



Due to deteriorating conditions at home, many soldiers chose to leave their army posts. Here, family and friends hiding out across the countryside welcome deserting soldiers. Illustration from Drake, *Fast and Loose in Dixie*.



Slouch hat worn by Lt. Col. Thomas A. Faires during the Civil War. Faires' family donated numerous Civil War memorabilia to the Lowndes County Historical Society.



Recognizing the 'Sign' of a Master Teacher

Story & Photos: Thressea H. Boyd

FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, Dr. Nanci Scheetz has been a teacher, researcher, and advocate for the Deaf community. In 2001, under the guidance of Scheetz, Valdosta State University began a four-year degree program in American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreting, which, at the time, was the only four-year program offered in Georgia and one of only 14 nationwide.

Beyond the Degree

Wheeler and her colleagues in the Valdosta State Theatre and Dance program make it a high priority to stay connected to their graduates.

"We try to do professional experiences and keep in contact with our alumni who are in different areas of the country," said Wheeler. "This helps us keep our students updated on the latest trends in head shots and resumes. If you are not using the correct format, it is going to get thrown in the trash."

Wheeler, along with Professor Duke Guthrie, has made repeated trips to New York with theatre and dance students to collaborate with alumni. During these visits, current students network with the dozens of Valdosta State graduates living in the Big Apple.

"We are always trying to find a way to connect our students to professional experiences," said Wheeler. "We use a two-prong approach. The first is to take our students to various centers of theatrical activities, and second is to bring alumni back to campus for workshops and lectures."

Wheeler said the workshops with alumni and industry experts are essential to helping students gain experience with audition techniques and preparing a professional portfolio.

"Debra Fordham has come back many times, and her workshops have been in the area of film and television," Wheeler said. "My thing is who is going to hire you, how can we get you a job out there? Because you need a leg up somewhere, you have to have some kind of connection."

Improving Quality of Life

Wheeler is an advocate for the arts, not only for the benefit of theatre and dance students but also for improving the quality of life for all students.

"People will say that arts activities are important for your quality of life, but no one really defines this. It is kind of a nebulous term, and we don't know how to latch on to this,"

Wheeler said. "However, it is interesting that, while we all acknowledge this, the arts is one of the first things to get cut in a budget."

Wheeler, along with Dr. Ray Young, professor of Communication Arts, and Dr. William Faux, associate professor of Communication Arts, have looked at the effect of participation of arts activities on student retention rates at Valdosta State.

"We have some preliminary studies that show that retention rates among students who participate in arts activity classes are higher than students who do not at Valdosta State," Wheeler said. "We looked at the 2004 and 2008 retention rates and what we found, when we removed all art majors, the retention rates were 18 percent higher. This is retention in the student body in general, not just the theater department."

Wheeler said she would like to continue researching the benefits of students participating in the arts (music, theatre, dance, visual art, etc.) and the effect on retention and graduation rates.



In her nomination, Fordham, a writer-producer for the Lifetime Television series "Army Wives," credits Wheeler with much of the success she has received throughout her professional career.

"It took years, but her belief eventually became my own. And two decades later, I am a three-time Emmy-nominated television writer, living a life I never dreamed possible," said Fordham, who graduated from Valdosta State in 1991. "You see, what makes Jacque Wheeler special is that she doesn't just teach for a semester or a year. And her lessons don't end at graduation. No, Jacque Wheeler is your teacher for life."

— Debra Fordham





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— **Nanci Scheetz**

The ASL program is designed to prepare highly skilled communication facilitators. ASL/Interpreters provide the communication link between hearing and deaf individuals, opening the door for educational opportunities of deaf and hard of hearing students in the public schools as well as providing interpreting services in the community. Today, VSU's ASL/Interpreting program is one of only three offered at public institutions within Georgia, and VSU is the only one that offers the degree completely online.

According to Scheetz, the process for becoming credentialed as an ASL interpreter varies from state to state; however, in Georgia, interpreters within the public schools must hold a two-year degree and have earned a 3.5 on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment, or be nationally certified through either the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) or the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (NRID).

“When I first came [to VSU], we were primarily training teachers for residential settings, and that need has shifted to public schools where needs are more inclusive,” said Scheetz, professor and coordinator of Valdosta State's ASL/Interpreting and Deaf Education program. “We have changed both programs to stay current and to meet the growing needs for more certified interpreters and deaf education teachers.”

At the undergraduate level, Valdosta State offers a bachelor's degree in ASL/Interpreting and a four plus one (combined undergraduate and graduate degree) culminating with a Master in Education in deaf education (for individuals with a teaching certificate). In addition, Valdosta State offers a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in deaf education (for individuals without a teaching certificate) and a Master in Education in Deaf Education (for individuals with a teaching certificate).

“The interpreters go into the general education classrooms with deaf students and help facilitate communication between

the teacher and the student,” Scheetz said. “The deaf education teacher is the primary teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students; they write the lesson plans, teach the courses, and administer the tests.”

Recently, NRID has begun requiring four-year degrees before an individual can take the national interpreting certification exam.

“In order to become a nationally certified interpreter with credentials, you have to have national certification,” Scheetz said. “Which now requires a four-year degree before you can sit for the test.”

Nationwide, approximately 85 percent of full-time interpreters work in the general classroom setting to assist students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

With an existing national shortage of interpreters and teachers for the deaf, the new NRID requirements will further deplete the number of certified interpreters within the public schools, as well as in the hospitals, court systems, and other public service areas.

To meet the crisis, Valdosta State has developed a way to train more interpreters nationally. Through the use of video conferencing and web-based distance learning, students across the country can earn a bachelor's degree in ASL interpreting and a master's degree in deaf education.

Valdosta State's American Sign Language Interpreting program allows students to complete a traditional on-campus program, or to complete the entire program through online courses via web-based and video conferencing classes.

New Opportunities

For single mom Stacy Amo, who received a degree in ASL Interpreting, taking classes online allowed her to fulfill her dream of becoming a certified interpreter.

The mother of 3-year-old twins who lives near Macon, Ga., has worked as a sign language interpreter for seven



Dr. Nanci Scheetz
professor of deaf education & interpreting

years, and was anxious to gain a bachelor's degree in ASL interpreting.

"I have worked in the educational setting and religious setting, but I was eager to further my education and Valdosta State had the perfect program for me," Amo said. "I plan to continue working in the interpreting field. I also plan to teach American Sign Language in the schools as well."

Amo said there were some challenges to the online courses; however, she overcame those and found support from the other online students.

"There were three of us in my classes that were distance learners ... we would message each other for clarification or questions," Amo said. "My instructors definitely got their share of e-mails of questions, and they have always been very willing to work with us."

Amo said that taking traditional classes was not an option. "Being a single mother, going back to school, and working full time ... would have been practically impossible if I had to relocate to Valdosta," she said. "This distance learning program was a Godsend. I was able to be near family and continue working. Of course, attending class from my couch was a bonus, too."

Identifying Master Teachers

As a nationally recognized expert in the field of deaf education and interpreting, Scheetz is currently looking at action research among deaf education teachers and identifying qualifying characteristics of a "master teacher" in deaf education.

"We place a lot of emphasis on action research where we can show evidence of how our graduates are impacting student learning," she said. "Action research is basically where you look at a student's individual education program and conduct a pre-test to see where the student is; then you write an intervention plan, and finally collect post-data to see if you have impacted the student's learning."

Working with Scott Grubbs, instructor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, Reading and Deaf Education, Scheetz is currently collecting survey information from institutions across

the U.S. that have a deaf education program to assess how many teachers are continuing to do action research.

The initial research, which began in 2009 with a U.S. Department of Education PT-3 grant, included the response of several hundred experienced education professionals to help define the concept of "master teacher" in deaf education.

"We are looking at basically how deaf education teachers are teaching deaf and hard of hearing children," Scheetz said. "We are also looking at how our students are taking what we teach and stress so much at the college level and implementing it in their classrooms."

Through the research, Scheetz said they have identified four primary characteristics of a master teacher — knowledge of content, passion for teaching, communication skills, and collaborative abilities.

"Once you have identified the characteristics of a master teacher, then you can pair student teachers with those traits found in classroom teachers and they can serve as mentors and role model," Scheetz said. "We can match a new deaf education teacher in an area with a master teacher to help, especially in the beginning years."

Getting more interpreters and deaf education teachers in the public school systems is a high priority.

As more deaf and hard of hearing school-aged children are mainstreamed into the public school system, the demand for more certified, trained ASL interpreters and deaf education teachers will continue to grow.

"There is a critical shortage for both teachers of the deaf and educational interpreters," said Scheetz. "The reason for the shortage is a reduced number of higher education training programs for deaf education and with interpreter programs."

Based on recent federal data, approximately two to four out of every 1,000 people in the U.S. are "functionally deaf," with more than half becoming deaf later in life? For children, approximately one in every 1,000 becomes deaf by 18 years of age.

Scheetz is currently working with colleagues within the Department of Middle, Secondary, Reading, and Deaf Education on a U.S. Department of Education grant to help prepare more ASL interpreters.

In 2004, Valdosta State was awarded approximately \$1.5 million from the U.S. Department of Education to prepare educational interpreters over a period of five years.

With this grant, Valdosta State trained 35 educational interpreters, who all went into the public school systems throughout Georgia.

The grant assisted students with tuition costs, purchase of textbooks, and portfolio materials, as well as expenses associated with practicum and internship experiences.

"The new grant will have the same focus and outcomes," Scheetz said. "Much like the first grant, this grant will allow us to graduate highly qualified professionals who will provide interpreting services in our public school systems. It will have a tremendous impact on the education of students who are deaf and hard of hearing."