



Advancing **ALTELLA**
SNAPSHOT

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot: Get to Know Stephanie Cawthon

Considerations for Multilingual
Students Who Are Deaf/Hard
of Hearing

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot No. 8

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About Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots

The Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot is feature series. Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots are short, informative articles that highlight experts, educators, and topics of interest.





Stephanie Cawthon: **THE FACTS**

TITLE:

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AFFILIATION:

University of Texas at
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AREA OF INTEREST:

Teacher preparation and
working with families
of multilingual learners
with significant cognitive
disabilities

Get to know Advancing ALTELLA Expert Stephanie Cawthon

Dr. Stephanie Cawthon is a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin, with a primary appointment in educational psychology and a courtesy appointment in special education. She is also the founding director of the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. Cawthon’s background is in language development within the context of assessment and equity in assessment.

Cawthon works with assessment and access issues for students with a range of disabilities, but primarily deaf students and multilingual learners. She looks at the requirements of standardized assessment and how assessment design and administration, and interpretation of scores are each critical points in a valid and accessible assessment framework. She thinks about those things with the lens of diversity language, specifically deafness.

“When I say ‘deaf,’ I mean the umbrella of deaf, hard of hearing, late deaf, and traumatic brain injury deaf,” Cawthon said. “I often use deaf in an inclusive manner, which refers to a broad range of different identities and experiences.”

When discussing how to assess and measure listening accurately and what that process entails for multilingual learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, Cawthon highlighted such considerations as the extent of the deaf population having additional disabilities and the impact of language deprivation on cognitive development.

Cawthon said that people tend to focus so much on a student’s deafness that they can miss a cognitive disability. There’s also the impact of language deprivation on cognitive development.

“Only about 5 to 10 percent of deaf kids are born to hearing parents,” Cawthon said. “There’s a growing awareness that some of the academic delays or academic challenges are tied back to language deprivation in early childhood, but then being manifested as a cognitive disability later.”

Cawthon suggested that a key question to ask about multilingual learners who are deaf is “Have they had a chance to learn language?”

Once you consider the impact of additional disabilities and language deprivation, Cawthon said, from a practical standpoint, there is no difference between listening and hearing.

“You have auditory access, and it goes to your brain,” Cawthon added. “For some deaf and hard of hearing kids that can be redirected, changed, or augmented with assistive listening aids,

Stephanie Cawthon's recommendations for working with multilingual learners who are deaf or hard of hearing

- Explore the National Deaf Center's game, [Deafverse](#), which teaches kids to advocate for themselves.
- Practice! Practice making mistakes and ways to learn from them and talk about them.
- Help students advocate first for making sure they get the information that they need, so that they're not just guessing. Students shouldn't always be the ones having to fight for everything because that's a lot of work. Access is a shared thing.



hearing aids, cochlear implants, additional visual information, or lip reading. There is a lot that goes into the act of listening or hearing, and it often takes more energy to put those pieces together.”

Cawthon said that listening is both the hearing and the awareness of the hearing and knowing when to say, “I’m not sure I got that whole sentence” or “that word doesn’t fit with what that sentence is supposed to be.”

When putting everything together and designing assessments and test items, Cawthon advocated for being aware of common assumptions that people may get wrong about multilingual learners who are deaf and hard of hearing.

“For example, think about a test item that refers to music or sound-based things even though that’s not the test item construct,” Cawthon said. “I think people sometimes don’t realize what a different level of experience it means to be deaf when you don’t have the same access to sound and associated experiences.”

Cawthon’s advice is to always have a deaf person review test content: “Don’t assume that you can just change the ones [test items] that you notice and be done. The ones that you notice probably are not the ones that are a subtle problem.”

Learn more: Stephanie Cawthon’s suggested resources

- [What Does Deaf Mean?](#) video. Watch this National Deaf Center video to learn about the meaning of deafness.
- [Guides for Colleges, High Schools, and Families.](#) These guides offer valuable, user-friendly tips and strategies on how to support deaf students.
- The [National Deaf Center’s resources on testing](#) and deaf students.
- [Get help and support](#) from the National Deaf Center! Contact their help team and subscribe to their Listserv.

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