

## Reflections on Quality of Life as a College Concern to Facilitate Success of Students Who Are Deaf

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**Abstract:** Quality of life is an area of nonacademic influence to which college programs can contribute significantly. It is proposed that a satisfying quality of life can enhance college success by increasing degree of academic engagement, regardless of a student's hearing status. A study of the quality of life of 200 deaf and hard-of-hearing students on a mainstream college campus is summarized as an example of how to define and measure baseline wellness using paper surveys and interviews. Life domains were defined through statistical analysis of students' responses. The most satisfying domains were Community Well-Being and Overall Life Satisfaction. Physical Well-Being was least satisfying. Intermediate were Social, Psychological, and Academic Well-Being. Although students acknowledged the educational benefits of their campus experience, they put more emphasis on intra-personal and inter-personal experiences, consistent with findings on other campuses. College programming that can promote connections to the campus environment, thereby enhancing students' perceived quality of life, include pre-college orientation, a freshman seminar course, learning communities, and non-academic programs that focus on campus life outside the classroom. It remains for future research to determine the extent to which attention to quality of life can affect academic engagement and enhance academic success.  
**Key Words:** COLLEGE SUCCESS, QUALITY OF LIFE

Students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing now have more opportunities than ever before to pursue a college degree alongside their peers who have normal hearing. The subject of this paper is what colleges can do to ensure that these students also have opportunities for success similar to their hearing classmates. Success, for the purpose of this discussion, is persistence from the first to the second year of college and, ultimately, the completion of an earned degree. Regardless of hearing status, college students are likely to encounter many of the same obstacles as they attempt to reach this goal. Students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, in addition, may encounter other obstacles unique to conditions surrounding hearing loss.

One obvious source of influence on academic success is academic factors; that is, the curriculum and the direct delivery of instruction. It is widely recognized that the first year of college is a time of transition, especially in the formation of students who begin college immediately after high school. Thus, special focus has turned to first year students and the factors relevant to their success. In the United States, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition<sup>1</sup> has

established a website devoted to collecting information on best practices directed toward the success of first year students, particularly the freshman seminar, and on facilitating the assessment of the first year experience. A second source of influence on academic success, which college administrators are giving increased attention, is nonacademic factors. Nonacademic factors encompass all of a student's experiences outside of the classroom.

### **Quality of life and the roots of academic success**

Although the roots of academic success are many and varied, only some are subject to outside influence by the time a student reaches college age.<sup>2</sup> For example, a student's native ability, personality, and maturity level are factors that a student brings to his or her college experience. These factors provide a backdrop against which other factors can operate that are more amenable to change. These might include a student's study habits; test-taking skills; foundation skills in reading, math, and science; support from family and friends; work experience; and participation in social and campus activities. Those are factors that can change over time, within limits, given effective instruction and sufficient practice.

The premise presented here is that underlying many other factors of academic success is a satisfying quality of life. Quality of life is one area of nonacademic influence to which college programs can contribute significantly. The outcome can be a positive effect on degree of academic engagement and the benefits that ensue from that engagement. Tinto<sup>3</sup> has written extensively on the reasons why students leave college before completing a degree. Engagement appears to be even more important than a student's performance in the classroom, as Tinto<sup>3</sup> has noted:

The majority of student institutional departures are voluntary in character, in that they arise despite the maintenance of adequate grades. Indeed in some instances individuals who leave voluntarily achieve higher grade point averages and are found to be somewhat more committed and creative than the typical persister. In these cases, leaving appears to reflect, on one hand, significant differences in the intentions and commitments with which they enter college and, on the other, real differences in the characters of *individual integrative experiences in the formal and informal academic and social communities of the college* following entry. The latter experiences have been described here as relating to problems of adjustment to college life, to the issue of congruence between the individual and the institution, and to that of *isolation from the life of the college* [p. 84; emphasis added].

On the path from a) experiencing a college program that is intended to enhance quality of life, to b) achieving success, the plan is for students to respond with increasing degrees of academic engagement. One of the first goals is to engender feelings of connection, belonging, or identity, oriented toward the campus. As the student feels a connection specifically to an *academic* environment, these feelings are naturally associated with *academic* activities. As students spend time in academic activities, greater learning can occur. Students who spend more time learning ("time-on-task") are likely to achieve greater academic success, and the experience of success encourages

more activity in order to yield the same satisfying reward. Success is a strong motivating influence to continue to pursue academic tasks, which ultimately leads to completion of program requirements and the attainment of an earned degree. A less tangible motivating influence that may operate toward the latter part of a student's college years is the potential to enter the work force, appropriately prepared for career success. To start a student on this path of increasing academic engagement, it is proposed that college programs begin with an assessment of their students' feelings of satisfaction with their quality of life. The assessment stage would then be followed by the implementation of strategies to enhance and sustain students' perceptions of a satisfying quality of life.

### **Defining and Assessing Quality of Life**

Quality of life is rooted in those values that bring meaning to an individual's life. It is a function of the difference between current reality and that which the individual desires.<sup>4</sup> Two simplistic examples can illustrate the definition. People who place a high value on wealth may not perceive a satisfying quality of life, regardless of how wealthy they are, if they desire more money than they have. Others, who may value relationships, would perceive a satisfying quality of life only to the extent that their actual relationships match their desired relationships.

A satisfying quality of life implies feelings of well-being and contentment. The contentment is not a function of where the person is, but where the person believes he or she is headed. This distinction is similar to that discussed above in relation to one's values, and the difference between current reality and desired reality. A contented individual not only feels a sense of achievement in his or her current work, but also a forward movement toward more long-term goals and a feeling of being on the way toward fulfilling one's potential. Those who are satisfied with their quality of life also derive a sense of well-being from experiencing the beauty in nature and the arts, and by identifying with their community.

A useful beginning in affecting quality of life is to obtain a baseline wellness measure for a specific campus. Roberts and Clifton<sup>5</sup> cautioned that, because quality of life is subjective by definition, we cannot merely count resources (such as student-to-teacher ratios) or measure readily observable outcomes (such as grades). Roberts and Clifton<sup>5</sup> wrote:

The salient point is that isomorphism does not necessarily exist between the objective circumstances of people, as expressed in terms of quantities of objects in their environment, and their subjective experiences. As long as such misalignment exists, *there is a need to independently investigate the quality of peoples' experience*, rather than attempt to infer quality from indicators of environmental quantity [pp. 3-4; emphasis added].

### Life domains for college students with normal hearing.

To study quality of life, one must first identify the life domains relevant to the community. Okun, Kardash, Stock, Sandler, and Baumann<sup>6</sup> labeled three life areas important to the 400 undergraduate students whom they surveyed: 1) academics, 2) satisfaction with institutional rules and availability of general services, and 3) informal

and formal social interaction. Cummins, McCabe, Romeo, and Gullone<sup>7</sup> found seven domains to account for the quality of life responses of 243 college students and 65 staff, but three domains were the primary determiners of overall quality of life; namely, 1) Emotional Well-Being, 2) Intimacy, and 3) Health. Ouimet<sup>8</sup>, in a study of 819 freshmen from three universities, emphasized that there is an interplay among quality of life domains. “The factors that influence quality of life are not linear; that is, social factors play a role in academic satisfaction, personal factors influence community satisfaction, and work factors have academic influences (Ouimet<sup>8</sup>, p. 120).” Hendershott, Wright, and Henderson<sup>9</sup> also highlighted differences in the interactions among the domains of quality of life of the 200 university students whom they studied:

The data show that students who reported greater satisfaction with their social lives and friendships also tended to report higher levels of overall well-being. On the other hand, satisfaction with academic life did not correlate as strongly with overall well-being. And, while satisfaction with housing or university services may have made life more pleasant, those two domains did not appear to have a significant effect on overall well-being [p. 120].

#### Quality of life for students with hearing loss.

Common to the research findings summarized above is a life domain variously identified as personal/social factors, informal/formal social interactions, emotional well-being, or intimacy. This outcome substantiates the important role of nonacademic factors in the quality of life of college students. De Filippo, Dagel, Lauria, and Mendonsa<sup>10</sup> investigated whether similar domains, particularly in the nonacademic area, would emerge in a study of the quality of life of students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. They used a paper survey to assess students’ perceptions of overall quality of life and to identify important areas that contributed to those perceptions. The survey was followed by focus group interviews to validate themes observed in the survey responses and to pursue important issues in depth.

A customized survey was prepared to ensure that items were relevant to campus issues and to avoid problems of reading comprehension for students who did not acquire English as a first language. The survey was constructed to measure the difference between students’ expectations and their college experiences. The immediate domains of academic and residential campus life were a primary focus, but the study also solicited comments on outside influences. The objective was to avoid inappropriately delimiting the domains. Although college is not directly responsible for all aspects of a student’s quality of life, the college experience can influence how students respond to their circumstances. For example, family harmony may be an important determiner of quality of life for a particular individual, despite the fact that college cannot directly affect harmony in a student’s family. Nonetheless, college can affect how a student responds to family discord. Thus, it would be appropriate to survey students’ perceptions of their family life. There are also times when college can neither modify a student’s circumstance nor influence the student’s response to it. In these instances, understanding of the circumstance might help to blunt the negative impact on quality of life. Thus, even if a particular factor were immune from campus intervention, it was not precluded from study. The survey also encouraged students to

comment on negative as well as positive experiences, because either might serve to diminish the effects of the other.

The survey included items that reflected the presumed interests of both the college and the students. Students attend college for many different reasons and those reasons may not all match the mission of the college. On-campus and off-campus arenas are both relevant, as Peltier et al.<sup>2</sup> noted: "Full-time students spend approximately fifteen hours a week in the formal classroom. The remainder of the time is spent with friends and family, working, studying, and participating in social and campus leadership activities [pp. 365-366]."

The De Filippo et al.<sup>10</sup> survey was divided into four parts:

**1. Tell about yourself.**

The first section of the survey requested demographic information while maintaining the respondents' anonymity. Items included age, gender, race/ethnicity, identity within the deaf and hearing communities, level in school, type of residence, and secondary disability.

**2. Describe your experiences.**

The demographic section was immediately followed by open-ended items so students could describe their concept of quality of life before reading the survey items. The purpose was to avoid shaping the students' responses. Students were asked to relate a recent event that significantly affected quality of life and to identify what they perceived to be positive and negative contributors to their quality of life in general.

**3. Identify important life areas.**

This part contained a list of 31 possible "keys to happiness." Respondents rated each item on a 7-point scale anchored by the phrases "very important for my happiness" and "not important for my happiness." There was also space to write in anything that was missing from the list ("What else do you need for a happy life?").

**4. Describe your quality of life.**

In this part, students responded to 67 topically organized statements using a 7-point agreement scale. There were eight sections:

- \* "School Issues" pertained to academic experiences that applied across courses and teachers, and to students' general satisfaction with their educational experience at the college.
- \* "Your Teachers" addressed students' views on the attitudes and skills of the college faculty and staff that might affect learning and quality of life.
- \* "Your Physical Health" included items on specific aspects of health and students' general satisfaction with their physical health.
- \* "Your Emotional Health" was comprised of items that sampled psychological issues that might be relevant to students on the campus being studied.
- \* "Your Relationships" included items about family relationships, friends, and general satisfaction with relationships.
- \* "Campus Attitudes and Atmosphere" assessed students' perceptions of how others responded to them on campus.
- \* "Campus Activities and Services" included items that sampled activities and services that were available on campus.
- \* "Dorm Life" was a section for students who lived on campus.
- \* "Cross-registered Student Issues" pertained to academic support and students'

perceptions of being welcome on campus.

## **Results of a Quality of Life Assessment of Students Who Are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing**

Results from the study of De Filippo et al.,<sup>10</sup> using the survey described above, are summarized briefly here. The objective is to provide an example, as the details of quality-of-life domains and issues are expected to be unique to each campus community. This example is meant to be suggestive of the potential benefits of assessing and enhancing quality of life on college campuses for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The reader is referred to the full report for additional information.

### Section I: "Tell about yourself."

There were 177 usable surveys returned, which constituted a 32% return rate. All but 13 of these students were within the traditional age bracket of 18 to 25 years old. Three-fourths of the students lived in dormitories or apartments on campus, nearly all with roommates (only 15 students indicated that they lived alone). More than half (65%) identified themselves as "Deaf;" the remainder chose the descriptor "hard-of-hearing" or "hearing impaired." These self-applied labels are independent of any physical measurement of hearing loss, as all students at this college who are supported as "deaf or hard-of-hearing" typically have pure tone thresholds no better than 70 dB HL. There were 11% of the respondents who reported having a secondary disability, including asthma, attention or other learning disorder, Usher's syndrome or other visual problem, epilepsy, diabetes, and cerebral palsy.

### Section II: "Describe your experiences"

#### *Life changes.*

Slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) wrote about a personal event that had recently changed their quality of life in a positive or negative direction. These events included experiences of personal growth and maturation; interpersonal relationships that had just begun or just ended; explorations of Deaf culture and Deaf identity; and death, illness, or other life-changing catastrophe among family or friends. Pertinent to the theme of this paper, only 7% of the surveys acknowledged academic issues as having a recent influence on their quality of life.

The number of students who reported a recent life-changing event was a dramatic finding of high information value for the college. It remains a question for further study whether those students would benefit from acknowledgement of the effect of these life issues on their academic study, and whether additional support would be valuable to them. Some students may need assistance in remaining academically engaged as they deal with the distraction of a dramatic life event.

#### *Positive and negative attributes of the campus.*

Students were candid in their assessment of what their college offered them. They recognized their college for its excellence in education, for special support services, and for understanding the needs of deaf people. They appreciated the presence of a network of friends, especially a community of deaf individuals, and the benefits of being where hearing, deaf, and hard-of-hearing people are all welcome.

Students were also able to identify sources of displeasure. These would be of particular concern if they diminish quality of life. Such a consequence is likely if the perceived negative attributes of a college are in areas that hold particular meaning to a student. That is, if a student's values are compromised as a result of the negative attribute, this will affect that student's feelings of well-being and contentment. When quality of life is less than satisfying, academic engagement and the success it engenders may suffer. Each college can determine these effects by follow-up surveys or interviews.

Sections III and IV: "Identify important life areas" and "Describe your quality of life."

Findings from these two sections were examined together to derive important domains of quality of life for the campus community under study. Among the 31 potential keys to happiness in Section III, the highest rated items were: attaining independence and responsibility, having a good place to live, enjoying good mental and physical health, having fun, and having good relationships with family. Life areas that were reported to have relatively low importance were: having money and possessions, marriage and children, spirituality, and partying.

Students' responses to specific experiences on campus, presented in 67 items in Section IV of the survey, were examined in light of the importance ratings of related life areas obtained from the Section III results. Items from Section IV were combined and re-combined to form conceptually related groupings. Cronbach's Alpha was examined to evaluate the degree to which each grouping was statistically related. At the end of this process, six scales were selected that represented the best conceptual grouping and the highest statistical outcome for this group of respondents (Cronbach's Alpha of at least .75). These groupings can be likened to domains of quality of life. Based on item content, the domains were labeled Community Well-Being, Academic Well-Being, Psychological Well-Being, Social Well-Being, Physical Well-Being, and Overall Life Satisfaction. Students' perceptions of their satisfaction with each life domain are displayed in Figure 1.

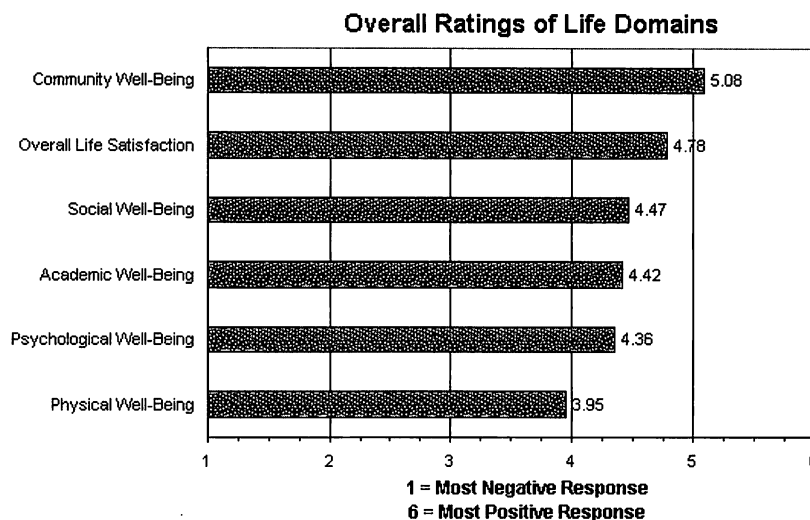


Figure 1. Satisfaction with six life domains, as perceived by college students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing, reported in a survey on perceived quality of life.

On average, students' responses indicated a satisfaction level above the midpoint of the scale. The specific level of satisfaction varied from domain to domain. The most satisfying domain was Community Well-Being. This domain refers to students' perceptions of the attitudinal health of the community regarding respect for others and tolerance of differences. The second highest level of satisfaction was associated with the domain labeled Overall Life Satisfaction, which contained items about the students' overall outlook on education, learning, health, self, future, and social relationships.

Compared to Community Well-Being and Overall Life Satisfaction, the domains of Social Well-Being, Academic Well-Being, and Psychological Well-Being yielded lower levels of satisfaction. Satisfaction levels were equivalent for these latter three domains. Social Well-Being was the label given to conditions that support or reflect satisfying social relationships, including ease of making friends, recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities to socialize, feeling cared about, and feeling comfortable on campus. Academic Well-Being captured that which enables a student to enjoy being a student. Items included students' satisfaction with their choice of major, academic progress, relevance of their academic study, class schedule, tutoring and advising, testing and teaching methods in the classroom, issues of health and wellness that affect academic performance, and feeling in control of one's life. Psychological Well-Being pertained to students' emotional and intellectual response to the environment and their approach to managing their life. Items focused specifically on consistent class attendance, lack of substance abuse, feeling connected, and not feeling weighed down by financial problems.

The domain that yielded relatively the lowest satisfaction was Physical Well-Being. This scale was formed from items about exercise, quiet time, sleep, nutrition, and overall satisfaction with one's health. Students from technical schools have a rigorous curriculum, which may affect physical health. Because of the dramatic difference between the satisfaction with this domain and the other domains that were identified, it was recommended for further study.

It would be informative to measure Physical Well-Being just prior to college enrollment and again after some length of college study in order to observe the direction of the association between Physical Well-Being and academic engagement, if any. If students do not perceive an adequate level of Physical Well-Being at the outset, they will probably be disadvantaged in their attempts at academic engagement. In this case, satisfaction in the domain of Physical Well-Being would control the student's response to the college community. Conversely, students may enter college with a satisfying perception of their Physical Well-Being, but later neglect this area of life because they are consistently engaged academically. In this case, decreased satisfaction with Physical Well-Being would be a consequence of being a serious student. Regardless of the direction of effect, this domain deserves serious consideration by college programs because wellness is a basic need that supports participation in other activities.

#### Follow-up focus group interviews.

Focus group interviews were conducted in order to validate findings from the survey group and to attach a deeper meaning to those findings. There were 23 students who participated in the interviews, held in small groups. Just prior to participating in



the group process, the interview students individually wrote their responses to the same items as the larger survey group. Based on a comparison of written responses, it was determined that the views of the interview group did not differ significantly from the views of the larger survey sample.

During the interview, students were asked directly to define quality of life; that is, to identify what they value in life and what brings them happiness or contentment. Important life areas mentioned independently by these students were remarkably similar to those that emerged from the larger survey group. In summary, the interview group identified these areas as important:

- \* Self-discovery. Finding out who you are and what you want from life.
- \* Achievement. Looking to the future and achieving your goals.
- \* Independence. Gaining self-reliance and managing your independence; taking responsibility for yourself.
- \* Friends and family. Having friends and family to support you; maintaining your place in the family by keeping up-to-date while away; feeling that people care about you.
- \* Education. Getting a college degree to build your future; succeeding in school; getting good grades.
- \* Communication. Being understood and understanding others, regardless of communication mode.
- \* Stability and a sense of world order. Feeling in control, having a stable routine, free from worries and pressures.

#### Summary of survey and interview findings.

Two particular areas were frequently prominent in the findings from the larger survey group and the interview group: 1) personal growth and transformation and 2) community. In contrast, purely academic issues seemed to have a much less discernible effect on quality of life. Although students acknowledged the educational benefits of their campus experience, their comments about quality of life and ratings of importance of various life areas put more emphasis on intra-personal and inter-personal experiences. This is consistent with previous findings on other campuses regarding the relatively high contribution to quality of life of elements of community and emotional well-being, compared to academics (Cummins et al.,<sup>7</sup> Ouimet,<sup>8</sup> Hendershott et al.<sup>9</sup>). What these findings suggest is a set of conditions that could dramatically enhance students' perceptions of their quality of life within the college community that was studied. The premise put forward in this paper is that attention to quality of life will enhance a student's academic success to the extent that a satisfying quality of life enhances academic engagement.

#### **Implications for College Programming**

College programming can promote both community and personal transformation. Students often fail to persist because they feel separated from home and friends, have difficulty making new friends, have not developed effective social support systems, and lack the skills to handle problems on their own. They may feel overwhelmed academically, lack a sense of comfort with their career choice, perceive teachers' expectations to be unreasonably high, or feel frustration with heavy schedules, difficult

courses, increased responsibilities, and academic failure. They may have difficulty managing their time and fulfilling the requirements of school, job, and family commitments, while maintaining a satisfying social life.<sup>3</sup>

How can a college facilitate the appropriate connections to the academic environment in the face of these difficulties that confront students? Colleges have been working on a program of first year experiences that are structured to engage students and instill the necessary attitudes and skills.<sup>1</sup> Educators like John N. Gardner<sup>11</sup> and his associates at the University of South Carolina have been leaders in proposing that these experiences become a major college concern. The experiences might include:

### **1. A pre-college orientation program**

Immediately before students begin their first academic term, they can be brought to campus to accomplish these objectives:

- \* Learn about campus resources.
- \* Learn how to get around campus and feel comfortable in their physical surroundings.
- \* Have an opportunity to meet new people and make friends.
- \* Develop a community feeling and a network of support.

### **2. Freshman Seminar**

During the first academic term, new students come together in a course that is sometimes called “University 101.” The purpose is for students to explore their attitudes, understand their skills and interests, adjust to college, and develop skills for college success. Outcomes include:

- \* Learn who I am as a person (my attitudes, skills, and interests).
- \* Learn the skills of time management, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility (how to deal with freedoms outside of home and use these freedoms for positive growth).
- \* Learn “studentsmanship,” how to be a successful student (maintain regular class attendance, complete assignments on time, develop good study habits).
- \* Learn about the curriculum choices available at the college and associated career options, discover academic goals that match the student’s skills and interests, and develop a map of the academic progress that will support the achievement of those goals.

### **3. Learning communities**

This is an approach to the curriculum that links courses, students, and faculty in order to increase specific attainments that support persistence. An experiment with a learning community for college students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing was reported by De Filippo, Dagel, Foster, McKee, Barefoot, Crandall, et al.<sup>12</sup> Background information and examples of learning community models can be found on the internet. Of particular note is the work of Smith and MacGregor at The Evergreen State College in Washington.<sup>13</sup> Some goals of learning communities are these:

- \* Student involvement academically and outside the classroom.
- \* Increased collaboration among students.
- \* Increased collaboration between students and teachers.
- \* Enhanced understanding of academic concepts from the perspective of different disciplines.
- \* Enhanced understanding of complex material.
- \* Improved student persistence.

#### **4. Non-academic programs**

When students are not in the classroom or laboratory, non-academic programs can support their personal and academic experiences. By attending to the spaces that are made available to students and to the events that are offered to them, colleges can target these needs:

- \* Provide programs to celebrate sources of diversity on campus (e.g., various ethnicities or religious traditions).
- \* Demonstrate awareness of hassles that students experience in their dealings with the institution, and assist in problem resolution.
- \* Attend to the pleasant look of the physical environment. Reduce feelings of homesickness.
- \* Maintain awareness of students' recent life experiences that may affect their academic achievement (e.g., the death of someone they are close to, illness or other personal catastrophe, depression, feelings of apathy).
- \* Monitor students who isolate themselves and become involved in inappropriate activities. Note when electronic interactions substitute for appropriate social interactions (e.g., excessive television watching, computer games, surfing the Internet).

The intent of these efforts to implement college programming is to promote positive and lasting connections to the campus environment. The desired effect is that students will perceive their quality of life on campus as satisfying. It remains for future research to determine the extent to which attention to quality of life can affect academic engagement and, ultimately, enhance academic success. This is a highly desired goal, not only for college students who have normal hearing, but for students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

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