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## Special Issue on What to Learn from Undergraduate Research in ASL/Deaf Studies

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# **SPECIAL ISSUE ON WHAT TO LEARN FROM UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN ASL/DEAF STUDIES**

## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

**JODY H. CRIPPS**

*Editor-in-Chief  
Clemson University*

The *Society for American Sign Language Journal* (SASLJ) is pleased to present a special issue: *What to Learn From Undergraduate Research in ASL/Deaf Studies*. All students published in this issue were undergraduates of Clemson University when they wrote these papers, where I am employed as an Associate Professor. I am deaf and use American Sign Language (ASL) for communication on a daily basis. My students can hear and had studied ASL and taken Deaf Studies coursework with me and other faculty members in the Department of Languages. My students and I communicated freely in ASL, and with my teaching and guidance, they arrived at a point where they are publishing their papers here.

What I hope that this special issue will confirm is that we have a lot to learn from undergraduates. Learning from undergraduate research comes from two sources; the first source lies in what students have to say in their papers. The second source relates to my experience following through on the research projects with my students. The titles for my students' papers and their names are listed below.

Bringing Sign Language Back to Martha's Vineyard  
by Brooke Turell, Jody H. Cripps, & Jaylin Dillard

Hereditary Deafness and Society: The Quest for Ethical Awareness  
by Danielle LaVigne

Inclusion of American Sign Language in Science and Engineering  
by Alejandro Mejia-Tejada

The publication titles are intriguing and highly relevant topics concerning deaf people and their language, ASL. As you read the papers, they speak for themselves. I would like to remind you that some ideas pursued in these papers are new for the field of ASL/Deaf Studies. For example, the first publication above reports on how the Martha's Vineyard community, located on an island off the Massachusetts coast, works toward becoming sign language friendly. It is not common for ASL/Deaf Studies scholars to talk about how hearing people can learn to sign and create a more inclusive society for deaf people, but this is precisely what Martha's Vineyard is attempting to do in the 21st century.

For the record, I greatly value undergraduate research in American academia. I recall from my own experience as an undergraduate at Gallaudet University that I did not have the opportunity to do a comprehensive research project. By this, I mean the process where students conduct research, write about it, and then have their papers published. My experience at Gallaudet was more limited. I wrote research papers for several courses that I took, and I also completed a Senior Thesis for a professor. I received brief feedback and a grade for my various papers. I did not venture into the publication stage nor even wrote my papers considering that such an outcome was possible.

As a professor at Clemson, I planned a different experience for my undergraduates by giving them an opportunity to do a comprehensive research project. The fact that I am the Editor-in-Chief for SASLJ plays an important role. I was able to envision a pathway connecting the journal and my undergraduates. I followed through on a comprehensive research project arrangement that began with my students developing their individual research scope and ending with having their papers published.

My interest in undergraduate research began when I was a faculty member at Towson University about 10 years ago. The fact that the Deaf Studies program at Towson had no graduate program presented me with a challenge. I realized then that typically only graduate students would have their research work published, but I could only work with undergraduates at the time. So I thought to myself, "What can I do?" This is where I decided that my undergraduates should engage in challenging research endeavors. Three of my undergraduates at Towson proved to be very capable researchers. I co-authored with them and published papers in peer reviewed journals.

My early relationship with undergraduate research at Towson continued when I began my position at Clemson in 2018. Initially, during my interview at Clemson, I learned that they have a program that promotes undergraduate research called Creative Inquiry (<https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/watt/creative-inquiry/index.html>). This was one of the drivers for my move from Towson to Clemson. I have been teaching Creative Inquiry courses since the fall of 2020. During my time with Clemson, the SASLJ was already established as part of the Society for ASL organization for several years. This is where I came up with the idea of creating a special issue to allow for my students to submit their papers for publication.

I am the first to admit that it has not been an easy task to guide my students through their comprehensive research projects successfully. I encountered and resolved challenges. I found that I needed to assist in editing the manuscripts before and after my students submitted them to SASLJ for a blind peer review. Dr. Sam Supalla, the President of the Society for American Sign Language organization (<http://www.societyforasl.org>) also helped out with the work involved upon my request.

In retrospect, I can see that my students learned a great deal from the process. They had the opportunity to revise their manuscripts based on the reviewers' feedback. I need to make it clear that the students were enrolled in my courses as they started to write the papers. The undergraduate co-authors of the first publication in SASLJ's special issue, Turell and Dillard, authored the paper with my participation as second author. Both Turell and Dillard took a variety of coursework, including Critical Inquiry and participated in research fieldwork with me related to Martha's Vineyard. Those courses gave both authors a good foundation for research and they were comfortable conducting research together. After experiencing this success in working together, we wrote the paper as joint authors.

The situation with the two other undergraduate students is a little different. They initiated their own research projects and wrote their papers as sole authors. Neither LaVigne (author of the second published paper) nor Mejia-Tejada (author of the third published paper) took the Critical Inquiry courses. They rather learned about research in the Deaf History class that I taught. I encouraged LaVigne and Mejia-Tejada to submit their papers for review and hopefully publication in SASLJ. Those published papers have strong history content, reflecting the fact that they were written in the course of my Deaf History class.

All four students either majored or minored in ASL, and they have completed their undergraduate studies at Clemson at the time of this publication. Turell graduated from Clemson with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in ASL and minoring in theater in May 2023. She is currently a Master's degree student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, majoring in secondary education. She is expected to graduate in May of 2025 and plans to work with deaf students in school settings. Like Turell, Dillard graduated with a bachelor's in ASL, while she also minored in educational interpreting. She graduated from Clemson in May of 2022. She is currently working as an educational interpreter with deaf children at a public school in South Carolina.

Both LaVigne and Mejia-Tejada minored in ASL. LaVigne graduated from Clemson with a Bachelor of Science, majored in Genetics, and minored in Biological Sciences (her second minor). She graduated in May 2023, and she is currently a second-year doctoral student at Washington University in St. Louis, focusing on molecular genetics and genomics. She is expected to graduate in May 2028. Even though Mejia-Tejada graduated from Clemson in May 2023 with a Bachelor of Science in Mathematical Sciences, he remained at Clemson as a Master's degree student in the Counselor Education—Student Affairs Program. He plans to graduate in May of 2025.

In closing, I am honored that Dean Lisa Ann Plowfield accepted my invitation to write an afterword for this issue. She served as Dean when I worked at Towson, proving herself to be a strong supporter of undergraduate research. I gave her the floor in this issue to discuss the state of the art in undergraduate research and to reflect on how the SASLJ publications fare with undergraduates as authors in her eyes. Dean Plowfield made an important impact on the field of ASL/Deaf Studies when she approved funding for the first Society for ASL symposium that was held at Towson on November 14, 2015 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fte9\\_DwBoOc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fte9_DwBoOc)). For this reason and others, I greatly appreciate Dean Plowfield's support.