

A growing number of deaf students in imaging program

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Patty Weeks got more than she expected when she joined the digital imaging and publishing program at the National technical Institute for the Deaf.

The Florida resident initially was just looking for a major to complete her studies. She chose digital imaging a few years ago, she says, because it involved computers and "sounded cool."

How right she was. The program soon became more passion than academic pursuit, with weeks spending long hours in computer labs practicing her skills.

She now works two part-time jobs in the graphic design field, laying out catalogs, booklets, brochures and a monthly newsletter, among other tasks. She soon hopes to find full-time work in image retouching.

Weeks is one of a growing number of NTID students who are studying advances in digital imaging technology and translating those advances into jobs in a variety of fields.

The school works with about 80 students each year to prepare them for "back-office" roles in areas such as commercial and one-hour photofinishing, graphic design, printing and Internet publishing.

Graduates are in imaging jobs at major employers such as Eastman Kodak Col, Xerox Corp National Aeronautics and Space Administration, IBM Corp., the West division of Thomson Corp., TIAA-CREF Inc., and the Federal Aviation Administration.

The current focus on digital imaging caps a major overhaul for the program that has taken place over the last five years.

NTID's imaging curriculum, which dates back to the school's founding, initially concentrated on traditional photographic technologies.

As the technology began to change over the last decade, so did NTID. So now, rather than learning about the chemical cocktails that produce topnotch pictures, students study imaging and publishing software programs such as Adobe PhotoShop, QuarkXPress and Adobe Acrobat.

The transition hasn't been easy.

"The industry is changing so quickly, it's a real challenge for faculty and students alike to keep up," said Jean-Guy Naud, professor and chairman of the program.

From reports of employers, students and graduates such as Patty Weeks, the program is, holding its own.

Weeks moved to Orlando after graduation last May. She did a 10-week co-op at the Florida Catholic Newspaper and then was hired part time in August. She picked up her second part-time job, at Wasman Color Graphics, in December.

Along the way, she's learned some lessons about business as well. "I like being creative," the 21-year-old said, "but it's hard to be creative every day at work. There are limits. I had to learn what customers like and don't like."

Students aren't confined only to photographic imaging or printing fields. Meredith Knox, 21, a student from Dallas, hopes to find a job in computer animation and artistry. She would love a chance to work on movies in the same vein as Toy Story or Monsters, Inc.

Knox has modest goals. "I hope to work for a good company. I just want to be a successful animator," she said, indicating that she will probably continue her studies at RIT.

Employers are increasingly receptive and say that students they've worked with from NTID have an impressive work ethic. They also note that the mere presence of a deaf employee is leading to cultural change in their workplace.

David Guida, owner of Livingston Camera Mart in Livingston, N.J., says some of his employees have started to learn sign language. The photo retail store employs two deaf digital restoration artists who work on digitally repairing damaged or old photos brought in by customers. One of those artists has an NTID background.

"Wherever they were trained, they were trained very well," said Guida. "And they are very willing to work. We treat them like people and in return, they repay us with hard work."