

“We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment.
Whether we permit chance environments to do the work,
or whether we design environments for the purpose
makes a great difference.”

- *John Dewey, American Philosopher of Education*

The Student Development Center:

Synthesizing philosophy, form, and function

Introduction

To understand the very idea of an environment and building *designed* for education, one needs to clearly understand the population whose needs it would serve. To best describe the justification and physical properties of the proposed Student Development Center for students at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, we offer here a review of information relevant to these students with regard to the concepts of *education* and *student development*.

Rationale

A review of today's college students recognizes the educational and developmental needs that are at the core of their continuous journey of human growth and development. While some of these traits, desires, and preferences are timeless, others are unique to this generation of *Millennial* students, defined as students born in the 1980s whose ages range from 17-23.

What is timeless? College impact studies conducted over the past 20 years show that students develop "in an integrated manner." During traditional college-age years, they make gains in both their factual/intellectual and their value/social/moral development. Not surprisingly, those gains are determined largely by the level and quality of their involvement in both curricular and co-curricular activities in the campus community.¹

What sorts of things influence these particular students, the Millennials? Students born in the 1980s who were surveyed rated the top six most influential factors in their generation in order of importance as the *September 11th terrorist attacks*, the *Columbine High School shootings*, the *death of Princess Diana*, the *Oklahoma City bombing*, the *war in Kosovo*, and the *accusations against and impeachment of President Clinton*. These young people admire and respect their own parents and grandparents more often than the media celebrities of the "40 and over" crowd.. They find inspiration in teamwork and service (an agenda of the President during their high school years). They believe in themselves as a generation that will make a better and more well-thought contribution to the world than the *Generation-Xers* before them. They are the most affluent and ethnically diverse generation in our nation's history. They have, in general, been the most supervised but least parented generation. They are the most "over-informed" generation, receiving media coverage and "over-coverage" from web, TV, pager, and cell phone; and they have been raised in a 24-hour society, allowing them to communicate with banks, merchants, and each other, with little or no regard for time of day or night.²

Considering the above, it is no surprise that students today routinely and intensively inquire about safety within a college community. They seek a

community that is both academically challenging and rigorous yet wholesome in its non-academic work and activities. They look to “adults” on the campus to provide involved guidance and coordination; while desiring the ability and opportunity to matter, to make a difference, to contribute to the community. They seek and respect diversity in its broadest sense. And, they have a different sense of time and planning, given not only the 24-hour world in which they have grown up, but the same 24-hour world they will enter upon graduation. They have experienced and thus expect service and learning to come, not in a traditional “9 to 5” work day, but in a broader and more expanded timeframe that is relevant in meeting their needs.

Similar to the tenets of general college student development, the work of educating deaf and hard-of-hearing students has also had at its core the integration of the development of *intellectual* and *personal* competency. As recently as 1996, the ideal educational environment for realizing a deaf student’s full potential has been described as one that treated the curricular and co-curricular environments as “one indivisible whole, complementing one another...”³

Students are thought to develop social skills through the improvement of self-esteem, problem-solving skills, and more thoughtful interaction between peers and those “adults” associated with the student’s educational and developmental environment. The importance of this skill acquisition has not only been discussed, but put into practice in the Deaf community. Programs such as the National Association of the Deaf’s Youth Leadership Camp, and the Communication Services for the Deaf’s National Middlers Leadership and Literacy Camp both are designed to foster growth that transcends curricular and co-curricular boundaries, focusing on the development of “citizens,” “leaders,” “problem-solvers,” and “contributors” to a community – both at the camps and later in their home environments – that is larger than self.

These programs clearly have successfully supported many of the needs of young deaf and hard-of-hearing students who are a part of the Millennials’ generation. They are staffed and supported by adults who serve as role models for these young people. They acknowledge the need for learning and development beyond the “traditional” parameters, and the successful growth and development that happens for today’s students in the experiential classroom. **These programs, however, are focused largely on middle and high school students, not those involved in postsecondary education.**

Specific to the campus of NTID, where more than 1,100 deaf and hard-of-hearing college students study and live, the art of teaching and learning has always included experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Such experiences

develop individuals who not only are academically competent, but are ethical, confident, and ready to contribute in solid and meaningful ways to a rapidly changing global society.

Our work always has included an understanding of the importance of environment and design in fostering a dynamic, visual, learning atmosphere. What NTID's original planners detailed so well in the construction and design of the college's original buildings still rings true today, as we discuss the concept of a Student Development Center appropriate for the 21st century. Since our collective task is to maximize the potential of each student, we must consider how to enrich the nearly **75 percent of their time that is not spent in classes.** We must create opportunities to explore interests, foster learning, and expose students to a kaleidoscope of exciting, enriching choices that will develop and celebrate each student's unique skills.

It is with these ideas and ideals in mind that we present the concept for an NTID Student Development Center.

The Building

Imagine a facility of substantial size built to connect our current center for student clubs and organizations and our current primary academic environment. Externally, this building would provide adequate visual position and connection to the residential quadrangle that houses 400 deaf and hard-of-hearing students. A terrace would allow for communication across the "quad" and would help to connect individuals from residential, academic, and social environments.

Entering the building one would enjoy an atrium that is large in size and inviting in its variety of light emanating from both natural and artificial sources. Display areas showcasing the work and achievement of current students as well as NTID's rich history of past student accomplishments would serve as the perfect introduction to this grand center.

Beyond the first-floor entry, the facility would include a circular cluster of student organization offices with a central area including computers, web cams, work spaces, and an elevated area to allow for sharing of information, resources, ideas, and support. It would include a series of lounge spaces each unique in size, environment, and purpose...smaller lounges for quiet study or small discussion groups or programs complemented by larger, more centrally located spaces for gathering, talking, workshops, and programs that could accommodate audiences of 20-30 people.

This building would embrace the importance of experiential, hands-on learning and would redesign labs for use by both students in a major and those who simply possess a recreational interest or curiosity about a subject. Labs for theater and performance arts, among others, could be located here – placing not only the space, but our most hands-on faculty, into this dynamic and interactive environment. A Community Service Center would help connect interested students with relevant and accessible service opportunities both on campus and in the Rochester community.

Supporting, guiding, advising, and supervising the facility would be members of the NTID Student Life Team, including one individual who would manage the space, maintain displays and information, supervise inventories and furnishings, coordinate a student advisory board, and manage reservations...all in a non-traditional timeframe dictated by student use. Recognizing that today's students operate in a decidedly spontaneous world, this structure would allow students holding an informal 8 p.m. discussion to reserve a room for an impromptu meeting at 9 the same night.

The first floor would also include meeting rooms and seminar spaces whose functional, comfortable design and décor would be designed to inspire conversation and debate, in addition to lecture format. This floor would also include an expandable programming area equipped with technology similar to that of a "smart" classroom. The space could be partitioned or opened to include programming for up to 100-150 participants. The environment would be formal enough to host an outside guest presenter yet comfortable enough to do so in a way that would welcome and draw students, faculty, and staff.

The second floor would include additional meeting and seminar space as well as academic support services in counseling, job placement, and hearing and speech labs. Such services are critical as students seek to merge the academic and social aspects of their lives, each requiring a level of privacy that makes their placement on the second floor both logical and practical.

History would be both preserved and celebrated throughout the building. Seminar rooms, programming spaces, and hallways all would include pictures and documentation of student activities, representation of classes through the years, and images that would evoke proud memories of alumni, past visitors, and guests of the college.

Activities

In its design and implementation, the building would be stimulating, supportive, and educational. First-floor Student Life Team offices would draw ongoing

student traffic throughout the day and into the late evening, as their work with activity, club, and event advisors, as well as supervisors of a student paraprofessional staff, occurs. Additionally, during the day, the lounge spaces would be utilized by students studying between classes, as well as students, faculty, and staff taking a break from their classes and offices. Some of these seminar/meeting spaces might also host Freshmen Seminar classes, while others could host meetings of student, faculty, and staff committees as well as sign language and interpreting classes. Traffic would be flowing through this center from the Lyndon Baines Johnson building, from the residence halls, and from other parts of the RIT campus as well. **This proposed NTID Student Development Center would be more than 25,500 square feet in size when completed and would draw both deaf and hearing students, allowing it to become a true campus community center.**

On the second floor, the environment would be no less welcoming, but certainly more tranquil, in an effort to support the privacy and need for students to be focused when utilizing the services located here. Groups and mini-courses intended to address student behavioral needs, and whose primary communication modes support full access for deaf and hard-of-hearing students could be located in these seminar rooms. Rooms also could be used for on-campus meetings with prospective employers, or student meetings with VR/SSI counselors.

In addition to the Student Life Team, evening activities could include NTID Student Congress, NTID Student Assembly, and many other student club and organization meetings. In addition, the large meeting/presentation space could be used for the 8-10 national deaf role models who visit NTID annually to share their experiences with the student community. These individuals could move to a central lounge space for a book signing, and then to a smaller seminar space to host a workshop for a specific group.

An advisory group consisting of representatives from each student organization would be created and overseen by the Student Life Team. This group would review areas relevant to student support in the center, including issues such as policy for student club office use, room reservation policies, building hours, lounge purpose and maintenance, and the ongoing change and maintenance of displays.

Online trivia contests and exhibit/exhibition tables in the Student Development Center would encourage students to actively learn more about the history of NTID and its graduates. Such acknowledgment of the college's past and present would allow students to continue their own journey of self-realization while realizing their place in the larger history of the deaf education movement in our country. In addition, these tables would allow clubs and organization to promote events, sell

tickets, conduct fundraisers, and complete surveys of student needs and satisfaction. In short, this Student Development Center would be awake and alive 24 hours a day, driven at its core by constantly changing student needs and growth opportunities.

Conclusion

NTID has a long and rich history of supporting programs that nurture students' academic and personal development. Missing from this history is the cornerstone—both in the physical and philosophical sense—of a gathering place where education can continue day and night in a centrally-located, safe, supportive atmosphere, a place where students could embrace, enrich, and celebrate their unique talents and spirits.

The NTID Student Development Center would by its very presence reinforce NTID's mission—to prepare students who are ready for life's challenges, ready to contribute to society, and ready to take their place as the next generation of deaf leaders.

When the dream of creating a Student Development Center becomes a reality, NTID will have taken perhaps its largest step to date in ensuring that all students who enter its doors have the best possible opportunities for total growth and development conducive to their birthright of independent living.

¹ Porter, et. al., *Campus Life and the Development of Postsecondary Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: Principles and Practices*, published Fall, 1998.

² Howe, Neil, and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Vintage Books, copyright 2000.

³ Turk, Dr. FrankR., *The Making of the Junior National Association of the Deaf*, A Deaf American Monograph, 1996.