain or challenge hearing privilege in higher education (Rensch, 2019). Audism is part of language beliefs, teaching assumptions, and institutional routines that structure higher education.

Audism as a Structural Problem

Audism in higher education is structural. It is embedded in the traditional design of institutions. Institutions continue to follow hearing-centered norms under the assumption that providing accommodation for Deaf/HoH students is enough to ensure equal access. Hearing norms are upheld as the standard when institutions minimize access to ADA compliance alone. True access is more than interpreters, closed-captions, or note-taking support; it means feeling affirmed, connected, and involved in campus life (Palmer et al., 2019, 2023, 2024).

This structural problem is particularly visible in accessibility services. Accessibility services offices are the primary gateway to communication access. However, gatekeeping reduces access to an individualized, administrative process rather than a campus-wide commitment to inclusion. Accessibility services professionals would rather provide access services than advocate for wider institutional inclusion for Deaf/HoH students (Palmer et al., 2024). The distinction matters as a student can receive accommodation and still experience exclusion, diminished belonging, and limited affirmation of Deaf identity. Accessibility services can institutionally marginalize Deaf/HoH students by positioning them as exceptions rather than prompting institutions to rethink the hearing-centered assumptions built into classrooms and campus systems.

Access models based on accommodation-only are inadequate. Documented educational attainment and postsecondary outcomes for Deaf/HoH students are not equitable (Garberoglio et al., 2021). Access barriers are not incidental but instead are systemically patterned. Audism persists when schools use hearing-centered designs, see Deaf/HoH students as exceptions, and confuse simple accommodations with real change.

Audism in the Classroom and Online Learning

Audism exists in higher education classrooms regardless of modality. Teaching methods, curriculum design, and participation expectations are hearing-centric. Courses often rely on spoken lectures without captions, class discussions that privilege verbal responses, and oral instructions delivered without supporting visual aids, all of which disadvantage Deaf/HoH students. Accommodation alone is insufficient. How accommodation is implemented affects

Deaf/HoH students' participation in discussions, interactions, and learning (Kushalnagar et al., 2018).

Additionally, faculty expectations contribute to audism. Most hearing instructors are not taught how Deaf/HoH students learn and access information. STEM classes are particularly challenging as lectures are fast-paced, contain complex vocabulary, and frequently divide visual attention (Braun et al., 2018). Group work, class discussions, and spontaneous interactions are also difficult because access is often incomplete. As a result, Deaf/HoH students must constantly self-advocate for full participation.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, online learning has become an important part of higher education. Online learning was not the neutral shift in instructional delivery it was expected to be. Instead, it became a setting where audism quickly became more visible. It exposed the depth of hearing norms built into educational institutions.

Digital platforms were designed with hearing users in mind. Communication, learning management systems, and recorded lectures relied on rapid speech and audio-based interactions, while captioning tools added later are not sufficient for inclusion. Equitable communication requires more than technical compliance (LaChapelle & Nelson, 2024). Technology use and availability is not at issue, but how it is structured around hearing-centered assumptions is.

Online environments fail to support meaningful and fair participation for Deaf/HoH students. The literature shows a consistent pattern: digital learning spaces may appear accessible while still reproducing hearing-centered norms. Aljedaani et al. (2023) note recurring barriers, such as language challenges, a lack of sign language support, and an inaccessible platform design. Student experiences are shaped not simply by the presence of accommodations, but by the quality of those accommodations and the instructional practices surrounding them

(Alshawabkeh et al., 2021). Deaf/HoH students must split visual attention across many sources—slides, chats, speakers, interpreters, and captions (Jolly et al., 2024; LaChapelle & Nelson, 2024). This creates a cognitive and participatory burden not expected of hearing students. Taken together, these studies suggest that the central issue is not technological access alone, but the dominance of instructional systems designed around hearing as the norm. Genuine Deaf-centered learning environments go beyond basic accessibility (Weber et al., 2024).

Campus Climate

Audism shapes campus climate not only through barriers to classroom access, but also through the ways Deaf/HoH students experience campus life as a space where they are not recognized, affirmed, or able to belong. Belonging is not equal with enrollment, nor is it assured by accommodation. Drawing on National Deaf Center data from the 2022–2023 Deaf Postsecondary Access and Inclusion Scale, Palmer et al. (2024) emphasize that “access is more than accommodations” and show that Deaf/HoH students can receive support and still feel isolated on campus. In that report, students’ overall ratings of institutional accessibility and engagement averaged only 65 out of 100, and the scale examined not only accommodating learning environments, but also campus connectedness and Deaf-affirming climate (Palmer et al., 2024). This distinction is critical; campus belonging depends on social and cultural affirmation, not access alone.

Mainstream campus environments can be isolating for Deaf/HoH students because they are organized around hearing norms in student life, informal interaction, and institutional culture. Institutions profit from Deaf language and culture through ASL instruction, interpreter education, and related programming but still marginalize the Deaf/HoH within the institution

itself. Offering ASL or Deaf-related coursework is not enough (Robinson & Henner, 2018). Institutions need to critically examine how their programs, hiring, curriculum, and co-curricular structures undermine Deaf rights, presence, and place. This contradiction points to how deeply hearing-centered assumptions remain embedded in higher education. It is no longer a question of representation; it is whether campus culture itself has been transformed around ASL, Deaf ways of knowing, and Deaf-centered forms of participation.

Campus social spaces typically produce marginal forms of inclusion. Belonging involves more than being allowed into mainstream spaces; it includes participating without being erased, constantly translating, or being pushed away from Deaf cultural identity. Deaf/HoH students may be formally included in campus organizations and still must build their own Deaf-centered communities to experience meaningful belonging. Stapleton and Nicolazzo's work on Deaf sorority life is useful here because it highlights how Deaf students resist audism through their own social organization rather than finding full inclusion within mainstream student life by default (Stapleton & Nicolazzo, 2019).

These concerns also have implications for continual enrollment and graduation. National Deaf Center reports that although educational attainment for Deaf/HoH has improved over time, completion gaps between Deaf/HoH and hearing people have not narrowed meaningfully. College enrollment does not automatically produce equitable outcomes. The National Deaf Center identifies broader systemic barriers tied to lower outcomes, such as limited access to language and communication, reduced social opportunities, and negative attitudes and biases (Palmer et al., 2024). Thus, campus climate is not a secondary concern; it is central to whether Deaf/HoH students, faculty, and staff can persist, thrive, and see themselves as full members of the academic community.

Intersectionality

Not all Deaf/HoH students are the same. It is important to look at how audism intersects with race, ethnicity, language, disability, immigration inequities, and other forms of marginalization. In the 2022–2023 Deaf Postsecondary Access and Inclusion Scale, 49% identified as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color, and 55% reported an additional disability (Palmer et al., 2024). Latinx Deaf communities face systemic barriers from overlapping discrimination, language deprivation, a dearth of Latinx deaf teachers and multilingual interpreters, and limited resources, which impede educational attainment (García-Fernández et al., 2024).

Analyzing intersectionality is also essential for understanding Deaf faculty and administrators. Rensch’s dissertation highlights how these individuals address audism in academic settings, emphasizing the institutional reproduction or challenge of hearing privilege (Rensch, 2019). More recently, Moges examines Deaf faculty of color in predominantly White, hearing-serving institutions who face overlapping audism, linguicism, and racism (Moges, 2025). They navigate through multiple, intersecting systems of marginalization in hiring, promotion, communication, and campus culture.

Conclusion

The literature shows that audism in higher education is structural. It is not just interpersonal and goes beyond isolated prejudice. Audism is embedded in policies, assumptions, and daily practices focused on hearing. Speech and auditory-centered communication have long been the standards for legitimacy, knowledge, and inclusion. Audism has determined who gets access, whose ideas count, and who must change.

This structural pattern is visible across multiple domains of campus life. Classroom lectures, verbal discussions, and participation policies are structured to advantage hearing students, even when interpreters or captions are provided. Accessibility services offices have reduced access to a bureaucratic procedure that positions Deaf/HoH students as outsiders who must continuously seek inclusion. Online learning platforms are designed with hearing as the default. Audism has permeated instructional design, campus technology, administration, and institutional policy.

The consequences of audism go beyond access to educational content. They impact participation, belonging, authority, and sustained educational opportunity. Deaf/HoH students must self-advocate, monitor communication, and navigate environments where their language and identity are marginalized. Similarly, Deaf/HoH faculty and staff are expected to educate hearing colleagues, negotiate hearing-centered norms, and establish authority within institutions that prioritize auditory communication. Deaf/HoH students, faculty, and staff experience a considerable emotional toll daily.

Higher education remains a system structured by the privilege of hearing. The issue is no longer whether accommodation is provided, but whether institutions are willing to make the structural changes necessary to advance equity, belonging, and Deaf-centered ways of knowing. The literature suggests that institutions should take immediate action to address these structural inequities. These inequities are not only matters of access and justice, but also of student success, retention, campus climate, and the mission of higher education. Institutional leaders should recognize ASL, Deaf culture, and Deaf-centered participation as essential to equitable higher education and embed those commitments in institutional policy. They must also move beyond accommodation-only models by redesigning accessibility services as proactive, campus-wide

inclusion efforts informed by Deaf voices. Faculty development must include Deaf-centered pedagogy, visual access, and inclusive communication practices. Institutions should also establish measurable goals and accountability mechanisms for the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Deaf faculty, staff, and administrators so that Deaf perspectives shape institutional decision-making. Authentic transformation requires institutional leaders to take responsibility for grounding change in Deaf-centered design and perspectives and for aligning that change with institutional priorities, resource allocation, and accountability.

References

- Aljedaani, W., Krasniqi, R., Aljedaani, S., Mkaouer, M. W., Ludi, S., & Al-Raddah, K. (2023). If online learning works for you, what about deaf students? Emerging challenges of online learning for deaf and hearing-impaired students during COVID-19: a literature review. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 22(3), 1027–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-022-00897-5>
- Alshawabkeh, A. A., Woolsey, M. L., & Kharbat, F. F. (2021). Using online information technology for deaf students during COVID-19: A closer look from experience. *Heliyon*, 7(5), e06915. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06915>
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. Nos. 101–336, U.S.C. (1990). <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-reg/ada/>
- Barancik, A. M. (1999). Determining reasonable accommodations under the ADA: Why courts should require employers to participate in an “interactive process.” *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal*, 30(3). <https://loyola-chicago-law-journal.scholasticahq.com/article/76505-determining-reasonable-accommodations-under-the-ada-why-courts-should-require-employers-to-participate-in-an-interactive-process>
- Bloom, C. L., & Palmer, J. L. (2023). *Undergraduate Enrollment of Deaf Students in the United States (2019-2020)* (Grantee Submission). (ED655929). <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=acd32b0f-dfb2-3391-af24-d716f6eb2262>
- Bloom, C. L., Palmer, J. L., & Winninghoff, J. (2026). *NDC Data Dashboard*. National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. [Nationaldeafcenter.Org.](https://dashboard.nationaldeafcenter.org/)

Braun, D. C., Clark, M. D., Marchut, A. E., Solomon, C. M., Majocha, M., Davenport, Z., Kushalnagar, R. S., Listman, J., Hauser, P. C., & Gormally, C. (2018). Welcoming Deaf Students into STEM: Recommendations for University Science Education. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 17(3), es10. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.17-05-0081>

Garberoglio, C. L., Johnson, P. M., Sales, A., & Cawthon, S. W. (2021). Change Over Time in Educational Attainment for Deaf Individuals from 2008-2018. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 34(3).

García-Fernández, C., Durán-Aguirre, J., Bloom, C. L., Palmer, J. L., & Winninghoff, J. (2024). Postsecondary Achievement of Latinx Deaf People: 2024. *National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes*. National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes

Horvath, S. P. (2025). Deaf Faculty Members' Experiences in Higher Education Institutions. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, (Paper 4553). <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/4553>

Jolly, A. J., Macfarlane, C. E., & Barker, B. A. (2024). Deaf/hard of hearing students' experiences with higher education's real-time captioning services. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 29(3), 424–432. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdsade/ena019>

Kushalnagar, P., Ryan, C., Smith, S., & Kushalnagar, R. (2018). Critical health literacy in American deaf college students. *Health Promotion International*, 33(5), 827–833.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dax022>

LaChapelle, T., & Nelson, D. (2024). Facilitating Equitable Access to Communication for Deaf and Hard of Hearing College Students in Online Learning Environments. *International Journal on Social and Education Sciences*, 7(1).

Moges, R. (2025). Torn Between Identities and Roles as a Deaf Faculty of Color: A Case Study. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2025(211), 21–29.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/he.70005>

Palmer, J. L., Bloom, C. L., Kinast, L., & Ivanko, T.-N. (2023). *Access, Belonging, and Affirmation: Deaf Postsecondary Access and Inclusion Scale, 2022-2023, Grantee Submission*, 202. National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED662934>

Palmer, J. L., Cawthon, S. W., Garberoglio, C. L., & Ivanko, T. (2019). *ACCESS Is More Than Accommodations: 2018–2019 Deaf College Student National Accessibility Report*. National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes.

<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/items/d22e7a0e-155f-4263-8bdd-b496b64dc5cf/full>

Palmer, J. L., Ivanko, T.-N., Kinast, L., Lewandowski, K., & Bloom, C. L. (2024). *Supporting deaf college students: Perspectives from disability services professionals (2023–2024)*. National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. <https://nationaldeafcenter.org/dss2024>

Paulsen, M. B. (Ed.). (2016). *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 31). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-3>

Rensch, S. M. (2019). A Qualitative Inquiry into the Actions of Deaf Higher Education Faculty and Administrators in Addressing Audism [Ph.D., Capella University]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*. ProQuest One Academic; ProQuest One Academic (2201959152). <https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/qualitative-inquiry-into-actions-deaf-higher/docview/2201959152/se-2?accountid=7122>

Robinson, O., & Henner, J. (2018). Authentic Voices, Authentic Encounters: Crippling the University Through American Sign Language. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(4). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i4.6111>

Skyer, M., & Cochell, L. (2020). Aesthetics, Culture, Power. *Critical Education*, 11(15).
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v11i15.186497>

Stapleton, L. D., & Nicolazzo, Z. (2019). Sorority Life Reimagined: Deaf Culture and Mainstream Sorority Life. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2019(165), 87–98.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20296>

Weber, J., Hayward, D., Skyer, M., & Snively, S. (2024). Applied deaf aesthetics toward transforming deaf higher education. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 30(1), 108–125. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdsade/ena050>

Wilks, R. (2025). Deaf legal theory: Challenging the law’s hearing bias. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 30(3), 293–305. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdsade/enaf010>