

**Language Accessible School Songs: Impacts on Student
Sense of Belonging and Community on a College Campus**

Honors Thesis

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Music and ASL are often not seen as activities that can be combined, I can personally attest to the impact these two organizations have had on my sense of belonging and academic success at CSU and I wanted to give as many students as possible the same chances at inclusive communities that I had. For my Honors Thesis I decided to make videos interpreting the three CSU school songs with lyrics, the Fight Song, the Alma Mater, and Aggie Boom, into American Sign Language (ASL). The idea came to me while contemplating what I wanted my legacy to be at Colorado State University (CSU). I knew I wanted my thesis to be a representation of all I have learned and experienced, and I wanted it to be a beneficial resource for future students.

I started my education at CSU during the 2020 Covid pandemic, which meant the opportunities to meet new people and make friends were extremely limited. This left me feeling anxious and isolated, until the request for the CSU Marching Band to hold classes in person was granted. It was in the marching band that I made my first friends, and looked forward to doing something every week. I was a member in the CSU Athletic Bands for all five years of my time at CSU, holding various member and student leadership positions. Through the band I met many of my closest friends, made my most precious memories, and met my partner. I cannot imagine what my freshman year, much less the rest of my time at CSU would have been like if I had not had the incredible support system, community, and sense of belonging fostered by being a member of the marching band.

In the Fall semester of my Junior year, I decided to enroll in ASL 100. I was encouraged by friends and professors, as we thought learning ASL would be helpful for my future career as a Music Therapist. Though I ended up changing my major to Psychology with a concentration in Clinical Counseling the following semester, I had already fallen in love with American Sign Language and knew I wanted to continue taking classes, regardless of my major. It was here that

I met so many incredible peers and professors, and is the main reason why I have decided to pursue a Master's Degree in Vocational Rehabilitation Mental Health Counseling. I found an entire new language, friend group, and perspective on the world that forever changed the projection of my life.

I am including these personal experiences because they are the foundation of what led me to create my thesis. Without the marching band I would never have known the impact a sense of belonging can have on student success. Without ASL I would never have experienced the world through different eyes, and I likely would not have found my career specialty until much later in life. It is these experiences that so greatly shaped my time at CSU I wanted to highlight, and find a way to show all CSU students that there is a place on campus for everyone. That is where my thesis idea was born, to combine my two unlikely interests into one project that is a tangible example of inclusive communities on campus. By interpreting the school songs into ASL, I have created an opportunity for those who communicate using ASL to be involved in pep-rallies and athletic events where the band is present in the same way those who communicate with English are.

This thesis project is almost entirely in video format as its main focus was creating an ASL interpretation of the school songs, which can only be achieved through video. In total, there are three main sections that make up this project. The first being the video ASL interpretations of the Fight Song, the Alma Mater, and Aggie Boom. The next are interviews with peers: Jason Toebe and Lucy McCrossan who were in the Marching Band, and Fynn Crossland and Rowan Ditslear who minored in ASL. The interviews of the students in ASL were completed in both English and ASL, partly to be as language-inclusive as possible and also to show off the years of hard work it takes to learn a second language. The third and final part is an interpretation of the

Fight Song performed with a live band made up of brothers from the Kappa Chapter of Kappa Kappa Psi National Honorary Band Service Fraternity. The inclusion of the live Kappa band is twofold; first, it shows that the interpretations can be done with a live band, and second since Kappa Kappa Psi is a service organization their participation in this community service project was the perfect example of how different communities and groups across campus can come together and make something inclusive and beautiful.

To describe the steps of completing this project is complicated. The interpretations, filming, and interviews of peers took place over the Spring 2025 semester, however, before I could get to that point I first had to learn ASL. In total, this project took me three years to complete, because that is the time it took for me to learn ASL as well as Deaf history, Deaf culture, and the impacts inclusion driven by hearing people can have on the Deaf community (both for good and for bad). I was able to complete the tangible part of this project with relative ease, but only because of the countless hours and years it took before I had even dreamed this project into existence to learn the language and find my communities in the band and ASL classes on campus.

One other large component to the success of this project was my two semester involvement with a Fort Collins, CO local organization Foundation Music School. At this organization, I was able to have the amazing opportunity to collaborate with two music therapists, Nicole Wilshusen and Kaley Stephen, to develop and cultivate an early childhood music class that is language accessible for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. I had the privilege of working with the music therapists, children, and families involved for two semesters. It was here that I got a majority of my practice learning how to “play with the language” as my ASL Professor and Thesis Advisor Deanne Seitz taught me. What this means, is that unlike

English, ASL can visually show the themes of the stories without having to rely on descriptions. ASL can create beautiful visual stories, but the process of learning how to let go of my need to describe everything with words rather than visually was long and arduous. It is only through my year at Foundation Music School that I was able to learn and develop skills to take the broad picture and themes of a song, and turn it into a visual representation of that story using ASL.

This project was completed using a research foundation in studies on sense of community, sense of belonging, and how either or both of those factors affect student academic success from preschool through college. My research focused on two main topics; impact of institution specific music (ISM) on collegiate student sense of belonging, and Deaf student sense of belonging in mainstream schools. Though I will be discussing these topics first individually, it is how they all interact that is the driving force behind why this project is so important for students, staff, and fans at CSU.

According to Jousha Berthelot's dissertation *Institution-Specific Music and Sense of Belonging of Undergraduate College Students*, ISM was not popular in higher education until the late 19th century, and gained more popularity after World War II when it began being used during athletic events and became a staple of American collegiate culture (Berthelot, 2017, p. 1). "These songs were used to elicit feelings of belongingness of the students to the campus community at athletic events and reunions... [and] ISM is used to encourage a high level of school spirit from event attendees and motivate athletes to perform at their highest ability" (Berthelot, 2017, p. 1, 2). Anyone who has attended college or a college athletic event where a band was present will know the electric feeling amongst the crowd and team when their school song is played, it is a unifying force that acts as a tangible example of school pride and student sense of belonging. Sense of belonging has been extensively studied, and is commonly defined

as “group interactions within the college community [that] may have an impact on feelings of attachment to the institution at large” (Berthelot, 2017, p. 3). Research has also found that students with a high sense of belonging are also more likely to have positive group interactions inside and outside the classroom, increased levels of student persistence, retention, and even successful completion of their degree (Berthelot, 2017, p. 3). It has been shown time and time again that the more a student feels like they belong in the classroom and in the broader environment of the campus, the more likely they are to succeed in their studies. Music has been found to be a huge factor for student sense of belonging for students participating in the music group, and for students who hear the music while attending pep rallies or school events.

Research on the experience of hearing undergraduate students is quite extensive, but the same findings cannot be generalized to the Deaf population. Those who grow up deaf, as in describing the hearing condition, and those who grow up Deaf, as in those who are involved in the Deaf community and Culture, have incredibly different experiences that research on hearing populations cannot capture. In order to do this project, I wanted to accurately represent the Deaf community, and as a hearing person, I turned to research written by or on Deaf individuals and the Deaf community. It is through this Deaf specific lens that I learned the importance of and differences in application creating a sense of belonging for Deaf students. I largely relied on Scott Gentzke’s dissertation *The Impact of Deaf Adolescents’ Educational Settings and Preferred Communication Mods on Their Sense of School Belonging* for my research. Most of the literature that have studied Deaf students’ educational experiences have found that “Those who attended schools for the deaf often report having positive experiences whereas [those] who were mainstreamed often share stories of loneliness and lack of connections” (Gentzke, 2023, p. ix). This is a sad truth for many deaf children, and the more I learned about this and other

experiences of the Deaf and their history in my ASL classes, the more I wanted to create something that could help bridge this gap of sense of belonging in hearing institutions. In research on the experiences of deaf students who attended both schools for the deaf and mainstream schools, it was found that “Each of the four students [included in the study stated] in their own words revealed that they noticed a significant shift in how they felt about school and their identities at the time compared to before when they were mainstreamed. Having limited interactions due to being different than the general population and unable to communicate with others led to a sense of isolation, socially and educationally, and a sense of inferiority” (Gentzke, 2023, p. 37). I have not experienced what many deaf children in mainstream schools have, but I knew that I could take my experience of having a fantastic sense of belonging in the band and my knowledge of ASL and Deaf culture to use my thesis as an opportunity to create a language inclusive environment where before there was none. Sense of belonging at a university should not be possible only for those with majority identities, it should be equally achievable for all. That opportunity is what I hope to accomplish by creating and publishing the interpretations of the CSU school songs.

Throughout this project, and the years it took for me to get to this point, my perspective on myself and the world around me completely changed. I believe the world can be a better place, but that is only possible if we come together and support those who are marginalized and oppressed. I have learned language equality and minority inclusion is a continuous uphill battle, but when individuals in the majority group are educated on minority issues and take it upon themselves to become involved and advocate for minority needs, progress towards equality is made. I will be the first person to say that I do not know what it is like to be a Deaf student in a mainstream school, or the struggles that often come with that experience. I will say however, I

am a deeply empathetic person and I wish everyone had the same opportunities of building a sense of community and feeling they belong at CSU like I did. This was the primary motivation for my thesis, and I am proud of the product I have created. My dream is that the interpretations will become accessible to CSU students and will be incorporated in athletic events going forward so all students, whether they are hearing or Deaf, can experience the joy and excitement I did hearing the school song played in victory at events across Colorado State University.

References

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