

# Professional support group provides NTID with a

# I DEAF VISION

by Kathleen Smith

ust because you're an administrator doesn't mean that you have the answers to an institute's problems and challenges. And just because you're a deaf faculty or staff member of that institute doesn't guarantee that you have the answers, either. It's best to seek solutions together rather than in isolation."

This is how NTID Dean James DeCaro describes his relationship with one of the Institute's oldest yet, in some ways, most innovative organizations—the Deaf Professional Group (DPG).

Founded by Educational Development Research Associate Harry Lang in the mid-1970s, the DPG has spent nearly two decades striving to provide perspectives on issues that affect interaction between deaf and hearing professionals at NTID. In the past three years, however, the group has emerged as a much more active and respected organization.

Many of the 87 employees in the group hasten to depict the DPG as a positive influence in the RIT community, not as a radical group of anti-hearing dissidents.

"The DPG exists to make sure that deaf professionals are visible," says Cynthia Mann, lecturer in the applied science/allied health department. "We need to have a voice, a way to show our concerns."

"Some people view the group as a threat," says Sharron Webster, systems analyst in the information services department. "But that's not what we're about...every minority group needs a support group."

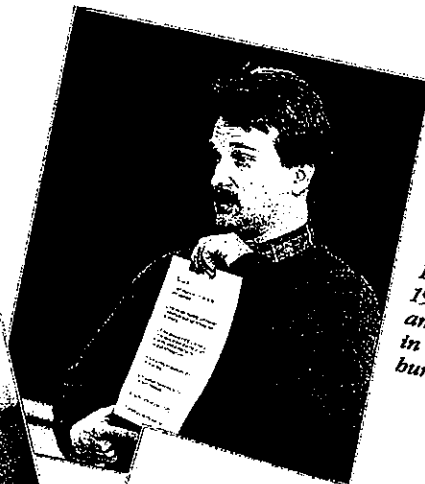
Indeed, Lang recalls that the group's early membership, while offering that support, "lacked a critical mass of deaf professionals to effect change. Instead, we discussed how to be individual change agents."

Lang, then a physics learning cen-

*Providing direction for the Institute Deaf Professional Group (DPG) steering committee members help raise and address issues that affect deaf faculty and staff members:*



*Farley Warshaw, former DPG leader and visiting career development counselor in the School of Science and Engineering Careers...*



*Dr. Thomas Holcomb, 1990-91 DPG leader and assistant professor in the department of human development...*



*Sharron Webster, former DPG leader and systems analyst in the information services department...*

ter faculty member, nurtured the growing group until 1983, when he became coordinator of the office of faculty development.

At that time, Lang turned over the reins of the DPG to a stream of successors, each of whom has worked to improve and focus the group on both timely and timeless topics.

David Hazelwood, assistant professor in the photo/media technologies department, was Lang's immediate successor. He led the group into technological territory by using the Institute's electronic mail system as a means of communicating with members between then quarterly meetings. Hazelwood's effort has resulted in an extensive

networking system among group members using computers.

Farley Warshaw, visiting career development counselor in the School of Science and Engineering Careers, was the next DPG leader. Under his leadership, the group changed its name from Hearing Impaired Professional Group to Deaf Professional Group and strove to "unify the subgroups in the deaf community to solidify the purposes of the DPG."

Webster, who succeeded Warshaw, worked on improving participation in the group and concentrated on issues related to telephone accessibility.

Most recently, Dr. Thomas Holcomb, assistant professor in the department

of human development, has stepped in at an exciting time in the DPG's history and will try to further Lang's original goals: to improve communication methods and accessibility for deaf people and to project a positive, strong image of deaf people in the RIT community and beyond.

Holcomb, who began his term last fall, has been the driving force behind what many say is the most well-organized, assertive DPG yet. Holcomb acknowledges that increased interest in and visibility for the group are partly results of the 1988 "Deaf President Now" movement at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.

The movement influenced NTID students and faculty and staff members alike and gave the group renewed purpose.

"I hope that the DPG is the wave of the future for deaf people," says Dr. Gerard Buckley, chairperson of the department of summer career exploration programs and outreach development.

"If a deaf professional group existed in every city, imagine how powerful and positive a force that would be. We've always been a good support system for one another; now we must decide how to become a viable force in the RIT community."

"The DPG has come a long way," agrees Dr. Greg Emerton, associate professor in the liberal arts support department. "It's making real efforts to change things."

Those efforts, as well as the mechanics of the group, are coordinated by an 11-member steering committee that includes Holcomb, the official DPG liaison to NTID's administrators. Committee members take turns drafting position papers; following up on actions recommended by the DPG; coordinating the DPG's monthly forums; writing and distributing agendas; securing interpreters and notetakers; and planning picnics, receptions, and other functions.

The link to administrators is important. Holcomb does most of his corresponding with DeCaro, the only hearing administrator invited to attend DPG meetings on a regular basis.

"We're very comfortable with him attending," Holcomb says.

"We're not interested in getting input from other hearing people at the meetings," says Webster. "We prefer to discuss things among ourselves, to say, 'Here's a problem—let's solve it.'"

"Many of the issues that we discuss are related to the deaf cultural environment," Holcomb explains. "We're concerned with the image and number of deaf professionals at NTID."

To address those issues, the DPG has several long-range planning topics that form the soul of the group. As Lang and Holcomb note, some topics were on the original planning list when the DPG was formed in the 1970s.

"We'll likely be discussing many of these issues 10 years from now," Lang notes. "We dealt with them as successfully as we could [when the DPG began] with limited numbers of faculty members and resources."

The prominent issue of **affirmative action** includes finding more qualified deaf candidates for available jobs at NTID; increasing the number of deaf administrators; improving recruitment strategies to attract more deaf people to NTID; and improving national networking among deaf professionals so that strong candidates can be found.

"When departments have openings, we hope they'll ask us for networking assistance," says DPG member Gary Meyer, career opportunities advisor in NTID's National Center on Employment of the Deaf. "That's one type of support that we can offer."

Holcomb notes that the group recently pointed out to DeCaro seemingly negative wording regarding deaf people in NTID's personnel recruitment advertisements.

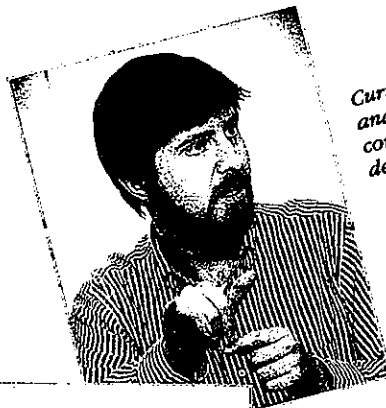
"We [NTID's executive directors] looked at that wording and realized that the group had a good point," DeCaro says. "Instead of including the statement, 'Minority and disabled candidates encouraged to apply,' the ads now say, 'People who are deaf or hard of hearing, with a disability, and/or members of a minority group are encouraged to apply.'"

According to DeCaro, that type of constructive criticism is what lends the DPG credibility.

"The types of issues that the group looks at are fundamentally important to the Institute. Every time I go to a DPG meeting, I learn. It's an opportunity for me both to listen and make known my perspectives on issues."

The issue of **telephone accessibility** raises the questions of how many TDDs (telecommunication devices for the deaf) should be available to faculty and staff members and whether all phones should have TDD-compatible answering machines.

"It's frustrating for me to try to contact a colleague and find that the person has



*Curtis Reid, applications analyst/programmer in the communication support department...*



*Dr. Karen Christie, assistant professor in the English department...*



*Patricia Durr, visiting instructor in the general education instruction department...*

a voice-only answering machine," says Meyer. "I then need to ask my secretary to leave a message."

Webster acknowledges that the TDD availability issue is almost resolved, since nearly 85 percent of NTID's offices/workstations now have access to a TDD.

Media Services Coordinator Charles Johnstone concurs, "We've been working for the past three years to meet the Institute goal that, by the end of 1992, every office and workstation will have direct access to a TDD. We're almost there."

"The concept of a TDD for each phone means that people answering the phone can hook it up to the TDD right away," Warshaw says. "This, to us, is 'equal access.'"

A third issue involves **communication** and the use of sign language. This challenging topic encompasses everything from required communication skills of employees to appropriate sign language etiquette and availability of interpreters.

According to Holcomb, the shortage of interpreters, largely due to debilitating injuries thought to be caused by a combination of repetitive motions and high-stress responsibilities, has affected the availability of interpreters for deaf professionals enrolled in graduate programs at RIT. While Holcomb acknowledges that providing interpreters for this purpose is not a high priority for the interpreting department (undergraduate classroom situations get priority), he is concerned about losing qualified visiting instructors whose permanent employment at NTID may depend on finishing advanced degrees.

The criteria for sign language competence touched a nerve among members of the DPG, who backed the NTID Communication Task Force's original recommendation that "advanced" sign language skills were appropriate for faculty members. After several rounds of feedback from faculty members, the task force ultimately recommended an "intermediate plus" requirement for faculty members seeking tenure or promotion to assistant professor and an "advanced" requirement for promotion to senior ranks.

"However," DeCaro notes, "our goal remains to have all faculty members achieve an advanced level of sign language competency."

Another part of this issue is the question of sign language etiquette. In February, Holcomb circulated a



Melinda Hopper, cross-cultural educator in the human development department.

memo to the Institute community "respectfully requesting that our colleagues, deaf and hearing alike, sign every time a deaf student or faculty/staff member is in their presence... these acts will clearly demonstrate appreciation and respect for our culture and will reinforce RIT's commitment to celebration of cultural diversity."

Holcomb argues that much can be learned about professional and social etiquette by "tuning in" to casual conversations.

"If a hearing person gives a secretary instructions about a project and uses sign language, even though a deaf person is not directly involved in the conversation, that person can observe how people interact in a business setting," he says. "It's not so much what one might say, but how one says it."

Recalls Buckley, "One of my former bosses always signed his entire conversation if, during a meeting with me, he had to answer the phone. I learned a lot of informal information about how to deal with people and get things done from that experience."

Such topics of etiquette, competency, and deaf culture are an integral part of the DPG's concerns. The group is enhanced by its diverse membership, which includes hard-of-hearing and deaf employees.

"I make no apologies about being hard of hearing," says Emerton. "It's all right to be hard of hearing, just as it is to be deaf, and I encourage that feeling among students who are hard of hearing."

"We have so much diversity among hearing and deaf cultures at RIT," he continues. "We need to celebrate that diversity and eliminate separatism."

To help eliminate geographical separatism among its own members, the DPG has its monthly meetings at various points around the RIT campus.

Another way in which the DPG has increased its visibility on campus is through its Excellence Award, presented quarterly to a hearing faculty or staff member, department, or committee that has demonstrated "outstanding sensitivity and interest in RIT's deaf population."

Dr. Susan Foster, research associate in the office of postsecondary career studies and institutional research, was the award's first recipient.

"Of any award I've received in my professional life, this one means the most to me," she says.

Dr. James Graves, performing arts chairperson, was similarly lauded in January.

"Nearly 20 DPG members poured into my office to make the presentation," he recalls. "I was speechless and signless... it's the most marvelous thing that has happened to me."

After participating in the DPG for 20 years, Lang is pleased with the group's progress and applauds traditions like the Excellence Award.

"I'm certainly pleased with the DPG's progress during the past five years," he says. "It helps tremendously to have a dean who is willing to address the issues. But let us not fool ourselves into thinking that what we're doing today will eliminate the need to do it, perhaps differently, in the future. It's an ongoing task."

*Editor's note: After serving NTID students for nine years, Dr. Thomas Holcomb will leave the Institute this summer to accept a position as associate professor in the School of Education at San Jose State University in California.*