Gallaudet University students protest for a deaf university president (Deaf President Now), 1988

7 March 1988 to: 13 March 1988
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Washington, D.C.
Location Description: Gallaudet University campus

Goals:
Student protesters presented the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees with four demands:

(1) The resignation of the hearing, newly appointed university president Elisabeth Zinser and the selection of a Deaf person as president

(2) The immediate resignation of Jane Bassett Spilman, chair of the Board of Trustees

(3) The reconstitution of the Board of Trustees with a 51% majority of Deaf members

(4) No reprisals against any student or staff members involved in the protest

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 054. Turning one's back
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:
- Marches
- Assemblies of protest or support
- Student strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- Marches
- Assemblies of protest or support
- Student strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- Marches
- Assemblies of protest or support
- Student strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- Marches
- Assemblies of protest or support
- Student strike

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Human Rights
Group characterization:

- Gallaudet University students
- staff members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Bridgetta Bourne, Jerry Covell, Greg Hllibok, Tim Rarus

Partners:
National Association of the Deaf

External allies:
Dr. I King Jordan, American Postal Workers Union

Involvement of social elites:
Representative David Bonior of Michigan, Representative Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- National Association of the Deaf

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Representative David Bonior of Michigan
- Representative Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin

Groups in 4th Segment:

- American Postal Workers Union
- Dr. 1 King Jordan

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** Approximately 1 day

### Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Gallaudet University Board of Trustees

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
None known

**Campaigner violence:**
None known

**Repressive Violence:**
None known

### Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

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When Dr. Jerry Lee, the sixth president of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. announced his plans to step down from the position on August 24, 1987, the Board of Trustees at the University quickly arranged a Presidential Search Committee that would begin looking for candidates to become the new university president. Ultimately, the Search Committee submitted the names of three finalists to the Board of Trustees on February 28, 1988. The Committee had selected: Dr. Harvey Corson (a deaf superintendent of the Louisiana School for the Deaf), Dr. I. King Jordan (Gallaudet’s deaf dean of the College of Arts and Sciences), and Dr. Elizabeth Zinser (a hearing vice chancellor at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro).

On March 1, 1988, more than 1,500 students, faculty, and alumni from Gallaudet gathered on campus to support the selection of a Deaf president. Gallaudet University was the only higher education institution in the US that specifically focused on
accommodating deaf and hard of hearing students, and up to that point had only been led by hearing presidents. A group of Gallaudet University alumni known as the “Ducks” (it was rumored that their first meetings were held at a duckpin bowling alley) had been the main organizers of the rally.

The Board of Trustees conducted interviews with Zinser and Jordan on the night of Saturday March 5. They conducted an interview with Corson on the morning of Sunday March 6. Originally, the campus had expected an announcement of the new university president from the Board by 8pm on Sunday evening. However, instead of coming to campus and announcing their decision as planned, the Board decided to have the University’s Public Relations Office hand out press releases to the campus community an hour and a half earlier than anticipated that announced the selection of Zinser as Gallaudet’s new university president. Gary Olsen, the president of the National Association of the Deaf, rallied the crowd of several hundred people that had gathered on campus to learn the Board’s decision and encouraged people to march down to the Mayflower Hotel, where the Board had been meeting, and demand an explanation. After some chaotic discussion, the Board permitted a meeting with student representatives of the protesters including Tim Rarus, the student who had served on the Presidential Search Committee. After this meeting, Jane Spilman, the chair of the Board, agreed to come to campus the next afternoon to discuss the issues further.

On the morning of Monday, March 7, students blocked each of the entrances to Gallaudet University with their cars and locked the university gates with chains. At about dawn, students had driven their cars to campus and deflated their cars’ tires. Students kept the main entrance to the university on Florida Avenue open and formed a “human shield” to selectively permit entry to other students, faculty, and staff members. In response, the university administration cancelled classes. As a result, students and staff were able to attend meetings and organize rallies that took place throughout the day.

When Spilman and the rest of the Board arrived on campus at noon, students presented four specific demands: (1) Zinser must resign and a Deaf president must be selected. (2) Spilman must resign from the Board. (3) The percentage of deaf members on the Board of Trustees must be increased to at least 51%. (4) There must be no reprisals against any of the protesters. After presenting these demands and discussing them with Spilman and the board in a meeting that lasted over three hours, a group of students, faculty, and staff waited outside the board’s meeting room. In the end, the Board rejected the demands and the selection of Zinser remained in place. That afternoon, Spilman and several board members proceeded to the university’s auditorium to make their official announcements to the rest of campus. However, as soon as Spilman began to speak, Harvey Goodstein, a faculty member, walked onto the stage in front of Spilman and told students that their demands had not been met, so they should walk out since there was no use in staying. Almost everyone filed out of the auditorium and marched on to the U.S. Capitol. While D.C. police tried to stop the Deaf students, they were unable to do so because they were unable to communicate with them.

On Tuesday March 8, students no longer blockaded the gates but boycotted classes to continue planning/attending speeches and rallies. At this point, four students emerged as the leaders of the students’ protests: Bridgetta Bourne, Jerry Covell, Greg Hlibok, and Tim Rarus. Students continued to hold rallies all day and by evening, the local media had started to cover the protests. The Alumni House became the headquarters for planning of the protests and protesters formed the Deaf President Now Council, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other deaf advocacy group members. The students’ protests would become known as the Deaf President Now (DPN) protest.

On Wednesday March 9, students used Gallaudet’s own buses to blockade the main gates, preventing anyone from being able to drive onto the campus. Two members of the Gallaudet Board of Trustees, Representative David Bonior of Michigan and Representative Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin, met with a small delegation of students involved in the DPN campaign. At this meeting, the student delegation emphasized that their four demands were not negotiable. Zinser also flew in from North Carolina early that morning and arrived in Washington D.C. to assume her responsibilities as president much earlier than planned, as the Board of Managers thought that her presence on campus might help end the protest. Zinser and Jordan, one of the other candidates being considered for the university president position and the current dean of Gallaudet’s College of Arts and Sciences, went to the National Press Conference where Jordan publicly announced his endorsement and support of Zinser. At 4pm, Zinser and Spilman met with Bonior and Gunderson, who both urged Zinser to resign. That evening, Bonior publically announced his support of the student protesters.
On Thursday March 10, the Washington Post published a front-page news story about DPN and quoted Representative Bonior stating his support for the students’ protests and his encouragement for Zinser to resign. Additionally, Hlibok, one of the four main student leaders, appeared on ABC’s ‘Good Morning America’. Moe Biller, the president of the American Postal Workers Union, also announced his support for the students and came to campus to hand deliver a check of $5000 in support of the students’ efforts. Biller also presented the donation again in front of local news media. Meanwhile, the only support Zinser had was from the Board of Trustees and Jordan. However, later that evening, Jordan changed his mind and retracted his earlier statements, stating at a press conference in front of the University’s Chapel Hall that he fully supported the students’ four demands. That night, around 8pm, Zinser publically announced her decision to resign as the president of Gallaudet University.

With a portion of their first demand achieved, the students focused their efforts on pressuring the University’s Board of Trustees to meet their remaining demands. Students began wearing buttons with “3 ½” on them, signifying the number of their remaining demands. At noon on Friday March 11, students and other members of the local and national deaf communities participated in an organized march to the U.S. Capitol Building. That night, ABC News named Greg Hlibok the Person of the Week on their national evening news program. Saturday March 12 was a day of rest for the protesters where many attended afternoon barbecues and engaged in informal celebrations across campus.

On Sunday March 13, the Board of Trustees held an emergency meeting to decide their final course of action in responding to the rest of the students’ demands. They held a press conference to announce their decision – Spilman willingly resigned from her position as chairperson of the board, Bravin would be the new chairperson of the board, the best way to achieve a 51% of Deaf people on the board would be determined by setting up a task force, and Dr. I. King Jordan would be appointed as Gallaudet’s 8th president and the 1st Deaf president in history. The DPN protesters had successfully achieved all four of their demands.

Since the DPN protests, Gallaudet was active in increasing the number of Deaf people involved in the University’s running and administration. Deaf and hard of hearing employees increased from 27% to 85% and Deaf and hard of hearing administrators at Gallaudet has increased from 18% to 36%. However, after Dr. I. King Jordan’s retirement on December 31, 2006, the University faced student protests in response to the appointment of another Deaf president – then provost Dr. Jane Fernandes. A group of students and faculty opposed Fernandes’s appointment on several grounds, including the feeling that not enough racially diverse candidates were seriously considered and Fernandes’ management style, though the main concern was perceived to be questions about whether Fernandes was “Deaf enough”. Fernandes is hearing impaired, is able to speak, did not learn sign language until age 23, and did not attend Gallaudet University. Ultimately, student and faculty protests led to Fernandes’s firing by the Board of Trustees and the appointment of Dr. Robert Davila, a deaf professor who had taught for nine years in Gallaudet’s Department of Education.

**Research Notes**

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy: Rosanna Kim, 7/10/2012

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.
Gallaudet University Students Protest Deaf University President: Deaf President, Now-1988

Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-student-participants