

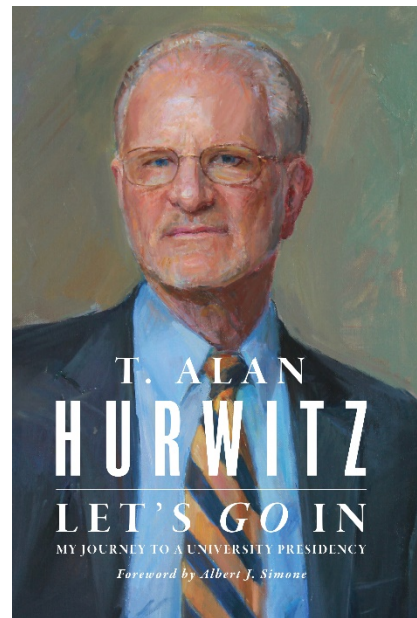
An Interview with T. Alan Hurwitz, Author of *Let's Go In: My Journey to a University Presidency*

Gallaudet University Press: In your book, you describe many mentors in your life who provided you with guidance. What was the best piece of advice you received and how did it impact you?

T. Alan Hurwitz: I believe the best advice I received was not to be preoccupied with how others perceive you, and that “perception is like a pothole which can break one’s leg.” At that time I didn't understand the meaning of this quote, but later I learned how to focus on issues rather than dwell on personalities. It has helped me to develop a thick skin and be able to deal with difficult situations with a clear mind.

GU Press: You mention how incredible it was to have interpreters available to you when you started working at NTID in the 1970s. At that time, most deaf people in the workplace did not have access to interpreting services. Do you think you would have been as successful had you continued working in an environment that did not provide communication access?

Hurwitz: Interesting question! In my earlier years as an engineer in the private sector I was able to develop relationships with my colleagues on a one-to-one basis—meaning I’d have to speak slowly and repeat my comments before they understood me. Lipreading my colleagues was always a challenge, and we often resorted to writing back and forth on paper. I was assigned to supervise two junior computer programmers, but at that time I didn’t even think I’d be able to advance on a management track, so I focused mostly on advancement on a technical track. I thought I could become a project manager with a small group, provided that we developed a mechanism for communication through paper and pencil and verbal communication on a one-to-one basis as appropriate. After I was first exposed to professional sign language interpreters at RIT/NTID, I was able to utilize interpreting services to communicate effectively with my hearing counterparts in the larger RIT community. At that time I had no thoughts about becoming a dean or vice president or even president of NTID, because I knew it required interaction and direct communication with hearing administrators in the other colleges of RIT and outside of campus. I was not sure that RIT would ever be ready for a deaf person to assume a senior administrative position at the university. Over time, as interpreters became more professionalized and skilled, I was able to progress in leadership and management roles. But to answer your question: I am somewhat skeptical as to whether I would have been able to progress into higher administrative roles such as deanship and presidencies. As a result, I am forever grateful for the excellent access services and advancing technologies that have made it possible for me to be successful in my journey to a university presidency.



GU Press: What advice do you have for young adults who aspire to a career in higher education?

Hurwitz: I have often advised young adults who aspire to a career in higher education to get out in the real world and gain experience in different fields before they even begin to think about a career in higher education. I remember working with a young deaf adult who wanted to remain in higher education right after graduating from college. He started to work as a college recruiter for a period of time, and wanted to apply for advancement in the same place. He came into contact with me and asked for my advice as to how he could remain in the college. I told him the best thing is to get out and get real life experience in the private sector. He was upset with me and walked away from my office. To my great pleasure, he found a job in another state and over the next ten years he progressed into significant leadership roles. He even went for his advanced degrees and obtained higher certifications in his profession. Later he applied for a faculty position at the same university where he received his undergraduate degree, and ultimately was hired. Now he is a valued member of the university. Years later he admitted to me that he was grateful that I ‘kicked him in the butt’ and that he followed my advice. This is what I would advise young adults who aspire to a career in higher education.

GU Press: What do you consider the most difficult aspect of being a university president? What aspect did you enjoy the most?

Hurwitz: Difficult? I would prefer to call it a challenge and an opportunity. The most challenging aspect was to try to find a solution that would serve in the best interests of students and the university. You cannot please everyone. The best lesson I learned, as I mentioned earlier, was to keep focused on issues rather than on personalities. This has helped me to deal with difficult situations and work with key stakeholders to arrive at a solution that would serve in the best interests of students and the university. Working with a wide range of stakeholders at the university—students, faculty, staff, administrators, board members, alumni, donors, congressional representatives and their staff, and other community organizations—was the most enjoyable experience I had at Gallaudet University.

GU Press: In your leadership positions, you had to balance the needs and perspectives of various stakeholders. How did you accomplish that? What tools and strategies do you think worked best to find consensus and enable strong decision-making?

Hurwitz: I felt I paid close attention to as many stakeholders as I could reach out to, and allowed them to share their thoughts, concerns, and insights with me. After my colleagues and I collected pertinent information from our stakeholders, I asked them to recommend several options and weigh the pros and cons of each option, including cost and benefit analysis, for my consideration. After reviewing their recommendations, I followed up with questions to be sure that I understood the ramifications of each option before I made a final decision. I have always been mindful that not everyone would be happy with my decisions, but I believed I always made such decisions in the best interests of our students and the university. After I made my decision I informed the community of the reasons why such decisions were made. Sometimes after I realized that I didn’t make the right decision, I was quick to let people know that I was wrong and that we needed to do what was necessary to remedy the situation as appropriate.

GU Press: In addition to your professional career, you have also been involved with advocacy organizations such as the National Association of the Deaf. What are the benefits to donating your time

in this way? What recommendations do you have for people who struggle to balance volunteer positions with a full-time job and family life?

Hurwitz: Volunteerism has always been the backbone of my life, including in my progressive leadership roles. Working with many different stakeholders in the community has always been a rewarding experience for me. I enjoyed seeing the positive results of the advocacy organizations that serve in the best interest of deaf and hard of hearing people at different levels—local, state, regional, national, and worldwide. Balancing volunteer positions with a full-time job and family life has always been a challenge for me; I am fortunate to have a supportive family including my dear wife, Vicki, who is also a fantastic volunteer at heart. It served her well in her role as the First Lady of Gallaudet University. Time management and multitasking are crucial in balancing the multiple roles in our lives and careers.

GU Press: What accomplishment are you most proud of?

Hurwitz: I am most proud of my family, who have not only supported me in my professional life, but have accomplishments in their own ways. I have always believed that my work at both institutions has served our students well. I am proud of the significance of the new programs set up at Gallaudet University during my presidency, including the STEM programs; pre-major programs in medicine and health care, law, and business; and graduate degree programs in interpretation and translation, educational neuroscience, ASL in education, and public administration. I am also proud of the many accomplishments during my forty years at RIT/NTID, including the last six years as president of NTID.

GU Press: What do you think is the biggest challenge for young deaf professionals? What is the biggest opportunity?

Hurwitz: The biggest challenge for young deaf professionals is to find a job that is commensurate with their education, training, and experience. Networking is always a challenge for everyone—more so for young deaf professionals who aspire to grow into progressive leadership positions. The biggest opportunity for young deaf professionals is to take advantage of professional development opportunities and keep up with rapidly changing technologies. Understanding the need and having the patience to develop a foundation for professional growth and development is essential to progressive leadership roles.

[Click here to find out more about *Let's Go In: My Journey to a University Presidency*.](#)