

NTID Helps Students Break Down Employment Barriers

Careers & The Disabled Magazine - May 1, 2001

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THE NATIONAL TECHNICAL INSTITUTE FOR THE DEAF HELPS STUDENTS BREAK DOWN EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

By Anne Whetstone

Exceeding Expectations

Exceeding expectations is a way of life at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, NY. Founded in 1968, NTID has become a world leader in educating students who are deaf to function effectively and successfully in a hearing world. Its former students can be found doing complex technical work for some of America's major corporations as managers, scientists, and engineers. Some graduates are in law school or medical school while others are technical support staff.

Support is the Key

Unlike Gallaudet University, NTID does not stand alone—it is an integral part of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)—an association that has been key to its success. RIT gives NTID students access to an enormous range of courses and majors and makes cooperative education a critical part of NTID. And, it means that NTID students to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their inclinations, function in a hearing world.

There is federal support for the 1,219 students at the school—1,121 hard of hearing or deaf, the rest hearing students in interpreting or secondary education. About 8% of the student body comes from other countries; most of them are from Canada. While slightly more men and women attend, the student body looks like any other.

When the school began, students followed programs contained largely within NTID that resulted in a two-year technical degree. As late as 1985, only 16% of NTID students were in baccalaureate programs, which require cross-registration with RIT. Now approximately 45% are in BA and BS degree programs, says Dr. Peter Lalley, director, center for baccalaureate & graduate studies. And, he adds, a lot more go on to advanced degrees—law school or PhD programs.

Students who qualify for NTID can be admitted either to one of the NTID programs or directly to one of RIT's baccalaureate programs. As many as one-half of those students who earn a bachelor's degree were originally in an associate's degree program, says Dr. Alan Hurwitz, dean, NTID.

What NTID offers every student is support. There is no requirement that students know American Sign Language (ASL), says Hurwitz, although most students do eventually learn it simply by living with other students who are deaf and hard of hearing. The college provides oral interpreters and C-print technology (a form of instant captioning developed by the school) as well as ASL interpreters. Most critically, say students, NTID provides quality notetaking services—available over the Internet for NTID courses—and tutoring, advising, and audiology services.

Hurwitz, an individual who is deaf, notes, "Technology, especially wireless and broadband, has been a boon to students." Video interviewing improves job opportunities, computers give almost immediate access to notes for many classes, and closed-captioning gives access to big public events on campus.

Students also have the support of their fellow peers who are deaf and hard of hearing, something many students, most of whom have been mainstreamed in their earlier education, are not familiar. "Students have the emotional support of being among other students who are deaf, but they're in a mainstream environment," states Lalley.

This level of support is why, Lalley says, about 62% of NTID student graduate—the same rate as hearing students. Students who are

deaf at other schools, says Hurwitz, are estimated to graduate at a 20% rate. Before NTID, only a handful of people who were deaf were engineers. Now, NTID graduates many engineers every year.

The extensive support is also why NTID students can participate so fully in RIT student life. The interpreting staff of 100, the largest in the world, provides interpreting for a wide range of activities—student meetings, athletic events (as participants as well as the observers), public speakers—anyplace a student might want to go.

“We have tremendous support from the top down,” declares Lalley. The president and provost are firmly behind improving access. New RIT faculty even go through an orientation program on NTID and its students.

No wonder Hurwitz says, “What’s good about RIT is that students have choices.” Want to join a fraternity or sorority? There are five Greek organizations for students who are deaf, which hearing students can join. Or, there are 20 Greek organizations for hearing students, which students who are deaf can join. NTID dormitories have 40% hearing students, meaning roommates can be mixed. There are student groups principally for NTID students, but they can, and do, join RIT student groups.

Working For Jobs

NTID’s commitment to its students extends beyond college. “Many colleges and universities just provide education,” says Linda Lacelli, senior employment specialist. “We’re committed to making sure our students get a job.” With 95% of its graduates who chose to enter the workplace employed, its commitment has worked.

Co-op experience has been one of the keys here. Indeed, the co-op tradition was an important feature in choosing RIT for NTID, says Paul Seidel, interim director of NTID’s Center on Employment. The founders wanted the school to be career-oriented.

For increasing employment opportunities, co-ops are critical. The experience gives students training and provides entries into companies by letting employers try out students without much risk. The risk is further diminished by staff and faculty commitment to visiting co-ops throughout the country during summer months. “Employers and students appreciate the visits, which help in resolving issues that may arise, such as initial communications challenges,” explains Lalley. “We know it’s critical to have that support.”

For the NTID Center on Employment, the most difficult problem is making employers aware that there are skilled graduates who are deaf and hard of hearing. “There’s always a need to open more doors,” states Lacelli. “Daily, we’re in touch with employers who have never worked with a person who is deaf.”

There are also a variety of outreach programs—magazines and newspapers are targeted. The school attends a variety of conferences in conjunction with RIT. Contacts with company diversity offices are increasing.

Students also contribute to the school’s efforts. They must take a course called “Job Search,” where they research employers appropriate to their course of study. Since students usually focus on areas they know, the school learns about companies in new communities. Ultimately, of course, the students are the best advertisement. “Our students are well-trained,” declares Seidel. “That’s what we’re selling.”

Naturally, the success of the program’s graduates helps. Some companies come back year after year to recruit. As a local company, Xerox has long ties with NTID and recruits both bachelor’s and associate’s degree graduates. With a 25-year history with the school, IBM is a longtime recruiter as is Spring, which has so many NTID graduates that it has hired interpreters to better serve its employees.

Both companies are also supporters of the school. IBM has helped with the computer-aided drafting program and Sprint by setting up a videoconferencing center, which has been used for interviewing, distance learning, and improving contacts with institutions overseas. Among other big companies that recruit on campus are Lucent, Kodak, TIAA-CREF, and Chase Manhattan.

While about 70% of graduates work in private industry, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has been an annual recruiter; and social work agencies vie for the school’s social work graduates.

Not every graduate, of course, works for a large company. Smaller companies, especially in the Rochester area, look to NTID for technically adept employees. The Center for Employment is always looking for more possibilities and more options.

Educating Business

The National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) teaches more than students—it educates businesses. Most small-and medium-sized companies don't have any employees who are deaf on staff and probably haven't thought of recruiting any, says Linda Lacelli, NTID senior employment specialist.

The NTID Center on Employment spends much effort trying to identify appropriate employers—and in trying to clarify any misconceptions they might have on employees who are deaf and hard of hearing. "We are always seeking employers who have needs in the areas where we train students," says interim director Paul Seidel.

If these employers are not familiar with employees who are deaf, the center helps educate them. The NTID employment Website gives advice on communication, and the center's employees are available for consultation. The center even brings employers from out of town on campus to attend seminars such as "Working Together: Deaf and Hearing People," which is designed to help employers feel more comfortable working with students who are deaf. This year, says Seidel, the seminar will also be given onsite at individual companies.

When combined with faculty/staff outreach to co-op employers during the summer months, all this work means NTID graduates do find work.

Telling the Story

Part of the success of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) is as close as its students and graduates. They tell the story. "NTID is the heart of the deaf community here," says Patrick Reese, a soon-to-graduate microelectronics engineer. And while he might get some arguments on that, NTID is truly a national institution, representing many parts of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

Craig Marsh, a recent graduate of the school's applied computer technology program, now works at Xerox. He was mainstreamed in his Massachusetts high school and heard about NTID through a visit by a recruiter. "I didn't know what to expect," he says. "I didn't know what I wanted for my future." Now after four years of NTID, he is working on a product development focusing on inkjet printers. "I wasn't planning to stay in Rochester, but Xerox offered me a good opportunity," he explains. "I was hired because of my experience, three months at Mass Mutual and three months at Xerox."

At work, Marsh uses a pager to stay in contact with his supervisor and with the engineers. People with Palm Pilots often use that device to communicate. "People are surprised how easy it is to communicate with me," Marsh explains.

Kelci Tingley was also mainstreamed in high school where there was only one other student who was deaf in her class, which was still better than the year she spent at Central College in Iowa as the only student who was deaf. There she had two interpreters she could call on, but no notetaking, which made it nearly impossible. "I wanted more exposure to the deaf community," Tingley comments. A friend told her about NTID. "I'd like the curriculum to offer more liberal arts courses, but I love the culture," she states.

Because of her previous college experience, Tingley was admitted directly into Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), where she has a concentration in marketing and an eye on a journalism career. Currently a marketing intern at NTID, she'd like to do her next co-op in California.

Unlike Tingley and Marsh, John Nemeth always intended to come to NTID. "Basically, I came in my freshman year in high school and fell in love with the college," he says. Admitted directly to RIT, he's concentrating in acting and cultural anthropology, after a few changes in his major. His only internship so far has been in the NTID marketing department, but he'd like to arrange one in England through the co-op office. "It's a wonderful opportunity to travel overseas," he notes.

Reese is one of the 20% of NTID students who attended a school for the deaf and was aware of both Gallaudet and NTID. He says he thinks Gallaudet is the school people know, but he states, "NTID is the place of the future. From now on things are happening in the technical field." He graduates in April after six years, which includes over one year of co-op experience with IBM in Vermont.

Reese is another student who emphasizes the critical nature of having good notetakers. For courses popular with NTID students, the college trains hearing students to take notes. Reese says because of the technical nature of his courses, he had to rely on fellow students. "I tried to take classes with good notetakers," he smiles.

Reese grew up in California and expected to return, perhaps to San Jose, but he received three offers from various IBM departments, as well as others. He accepted an offer to return to Vermont. "It worked out very well," says Reese. The IBM facility there has a number of employees who are deaf and the surrounding area has perhaps 100 individuals in the deaf community.