

# William Destler named RIT president

## *Maryland provost praised for his academic ideas and vision*

William W. Destler has been named RIT's ninth president. The RIT Board of Trustees made the choice at a special March session, selecting the senior vice president for academic affairs and provost of the University of Maryland at College Park from among two finalists and a pool of nearly 100 candidates.

Destler will assume RIT's top post July 1, succeeding Albert J. Simone, RIT's president since 1992.

### **Vision for RIT: Taking the next steps 'from good to great'**

Destler wants to do for RIT that which he has spent a professional lifetime doing in Maryland: moving units under his direction to new levels of achievement and distinction.

"This is quite a unique place," Destler says. "It offers some opportunities, in my opinion, to be a groundbreaking institution if we have the courage to move forward together and capture the new high ground in higher education. RIT is well positioned to take that next step."

Speaking to the RIT community during a Feb. 20 open forum (one of two such forums in which he participated last month), Destler commended RIT for its unique mix of high-caliber programs in a wide range of disciplines—including those within NTID—and the promise it holds to become internationally recognized in higher education.

Emphasizing these niches, Destler wants to build on Simone's "category of one" initiative. "Take advantage of your unfair advantages," he advocates.

Moving RIT to that next level, he suggests, will begin with benchmarking the university against other high-quality institutions, identifying areas in need of improvement and



A. Sue Weisler | photographer

William Destler, selected to become RIT's ninth president effective July 1, chats with community members, including student Erhardt Graeff, far left, following an open forum on Feb. 19.

addressing deficiencies. Specific steps RIT must take, he recommends, include raising its retention and graduation rates, better engaging its alumni and increasing the value of its endowment.

Focusing on these priorities will, in turn, have additional benefits, Destler says, by helping raise the university's reputation—leading to a larger pool of applicants and allowing RIT to become more selective by raising its admissions standards or increase revenue by admitting more students.

"There's nothing that helps more because that next step will make you an attractive institution of choice for students from a broader region, perhaps even internationally," he said at the Feb. 20 forum.

**"RIT is an extraordinary university and has the prospects of becoming a national treasure."**

—William Destler

### **Innovation, collaboration and a 'community of learners'**

Other strategies Destler envisions to put RIT "on the map" include student projects stressing innovation—similar to Maryland's Gemstone Program, for which he receives credit for creating (see story below for more); collaborations with industry on research-and-development goals; additional strategic global partnerships; continual learning by

faculty and staff, as well as students; and academic programs emphasizing cross-disciplinary cooperation—including a possible first-in-the-nation "team Ph.D." program.

"Now that would really shake up higher education," he says of the latter idea.

"These are not proposals—I'm not even sure they're good ideas," he quipped during the forum. "But they are conversation starters."

Earlier in his visit, he said his administrative style is to foster dialogue on areas where RIT can gain prominence nationally and internationally.

In response to audience questions, Destler expressed support for the arts and humanities, and he shared his views on the value of scholarship.

"When I look at a university, I

see a community of learners," he explained. "The students are here to learn, but so are the faculty and staff. In a very real sense, teaching, research and scholarship, and creative activity all together comprise the educational enterprise. I think we want a community in which everybody is learning."

Highlighting RIT's College of Liberal Arts as the university's largest college in terms of numbers of faculty and credit hours taught, he continued: "RIT does a wonderful job preparing people for careers, and its career orientation has earned it a fine reputation. But RIT has another responsibility, and that's to train people to be solid, intellectual citizens. College is not just about job training. It's about learning how to live your life in an ethical and principled way—learning how to learn, learning how to use information wisely."

### **Upstate New York's economy, support for the performing arts, and college sports**

Other topics Destler touched on during the open forums included the regional economy, support for the performing arts and college sports.

*On RIT's impact on the regional economy:* "I think RIT has to be seen increasingly as the region's greatest asset, not just in Rochester, but in this whole upstate New York area. I think it has the potential to be the strongest economic driver in the region."

*On support for the performing arts:* "Institutions always tend to get a little bit out of balance, and they get weighed down by where the money is. And the money is on the science

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## Simone pleased with selection

The selection of William Destler will propel the university as it moves forward in the 21st century, says RIT President Albert Simone.



Albert Simone

"I welcome Dr. Destler and his family to the RIT family," says Simone. "This is an exciting time for RIT, as we are already on an upward trajectory. With Bill's leadership, passion and vision, I am confident that we will accelerate this momentum and take RIT to even higher ground."

Simone applauded the work of the Presidential Search Committee, led by Trustee Donald Boyce. "The process was one of the best that I have observed," Simone says. ■

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## Destler brings 30 years of academic prowess to RIT

William Destler has spent his entire professional career—more than 30 years—at the University of Maryland, rising from the ranks of research associate and assistant professor of electrical engineering to senior vice president and provost, a position he has held since 2001. He has also served as electrical engineering department chair, dean of the A. James Clark School of Engineering, interim vice president for university advancement, vice president for research and dean of the graduate school.

During his term as graduate school dean, from 1999 to 2001, student applications increased by more than 20 percent and research funding rose by more than 30 percent. As senior vice president for academic affairs, retention increased and the graduation rate rose from 62 percent to 80 percent over five

years. While interim vice president for advancement, Destler was credited with securing a \$25 million gift from Comcast Corp. for naming rights supporting the construction of the Comcast Center sports arena.

As engineering school dean, a position in which he served from 1994 to 1999, Destler created the Gemstone Program, a multidisciplinary four-year research program for undergraduate honors students of all majors in which teams of students design, direct and conduct research exploring the interdependence of science and technology with society. (For more about the program, visit [www.gemstone.umd.edu/Main/aboutus.htm](http://www.gemstone.umd.edu/Main/aboutus.htm).)

The program's mission states that it is "dedicated to the development of citizens, scholars and leaders."

It continues:

"Our efforts are focused on

holistic student development, both inside and outside the classroom. We value qualities of mutual respect, intellectual excitement, collaboration and diversity of thought. We strive to give our students the transferable skills valuable for wherever life will lead them."

Other achievements at Maryland that Destler cites include leading a faculty team in the creation of a cross-disciplinary master's degree program in telecommunications; originating the Hinman CEOs Program, a living-learning entrepreneurship initiative for undergraduate students; and involvement in the President's Promise, an outside-the-classroom experiential program for freshmen.

Destler earned a bachelor's degree from Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken, N.J., and a Ph.D. from Cornell University. An expert



A. Sue Weisler | photographer

William Destler has spent more than 30 years at the University of Maryland.

on high-power microwave sources and advanced accelerator technologies, he has consulted for government agencies and private firms, received more than \$40 million in grants and contracts, published numerous journal articles and book chapters, and presented many papers. He has directed 18 master's and doctoral student theses and earned

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## Up close and personal with the banjo-loving president

William Destler comes from a family of “humanists”—including his wife, Rebecca Johnson, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology, and his father, who was a historian, along with other family members who pursued math and the humanities.

His professional interest leads the self-described black sheep to joke, “I’m the only person I know who rebelled against his family by going into engineering.”

The couple has two sons, a computer science and theater major at the University of Maryland; and a

senior in high school.

Destler wasn’t drawn to RIT only by the university’s growing reputation, its eclectic mix of well-regarded programs and unique niches, its first-place men’s hockey team, or the Rochester area’s third snowiest February ever. He was also attracted by Bernunzio Vintage Instruments, on East Avenue, which Destler describes as one of the finest antique banjo shops.

“I am one of the world’s foremost collectors of antique banjos,” Destler confessed at an open forum at RIT, admitting to his “deviant” behavior.

Destler has a Web site showcasing his hobby at [www.billsbanjos.com/index.htm](http://www.billsbanjos.com/index.htm). “The exact number I have is a secret from my wife—it’s more than a hundred,” he says.

Numerous times during two open forums, held on consecutive days, Feb. 19 and 20, Destler flashed his sense of humor, eliciting laughter and supportive applause from those gathered in RIT’s Ingle Auditorium.

Destler and his wife also share an interest in alternative-powered vehicles and scooters. ■

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## Looking to RIT’s future

A few of RIT’s faculty and staff members comment on RIT’s future.

I believe that William Destler has a great understanding of the important role alumni play in RIT’s future.

Engaging our graduates will be critical to branding the university, growing the endowment and RIT’s expansion on a global level. *Kelly Redder, executive director, Alumni Relations.*



Kelly Redder



Eugene Fram

One search criterion calls for the next president to expand research and scholarship activities while retaining a student focus. Business, governmental and nonprofit organizations

are now looking to universities, like RIT, for more applied research and scholarship. RIT’s growth will depend on how it responds to this challenge. *Eugene Fram, J. Warren McClure Research Professor of Marketing, Saunders College of Business, and long-serving faculty member.*

Diversity leadership should build upon our past successes. The challenge will be providing effort towards our diversity priorities despite underlying issues; utilizing the

perception of creative tension to achieve positive results; supporting change that is productive and creating an environment that is open and welcoming towards a rich, diverse culture that will ultimately win the global market. *Alfreda Brown, interim chief diversity officer.* ■



Alfreda Brown

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and technology and business side, for the most part. So they occasionally need to rebalance themselves or, at least, remember the need for this intellectual breadth.”

*On RIT sports:* Destler hinted at

openness to possibly evaluating the upgrade of a second team sport to Division I. The RIT men’s hockey team currently is the only Division I college sports team in Rochester. ■

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awards for his teaching.

RIT’s soon-to-be president is familiar to at least one RIT faculty member. Destler was the favorite professor of Chance Glenn, associate professor of telecommunications engineering technology, when Glenn was an undergraduate at the University of Maryland.

“The warmness and insight we glimpsed during his visits here are truly real components of his personality,” says Glenn. “To me, this is an enduring quality of his that will

serve the RIT community for many years to come.”

In a statement attributed to University of Maryland President Dan Mote in *The Diamondback*, an independent student newspaper, Mote is quoted as saying:

“His vision, judgment and counsel have been critical to our academic and fiscal directions during this period of unparalleled achievement. Any university would do well indeed to recruit Bill to its presidency.” ■

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## Meet and greet



A. Sue Weisler | photographer

*William Destler, who will become RIT’s ninth president on July 1, chats with Phyllis Walker, community service coordinator in RIT’s Leadership Institute and Community Service Center, during a coffee hour with community members following a Feb. 19 open forum.*

## RIT’s presidential history

**Carleton Gibson (1910-1916)** Carleton Gibson was chosen as the first president of the Mechanics Institute in 1910. He placed emphasis on industrial education and did not propose any immediate or drastic changes to the institute upon his arrival. By 1912, however, he had managed to have the institute adopt a policy of allowing students to work half their time of study in industry and spend half their time attending classes. This method of study would later be referred to as a “co-op.”



**James Barker (1916-1919)** James Barker was asked to be the Mechanics Institute’s second president in 1916. He was an engineering graduate from Cornell University and believed in emphasizing technical training. Barker’s main interest was the promotion of secondary education. He remained in the position until 1919, when he resigned in order to take a position with the Rochester City School System.

**Royal Farnum (1919-1921)** Royal Farnum assumed the presidency of the institute in 1919. Between 1919 and 1921 more students enrolled at the institute than ever before. This was primarily due to the school’s appeal as an intermediary place of instruction between high school and college-level education. Fundraising efforts carried out during his term allowed the school to remain financially stable.



**John Randall (1922-1936)** The institute waited for a period of nine months before appointing John Randall as Farnum’s successor. Randall was invited to be president in 1922. He had served as the undersecretary to the secretary of war for the United States. He had taught at Pratt Institute, where he was head of the physics department, and at Cheltenham Military School in Pennsylvania. Randall and Carl Lomb engaged in a series of conferences that would benefit the institute’s future. It was eventually decided that the role of the institute was to provide short, intensive courses and not to award degrees.

**Mark Ellingson (1936-1969)** Mark Ellingson’s career at the institute began as a teacher. During his term as president, the institute was able to increase the endowment from \$1.5 million in 1937 to \$20.8 million three years later. An important merger between the Empire School of Printing and the Mechanics Institute took place in 1937. In 1944, the Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute was renamed Rochester Institute of Technology. During Ellingson’s presidency, RIT revised its decision regarding awarding degrees. Under Ellingson’s direction, the university began planning for the Henrietta campus in 1961.



**Paul Miller (1969-1979)** When Paul Miller began his term in 1969, the campus had just moved to Henrietta. Miller introduced a budgeting procedure to RIT that focused on simply not spending more money than the university had available and allocating funds as they were deemed necessary. Enrollment increased at a steady pace from 1969 to 1981 due to the increasing likelihood of college-level studies leading to a professional job.

**M. Richard Rose (1979-1992)** M. Richard Rose assumed the presidency in 1979. Miller and Rose shared the belief that students in a technical school should be exposed to more art, literature, philosophy and culture. Partially out of this interest, and partially due to financial difficulties, Eisenhower College became a part of RIT. The university had made attempts to increase the liberal arts and humanities curriculum. Rose helped launch RIT’s first Ph.D. program, in imaging science, in 1988.



**Albert Simone (1992-present)** Albert Simone was inaugurated president in 1992. Under his direction, partnerships with business, industry and other professions have led to RIT’s continued success. Simone helped launch Ph.D. programs in microsystems engineering (2002), computing and information sciences (2005) and color science (2007). He also spearheaded the addition of the Gordon Field House and Activities Center and approved RIT’s move to Division I men’s hockey.

*Some information adapted from Dane Gordon’s book, Rochester Institute of Technology: Industrial Development and Educational Innovation in an American City.*