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International Deaf Partnerships: A Leadership Model for the 21st Century  
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As the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawns, we are experiencing the promise and pitfalls of globalization, a controversial phenomenon with strong supporters among advocates of free trade and strong enemies among labor unions and environmentalists (Baghwati, 2004; Cavanagh, 2002; Stiglitz, 2002; Langhorne, 2001). Despite some uncontested benefits brought by globalization, such as its spread of knowledge, technology and aid across borders, skepticism continues to surround this process, mostly due to its elusive plight to close the gap between the world's rich and poor. Whether we are for or against it, it is up to us to exploit the opportunities offered by the positive sides of globalization to build new leadership models in the spirit of a renewed sense of empathy and "global ethics" (Singer, 2002).

As we seek for new leadership models to help people live better lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must start by expanding our concept of leadership to include the people and

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the places that have been neglected, particularly people in developing countries who are sick or disabled. Thanks to the technologically driven communication revolution and the unprecedented degree of interconnectedness among nations and people, globalization has given us the first real chance to build a truly inclusive leadership model by listening directly to those who struggle in any corner of the world. An encouraging example of this newly acquired sense for global empathy can be seen in the World Bank's 2001 report *Globalization, Growth and Poverty: Building an Inclusive World Economy*, in which the Bank acknowledges that globalization<sup>1</sup> might not be the best tool to fight poverty in the world's poorest countries. What is even more encouraging is that since 2002 the World Bank, a highly criticized agent of globalization, has taken a broader "ethical" approach to poverty reduction worldwide by pointing out that disability can be a risk factor for poverty. This is an exciting development because for the first time the financial community is asked by one of its leading institutions to recognize and address the special needs and concerns of the ten percent of the world population who are disabled<sup>2</sup>. In response to this call for global leadership to promote the self-determination of disabled people, over the past five years we have administered a successful leadership program tailored to the needs and concerns of deaf people in the US and in Latin America. In this paper we intend to describe our leadership model, reflect upon the lessons we learned and make suggestions to practitioners who are interested in developing leadership models tailored to specific minority groups.

Leadership is as much about empowerment as about participation. Ideally, people with disabilities as well as other minorities should be fully included in developing programs that will bring about positive changes to their lives. However, due to their marginalization from society, the needs and concerns of minorities are rarely taken into account by policymakers when formulating policies at national and international level. Indeed, some of the heated controversy surrounding the resistance of advocates of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www1.worldbank.org/economicpolicy/globalization/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/HDNet/hddocs.nsf/2d5135ecbf351de6852566a90069b8b6/066274da1ba9e8da852567e0005215e6?OpenDocument>

learning disabled students to standardized exams might have been avoided if those behind the US goal of "No Child Left Behind" had consulted directly with the disability-group that represents them, the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Similarly, gender equality would have been at the forefront of the UNESCO goal of "Education for All" if women's groups had been included in the policy meetings.

When it comes to discussing mainstreaming disabled people into society it is critical to keep in mind that the best intentions might fail unless the process is driven by disabled people. According to the slogan of the disability community, "nothing about us without us", a successful leadership model to bring about positive change to people with disabilities must be highly participatory. Secondly, it must also be tailored to the unique needs of the population served. This is critical because the needs of people with physical disabilities might be completely different from the needs of people with cognitive disabilities. Finally, in order to break the cycle between any disability and poverty<sup>3</sup> the leadership model needs to take a human rights-based approach, the only approach that focuses on providing the tools for economic self-sufficiency.

When focusing on mainstreaming deaf individuals into society, it is particularly critical to be fully aware of the complexities of deafness, which involves more than hearing loss and the resulting barriers to communicate with the hearing world. Deafness can be considered from a medical perspective as a deficit to be cured (Lane, 1992) or from a sociological perspective as a cultural minority, with its own language and culture (Padden & Humphries, 1988). In any case, there is little doubt that deafness can become a serious handicapping condition when linked with poverty, a harsh reality that translates into lack of access to education and employment and affects the majority of deaf people because they live in developing countries<sup>4</sup>. In accordance to the renewed sense of global

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of effective ways to include disabled people in poverty reduction, visit <http://www.id21.org/society/S6bry1g1.html>

<sup>4</sup> According to the World Health Organization " .... 250 million people in the world have disabling hearing impairment... Two-thirds live in developing countries." ([www.who.int/](http://www.who.int/))

community made possible by our increasing global interconnectedness, our leadership model aimed to enhance the lives of deaf people in Latin America is based on two concepts. The first concept is the notion of equal partners. The other key ingredient in our recipe for success is peer mentoring across nations. This second concept draws upon our belief that international collaboration among the deaf allows deaf people from developed and developing countries to learn from each other in their struggle for self-empowerment.

Our "International Deaf Partnerships" model is a "deafness enhanced" participatory leadership initiative that promotes a shared agenda of self-empowerment and "leadership in action" through deaf peer mentoring. The mentoring occurs via exchanges and service learning opportunities within the American, Costa Rican and Mexican deaf communities. Efforts are currently underway to expand the program to Argentina. Our original partnership model, "International Internships for Deaf College Students" piloted from 1998 through 2001 with a grant from the US Department of Education, was an attempt to provide American deaf college students access to meaningful study and work abroad opportunities that are available to their hearing peers. In order to ensure full accessibility, we piloted a unique written/signed bilingual educational exchange program between American and Costa Rican deaf college students. Initially, this unique semester-abroad internship program, combined coursework offered in LESCO (Costa Rican sign language) through PROGRESO, a resource center on Deafness at the University of Costa Rica, with a service learning practicum in the intern's field for the American deaf students. It also included a semester's study and summer teaching practice at Gallaudet University for the Costa Rican deaf students.

The original purpose of our program was to give American deaf college students access to "deaf friendly" study abroad opportunities because of its unique written/ signed language-component, which includes functional proficiency in English and Spanish but also in American and Costa Rican sign language. However, as the program director, and one of the authors of this article, Dr. Berdichevsky, became aware of the potential of this

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model for fostering deaf empowerment across Latin America, the focus of the program became educational in a much broader sense, by shifting towards promoting international development. As a result of this shift, several changes have occurred. For example, the current model is open to but not limited to deaf college students from Latin America because most deaf people in Latin America never finish high school. Another change relates to more flexibility in the duration of the exchanges, based on the interest and time availability of the Latin American participants. For example, a Mexican deaf participant who has not completed high school and earns her living as a teacher assistant was granted a scholarship to attend Deaf Way II, an international deaf cultural festival for one week at Gallaudet in 2002. The format is also being reconsidered to include more deaf adults from Latin America who are involved in their communities but lack any formal education. Private monies are currently being raised to provide funding to deaf adults from Mexico to participate in joint leadership training in Mexico and in the US with deaf Americans.

Although data collected since 1998 attest to the positive impact of the program not only in internationalizing the field of Deaf Education but also in fostering leadership skills in action within the American, Costa Rica and Mexican deaf communities, we must confess that it has surpassed our expectations. As we reflect upon the lessons learned over the past five years it becomes clear that the key to its success lies on its design as a highly participatory model of leadership in action with emphasis on a shared agenda of self-empowerment through deaf peer mentoring. Through service learning American deaf interns gain a global perspective on their fields and the skills and cross-cultural sensitivity required for becoming productive and responsible citizens in today's diverse society. They also test their leadership skills by becoming informal mentors as well as mentees to deaf peers in Latin America, thereby improving their chances of becoming effective leaders of the national and international deaf communities. Latin American deaf participants who spend time in the US bring home a fresh perspective on deafness and a newly acquired sense of deaf pride and self-empowerment.

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When attempting to build a leadership model tailored to a specific minority group it is also critical to build a solid partnership, with partners who are fully committed, reliable, flexible and open to constructive criticism. Given the fact that our institution, Gallaudet University<sup>5</sup>, plays a leading role in Deaf Education worldwide, our partnership usually includes at least one university and the local national deaf association in the host country. Based on our experiences, when looking for the right partners it is critical to identify partners who share a common agenda that is equally beneficial to each one of them. In fact, our partnership with Costa Rica has become highly successful because all partners are invested in a common agenda of deaf empowerment: Gallaudet University, PROGRESO, a resource center on Deafness at the University of Costa Rica and ANASCOR, the Costa Rica National Association of the Deaf. Another factor that is critical when building a successful partnership is effective communication. Due to less availability and familiarity with technology in Latin America communication has been challenging. In order to keep in touch we have been resourceful by using all possible communication channels with our deaf colleagues abroad: relay service, TTY, fax, instant messenger, email, regular mail, phone calls to hearing relatives, etc. Finally, another important aspect to take into consideration to avoid tensions among partners is the money factor. In the US it is common to expect people to volunteer their time. This might be an excellent idea for those who can afford it but not for people in Latin American who must work at two or more jobs to survive. Our experience has been very positive with our partners because we have always paid for any service they provide.

Globalization has opened various windows of opportunity to promote global equality. The UN with its initiative known as Enable is doing its share to promote the rights of disabled people<sup>6</sup>. As we conclude this discussion we would like to encourage

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<sup>5</sup> For information about Gallaudet's mission and its legacy visit [www.gallaudet.edu](http://www.gallaudet.edu)

<sup>6</sup> For more information visit <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/disabout.htm>

practitioners to develop leadership models to foster the successful integration of neglected minorities into our global society.

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