

Deaf/Hearing Cultures Focus of New Program

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As part of a federally-funded program, teachers and students from around the world gathered here at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) to grapple with the challenges of fully including deaf and hard-of-hearing people in their societies.

Their first task? Defining inclusion.

"It was difficult just for the American students to agree upon one definition of inclusion," said University of Tennessee graduate student Jeff Haney. "When cross-cultural issues come into the equation, it gets even more complex."

"The fact is, there is no single definition of inclusion," said Kenneth Nash, an NTID/RIT director and US director of Project Inclusion, which is designed to assist deaf people realize equal opportunity in education and society worldwide.

Participants debated the pros and cons of educating deaf children in a mainstreaming environment, versus day schools or residential school settings, and how they affected a person's inclusion in society.

The group agreed that bicultural/bilingual education is another method of inclusion. All the deaf and hard-of-hearing people participating in Project Inclusion were conversant in their native sign language, spoken language and spoken English.

"It would seem that what is being done in the represented countries that encourages the bilingual approach produces individuals who are able to function in the deaf and hearing worlds," said Marilyn R. Farmer an adjunct lecturer at Canisius College in the teacher-training program for teachers of the deaf.

The international partners of Project Inclusion, including people from Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States, will activate a curriculum presenting a comparative study of models for deaf education when the project is completed in August 2002.

Project Inclusion will also prepare educators to fully participate in shaping global and national policies regarding education of people who are deaf.

To tackle this objective, the transatlantic course included two components: an internet-based course delivered by faculty in four countries, complemented by the three-week intensive program in Rochester.

The Project Inclusion team accomplished their work through distance learning techniques. They compared notes and completed readings on each of their country's education systems.

"In the United States change in education and service to individuals comes about from lawsuits," said Farmer. "In Greece and in Sweden and the Netherlands, changes in educating deaf students have come about as a result of parents, organizations for deaf individuals and governmental changes."

Ultimately, the participant universities may act as reference sources used by educational or political authorities and officials of other groups. They would also help establish networks for information dissemination as mediators, according to Agathe Raptou, a deputy administrator at the Special High School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Thessaloniki, Greece.

When the Project Inclusion curriculum is integrated into the respective countries' education programs, future teaching professionals will have a new tool to create programs preparing people who are deaf to achieve social and economic equity in the changing global marketplace.

"Inclusion has mostly followed the definitions/concepts of hearing people, not deaf people," said Lasse Lorentzon, Orebro University, Sweden.

Lieke Leuw, senior project manager at the Institute for the Deaf in St. Michielsgestel, the Netherlands, agrees and believes Project Inclusion is an important catalyst for hearing people to learn that deaf people have the same potential to be good and competent citizens.

"Far too often, deaf and hearing professionals have not participated in shared dialogue around these important issues. Project Inclusion provided one venue in which this occurred," said Olga M. Welch, professor and head of counseling deafness and human services at the University of Tennessee.

Through the life of the project, about 10 RIT faculty and staff members will participate, and deaf students from Europe will visit the RIT campus. Deaf and hearing graduate students from NTID and the University of Tennessee will visit Europe, as well.

Now back at home, this year's student delegation from each country will share their individual papers and the reports of each team with appropriate educational authorities in their countries.

At the end of this year, each academic institution will integrate the course into its ongoing distance learning offerings. Each partner will develop a marketing plan for the course. When appropriate approvals are received, the course will carry full academic credit for the educational system in the participating countries and universities.

NTID received \$180,000 to implement Project Inclusion from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), a joint effort by the European Community/United States (EU/US) Consortia for Cooperation in Higher Education and Vocational Education.

For more information on Project Inclusion see <http://www.rit.edu/~624www/fipse/>.

The first and largest technological college in the world for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, NTID offers educational programs, access, and support services to the 1,100 deaf and hard-of hearing students on Rochester Institute of Technology's Rochester, N.Y., campus.

For further information visit NTID's homepage at <http://www.rit.edu/NTID>. For more NTID news go to <http://www.rit.edu/NTID/newsroom>.