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Career Education...Preparation for Life

Challenges and Rewards for International Students

by Pamela L. Carmichael

“Deaf and hard-of-hearing international students are some of the brightest and bravest students I have ever met,” says Lilli Holdgaard Jensen, assistant director of RIT’s Office of International Student Services. “Think about what it would take to uproot yourself from your home and go to a new place where you don’t know anyone. You may not know the language very well, you have little experience with the culture, and certainly no experience with the academic environment. It’s SCARY.”

Indeed, international students can face significant challenges in their quest for education; often just getting to RIT/NTID can be difficult. First, students must meet the entrance requirements, and according to Loriann Macko, assistant director in NTID’s Office of Admissions, that can be tough for many students.

“The education systems in many countries are such that students often are not yet prepared for college-level academics in the United States,” says Macko.

Those students who clear the academic hurdles and are accepted to RIT/NTID must apply for a visa to travel to the United States, and in our post-9/11 world, U.S. security measures have made obtaining a visa more difficult.

Perhaps the greatest challenge international students face, though, is finding adequate funding for their education.

“We can’t offer international students federal financial aid,” says Denise Hampton, NTID student financial services coordinator. “And we have only limited scholarship funds to assist them.”

And the challenges for international students don’t end there.

“It’s not easy for international students to leave their homes and come here,”

says Pawee Kiratiya-Angul, a third-year Applied Computer Technology student from Bangkok, Thailand. “They have to be ready for a lot of new experiences.”

In addition to having differing social norms, many international students come from cultures where the classroom experience is quite different from what they find in the United States.

“In many countries, students are taught by lecture and are expected to simply absorb information—challenging a professor is unheard of,” says Dr. Ellie Rosenfield, associate dean for student and academic services at NTID. “They arrive here and are expected to participate in classroom discussions, use problem-solving approaches that rely on creativity, and apply their knowledge in practical ways. The American educational environment also can be more competitive and individualistic than what many students experience in their home countries.”

Despite the challenges they face, 359 deaf and hard-of-hearing international

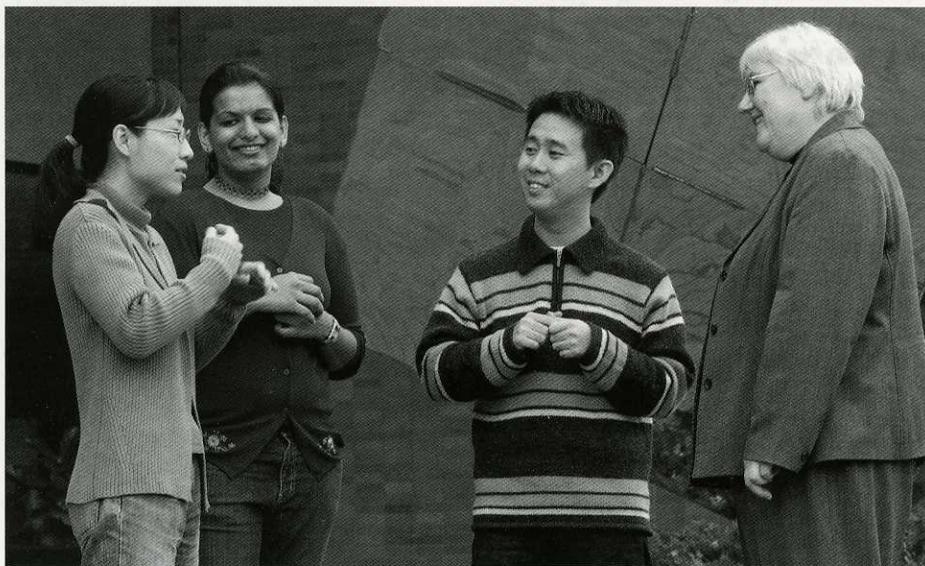
students from 43 countries have attended RIT/NTID in the past 14 years.

“Colleges in most other countries don’t have many services for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, so students often don’t have many options available to them at home,” explains Rosenfield.

Zahra Damarwala, a Graphic Media student from Mumbai (Bombay), India, agrees.

“RIT is a world-renowned university, and NTID offers technical courses tailored specifically for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, so we can find our place in society through the skills we learn here,” she says. “You just have to be focused and work hard to be successful in the educational opportunities offered here at RIT/NTID, which are not otherwise available to students like me from third-world countries. Besides, graduating from RIT/NTID gives you an edge over others when you return to your home country.”

Qing Quan, a fifth-year Information Technology student from Beijing,



Deaf International Student Association (DISA) President Qing Quan, left, chats with DISA Secretary Zahra Damarwala; Minoru Yoshida, who was instrumental in establishing DISA; and Lilli Holdgaard Jensen, DISA advisor.

China, also sees the benefits of an RIT/NTID education.

“I graduated with an associate degree in applied art from a college in China for disabled people,” she explains. “I was thirsting for more knowledge related to computer technologies, but the college I graduated from didn’t offer higher degrees. I took some computer classes at hearing schools, but there were no interpreters, and I was never able to understand the teachers. When I heard that RIT/NTID offers deaf and hard-of-hearing students multiple majors, support services and advanced degrees, I knew right away that I wanted to come here to complete my education.”

Students like Kiratiya-Angul, Damarwala and Quan discover that in addition to offering deaf and hard-of-hearing students many options and opportunities, RIT/NTID has marshaled a number of resources to help them make the most of their experiences here.

Jensen and RIT’s Office of International Student Services provide orientation programs and workshops on a variety of topics, including immigration law, cultural adjustment and taxes. They also help students obtain a Social Security number, so they can work on campus, and provide work authorization for those who wish to work off campus. In addition, they work closely with the academic departments on campus to address any issues international students may encounter in the classroom.

“If students come to our office with issues, we’ll work with them—no matter what the issues are,” says Jensen. “Our aim is to smooth any bumps in the road international students might encounter in reaching their goal of getting an education.”

NTID counselors also are instrumental in helping guide deaf and hard-of-hearing international students successfully through their college experience.

“We try to match students where they are in terms of curriculum and provide what they need to meet their goals,” says Rosenfield. “Our counselors often are the connection between students and campus services.”

RIT/NTID also offers a number of social opportunities for international



Cross-Cultural Exchange Dr. Ellie Rosenfield, associate dean for student and academic services at NTID, right, chats with Pawee Kiratiya-Angul, a third-year student from Bangkok, Thailand.

students, including the Deaf International Student Association (DISA), Asian Deaf Club, Ebony Club, Hispanic Deaf Club, and Caribbean Deaf Club.

“The cultural and ethnic social groups and associations make international students feel comfortable here,” says Damarwala, who serves as DISA secretary. “We can meet other students from different parts of the world, socialize with them, learn about their cultures and traditions, share each other’s concerns and aspirations, and at the same time have fun.”

Paulo Rodrigues from Lisbon, Portugal, who earned his bachelor of fine arts degree in graphic design from RIT and now is a first-year student in NTID’s Master of Science program in Secondary Education of Students who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing, agrees.

“There are several clubs on campus that focus on diversity, and I really enjoy the opportunity to interact with both deaf and hearing students from all over the world,” he says.

There’s no question that an RIT/NTID education offers a number of benefits for deaf and hard-of-hearing international students that they can’t find anywhere else in the world. At the same time, the students offer the campus community something equally important. Deaf and hard-of-hearing international students contribute markedly to campus

diversity, enriching the educational experience for all students.

“RIT/NTID offers a unique learning environment for both hearing and deaf students,” says Minoru Yoshida from Kyoto, Japan, who received his bachelor’s degree in Information Technology from RIT in May.

Yoshida now works as a technical specialist for the Postsecondary Education Network (PEN)-International, a program based at NTID and funded by The Nippon Foundation of Japan to improve postsecondary educational experiences for deaf and hard-of-hearing students worldwide.

“Interacting with hearing and deaf students from around the world, both in and out of the classroom, makes students’ learning experiences richer and more diverse,” says Yoshida.

Jensen sees even wider benefits to the exchange.

“It’s important for peace in our world to invite international students to the United States, so they can go home and be ambassadors for this country, just as they serve as ambassadors for their home countries when they’re here,” she says.

“Deaf and hard-of-hearing international students accomplish so much and often are so very humble about it,” adds Rosenfield. “They focus on academics, work hard, and provide tremendous support to each other. I’m in awe of their incredible talent and dedication.”