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# The Spice of Life: How Outstanding Professors at RIT Address and Incorporate Topics of Diversity into the Classroom

Jenna Williams

Rochester Institute of Technology, [jkwterp@gmail.com](mailto:jkwterp@gmail.com)

Luke R. Auburn

Rochester Institute of Technology, [lra9802@rit.edu](mailto:lra9802@rit.edu)

Kimberly S. Reeb

Rochester Institute of Technology, [ksr5439@rit.edu](mailto:ksr5439@rit.edu)

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# The Spice of Life: How Outstanding Professors at RIT Address and Incorporate Topics of Diversity into the Classroom

Jenna K. Williams, Luke R. Auburn, Kimberly S. Reeb  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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The current study investigates how award-winning professors at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) incorporate diversity into their classrooms. Universities across the country are concerned with creating an atmosphere that encourages diversity among their students and RIT is no exception. The authors conducted an interview with ten professors to discuss their attitudes towards approaching a diverse campus, classroom, and world. Furthermore, each professor shared their methods for handling issues that may arise in a diverse educational atmosphere, how they encourage students of different races to interact, and whether they notice a difference in the classroom behaviors of American and international students. Overall, the professors were found to have strong educational beliefs about approaching students equally and a need to encourage open communication and interaction in their classrooms.

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Universities across the country are concerned with creating an atmosphere that encourages diversity among their student bodies, and Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) is no exception. RIT is a cultural melting pot with a large population of international students and the second largest population of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the United States. On its website, RIT lists diversity as one of its six core values with a goal to “provide a high level of service to fellow members of the RIT community. Treats every person with dignity. Demonstrates inclusion by incorporating diverse perspectives to plan, conduct, and/or evaluate the work of the organization, department, college, or division.”

This focus on diversity in American education dates back to May 17, 1954 when the United States Supreme Courts decided unanimously that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional (Brunner & Haney, 2007). To further promote equal opportunity at a national level, the federal government created the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and enacted affirmative action for employment in 1965. Over the past 40 years there have been numerous affirmative action cases challenging the right to use race as a deciding factor for admitting a student to a college (Brunner & Haney, 2007). Brunner & Haney point to *Grutter v. Bollinger*, an affirmative action case in June of 2003 where a white individual felt the need to accept racially diverse students limited the number of Caucasians being admitted to universities. The court ruled that race could be a deciding factor because it is “a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body” (2007, para. 22). This decision reinforces the need for government to

ensure that all American citizens have equal opportunities, especially in the arena of higher education.

To begin to understand how outstanding professors address topics of diversity in the classroom, a metric was needed for finding and defining outstanding teachers. For the purpose of this study, all professors were chosen because they have previously won an Eisenhart award while teaching at RIT. The Eisenhart award is granted annually to up to four outstanding professors from the Rochester Institute of Technology. The award has two levels: the Eisenhart Outstanding Teacher Award for those who have taught on a full-time basis for at least seven years at RIT, and the Richard and Virginia Eisenhart Provost's Award for Excellence in Teaching which is available to those with three years or less. As the Institute encompasses nine colleges in a variety of fields, there are no specific criteria a professor must meet in order to be nominated or awarded. However, both awards look for those who have made positive changes in the classroom, on campus, and in their college. Professors are student-nominated and then asked to provide information about their teaching style and beliefs to a committee of professors for peer-review.

Previous research has uncovered a need for professors to have an understanding of the importance of a diverse study body partnered with inclusive course material (Simonds et al, 2008). This study seeks to examine the feelings and knowledge that professors possess in order to address diversity in the classroom led by the following research question:

RQ1: How do outstanding professors at RIT address topics of diversity in the classroom?

## **Rationale**

Colleges across the nation recognize the importance of providing their students with professors who treat students equally. U.S. Legislation and judicial action over the past 40 years have repeatedly asserted the importance of legal requirements for equal opportunities to all citizens. In 2003 the Supreme Court ruled (5-4) that race may be one of many factors considered by colleges when selecting their students because it furthers “a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body” (Brunner & Haney, 2007). Colleges can benefit by looking to their best professors for strategies to address diversity in the classroom. Our research will provide further insight into some of the ways outstanding professors at RIT address this important subject. The Eisenhart Outstanding Teacher Award distinguishes the exceptional professors at RIT from average professors. These findings will add to the body of research on diversity in education and aid in understanding the relationship between outstanding professors and levels of diversity in the classroom. Our research will also provide a framework that can be applied to colleges across the country to build a true wealth of knowledge on this important subject.

## Literature Review

Before diving into investigation, it was important to review communication literature that examines diversity in education. There are many factors that can make a population diverse and the concept of diversity is extremely broad; for the purposes of this study the researchers were most interested in the aspects influencing RIT. Many feel that RIT's diversity comes from its multiracial student body, large Deaf population, and the large percentage of international students. This literature review will discuss communication education literature related to each of these factors and also consider articles about the effects of diversity training in education.

Several communication studies examine challenges related to the culture differences present in diverse classrooms. A study by Yook and Albert (1998) examines dissimilarity in the perceptions of the appropriateness of negotiation among Koreans and Americans. Samples of 193 mainstream American college students, 75 Korean students in the United States, and 110 Korean students in Korea, were asked to rate the appropriateness of negotiating with instructors and classmates in 13 mock situations. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the responses of the Korean students in the U.S. and the Korean students in Korea. However, the authors found that "there were highly significant differences between the combined Korean group and the [mainstream] American group" (p. 18). American students found negotiation significantly more acceptable in 12 of the 13 situations than the Korean students. These responses point to an important cultural difference affecting college classrooms.

A similar article by Ikuko Nakane (2006) also focused on how the presence of international students influences the classroom. Nakane investigates to what effect being a non-native speaking student impacts likelihood for participation and engagement in discussion in the classroom. The research is part of a bigger project on politeness and culture in the classroom setting. The purpose was to investigate the role of Japanese students' silences as politeness strategies in multicultural university seminar settings. The study collected data from Japanese students through survey and from both Australian students and Japanese students from audio/video recordings and focus groups. Findings showed that Japanese students usually do not participate unless called on, and usually stay quiet to "save face" in class. Some of the respondents reported that they do not speak much because they do not want to be judged on their ability to use a language that is not native to them and that they want to be accepted and understood. The Australian students did not use the 'saving face' strategy and they were not as anxious at the potential of using English incorrectly. The study found that Japanese students do not want to be embarrassed due to their perceived lack of ability to speak English. Overall, the authors suggests teachers should consider that Japanese students may think they are being polite by remaining quiet, and that if a teacher would like them to participate more they need to encourage them by calling on the students so they feel they have permission to speak.

Holmes (2005) explores the intercultural communication experiences of ethnic Chinese students in a New Zealand university classroom context. Holmes conducted an interpretive case study over 18 months through interviews with 13 Chinese international students attending the same business school. Two research questions guided Holmes' research—"RQ1: what differences do Chinese students encounter in communication with New Zealand students in the classroom, and how do they make meaning from these differences? RQ2: How do Chinese students (re)construct and (re)negotiate their intercultural communication experiences in light of these differences?" (p. 295). Holmes found that "Chinese students encountered considerable differences in communication with New Zealand students in the classroom, especially in the contexts of asking and answering questions, giving opinions and expressing ideas, managing interpersonal skills in cooperative learning contexts such as group work, and in interaction with teachers" (p. 306). Holmes also found the Chinese students, to varying degrees of success, had to reconstruct their intercultural communication patterns over time as they adapted to the culture of the New Zealand school.

Nancy Burroughs (2008) discusses how services provided to non-English speaking people attending college in the U.S can be improved. She identifies three important communication constructs that should be addressed in courses for English language learners: communication apprehension (CA), self-perceived communication competence (SPCC), and willingness to compete (WTC). According to Burroughs, "in most cases, communication-trained professionals do not teach these courses [for English language learners]. Those who do teach these students have little or no understanding of cross-cultural communication and the implications of CA, SPCC, and WTC on students' communication skills and propensities" (p. 292). Burroughs highlights her campus' three-tiered programmatic approach, which includes a communication lab, support centers, and specialized courses in public speaking for non-native speakers. The article concludes with a call for other members of the National Communication Association to work with their colleges and local high schools to bolster support for English language learners.

Johnson & McIntosh (2009) examined an aspect of diversity of special interest to RIT in their article on the Deaf experience in multicultural education. The authors present literature showing that Deaf students belong to a very distinct culture and encourage educators to treat their interactions with Deaf students as a form of intercultural communications. Johnson & McIntosh stress the importance of teachers' ability to demonstrate cultural competency in these areas in order to interact successfully with Deaf students. They assert the "need for the incorporation of cultural perspectives of Disability and Deaf experiences into teacher preparation programs" (p. 67) and offer specific recommendations for the acknowledgement and support of cultural perspectives and understandings related to the Deaf experiences.

Many communication scholars have addressed diversity training and examined its impact on both students and teachers. A study by Lori Carrell (1997) addresses the need for

expanded research on intercultural communication competence and how it may influence students' levels of empathy towards peers of different cultures and backgrounds. The study inquires how communication instruction specifically linked to cultural diversity differs in impact from more traditional communication instruction. Carrell examines the effects that different levels of empathy for peers can have on communication in the classroom. The four research questions all asked how different ways of including diversity in classroom discussion and lessons may impact a student's level of empathy. Undergraduate college students from a midwestern university were selected from different courses that involved varying types of communication. The students were surveyed to measure their levels of empathy using an Empathy Measurement Scale during the first week of the semester and the last week of the semester. The survey measured empathy as each a trait, an attitude, and a behavior. Overall, significant gains in empathy were found after students completed a semester of an intercultural communication course. All three measurements of empathy were found to have increased during the course instruction when compared to the first week survey data. Students who were exposed to multiple cultures repeatedly increased the most in their levels of empathy towards their peers of different cultures. Carrell suggests that the empathy increase is a two-fold result of both exposure to peers of different cultures and the teacher's involvement. This is possibly the most effective means for molding students into diverse and accepting individuals.

Gottfredson et al., (2008) investigated whether or not students benefit from learning in a diverse classroom and if it influences a student's outcomes in school. They hypothesized that it is beneficial for students to learn amongst students of all backgrounds and cultures. Using two student samples, Gottfredson et al. investigate whether or not contact diversity and classroom diversity additively and multiplicatively benefit students. The first sample was an exploratory volunteer sample of law students and the second was a nationally representative randomly selected sample of law students. Both samples reported on their undergraduate experiences while attending either law school or a randomly selected undergraduate university in the U.S. The results from the first sample supported their hypothesis that students in a diverse classroom that engaged in interactions among students would increase their cognitive openness with their peers. There was a positive relationship between classroom diversity and the student's belief for equal opportunity and cognitive openness. The first sample is not nationally representative. The second sample's results were similar to the first sample, but with lower correlation strengths. An interesting finding from the second sample was that women had significantly more positive attitudes favoring equal opportunity than men and that politically conservative students had lower scores on the attitude scale. Overall, both samples found some levels of positive outcomes of diversity among students in the classroom. Their findings provide many interesting aspects for further research to address the important role of a college in maintaining and ensuring a diverse body of students.

Some diversity studies focus on overall diversity, Harris (2003) focuses specifically on racial diversity. Harris wrote the article as a professor assessing the impact her interracial communication course had on reducing racial prejudice and promoting racial sensitivity and awareness among her undergraduate students. Data was collected using narratives from three of her classes and used another as a focus group to create a multiracial sample of 114 students. After analyzing the narratives and focus group audiotapes, Harris found that she “was effective in impacting student perceptions of, and attitudes towards, race” (p. 311) and divided the changes students experienced into the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. The inherent bias in Harris’ methodology is a severe limitation of the study, however the study is still significant because it provides anecdotal evidence that such courses can teach students ways of thinking that combat racism on interpersonal levels.

Much of the literature reviewed suggests diversity and intercultural communication have very important implications for education and cannot be ignored. Studies by Yook and Albert (1998), Nakene (2006), and Holmes (2005) all demonstrate the importance of recognizing international diversity in educational settings. Burroughs (2008) specifically addressed specific ways the education system can improve the quality of learning in diverse schools with students who do not speak English as a native language. Johnson & McIntosh (2009) emphasized that educators must recognize their cultural differences with Deaf students to provide quality education along with an atmosphere that promotes diversity. Studies by Carrell (1997), Gottfredson et al. (2008), and Harris (2003) all examined the positive effects of integrating diversity education for students and teachers. Diversity in education is clearly an important subject for many communications scholars, professors, and teachers across the country. With the literature as a guide, the researchers began an investigation of how outstanding professors at RIT address diversity in the classroom.

## **Methods**

The present study consists of a convenience sample that includes 11 award-winning professors of the Eisenhart Outstanding Teacher Award at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Participants were recruited through an e-mail invitation to participate in a graduate communication education course project on excellence in teaching. In order for the teacher to be included in the selection process for being interviewed they were required have won one of two teaching Eisenhart awards that RIT issues yearly. Once the teachers agreed to be interviewed each student in the graduate course was paired with a professor. The interviewees were informed that the results would remain confidential and their responses would be explained by referring to them in the paper as an anonymous survey respondent.

The researchers asked six specific questions in the survey to investigate diversity awareness among the selected Eisenhart winners, these questions were derived from the reviewed literature to answer the main research question: How do outstanding professors

at RIT address topics of diversity in the classroom? Interviewers used six open-ended survey questions (Appendix A) to generate discussion about diversity. The first survey question addressed the feelings that the professors have about RIT's focus on understanding diversity-related issues. The second asked if their students' perceptions of race have ever created conflict in the classroom. The third asked if they have ever participated in pluralism or diversity training at RIT or elsewhere and, if so, how it impacted their teaching. The next two survey questions asked whether they feel that international and American students interact differently themselves or with American students. The last survey question asked if they find that international students who speak English as a second language (or Deaf students) have larger degrees of communication apprehension, and if so how do they help international and Deaf students overcome their shyness.

### **Procedure**

After the interview questions were devised and distributed among the 11 students in the Communication Education graduate course each graduate student then conducted the interview with their assigned professor. The interview schedule is found in Appendix A. Each interview took approximately one hour to conduct. The order in which the questions were conducted was the interviewer's choice, which allowed for a better chance that each question would receive equal time. This approach was also an attempt for a random choice of question order by each interviewer. The interviewee either recorded or hand wrote the responses and after the interview typed a manuscript like format to be distributed to the rest of the graduate students in the class and to the professor. The interview results were then analyzed and then compared to the literature reviewed for the project.

### **Analysis**

For the purposes of qualitative research the most common themes and responses to the survey questions are included below. A further explanation of the main research question will be explored after this survey response summary.

SQ: 1 asked, "Does RIT put appropriate focus on understanding diversity-related issues in teaching?" Most professors felt RIT was trying to put an emphasis on diversity. However, several mentioned that the efforts were not yet successful. A few expressed feeling that more could be done while others felt diversity training was unnecessary. Several professors expressed an interest in training on how to work with Deaf and hard-of-hearing students which they felt was not currently available. One professor mentioned that it is important to be upfront and honest, that RIT is not as diverse as the university would like to be. Professors from a variety of fields mentioned different deficiencies in the diversity of their home departments; for example those in computer science mentioned a lack of female faculty and students in their programs. One professor noted the student body is still primarily upper-middle class.



SQ: 2 asked, “Have students’ perceptions about race ever created conflict in the classroom?” Only a few professors said they had experienced problems with students making racist or derogatory remarks in the classroom. Of those that did, they made it clear these kinds of comments were not acceptable. Several professors mentioned working to create a safe classroom environment where students could feel comfortable. One professor explained a problem he had with a group of students that included one African American female student: the other students assumed they were more intelligent and ignored her contributions even when the female student's answers were correct and the group answers were not.

SQ: 3 asked, “Have you participated in pluralism or diversity training at RIT or elsewhere? How has participating in diversity programming influenced your teaching?” Several interviewees recalled taking diversity training as a part of their preparation to be on hiring committees. Most professors could not recall taking diversity training related to interaction with students here at RIT, of those who had, most did not feel that it influenced their teaching in the classroom. One professor commented that diversity training “annoys the heck” out of him and mandatory diversity training has “pissed everyone off.” This professor feels that teachers shouldn’t needed training to understand the importance of treating every student equally.

SQ: 4 asked, “How do international and American students interact differently with you?” Most professors felt that international students are more respectful and more formal than American students. Many are cognitive of a perceived “very large gap” between certain nationalities of international students and professors. One mentioned that it’s a kind of culture shock for international students to see American students and professors interacting conversationally. Another stated that some international students struggle with females as professors. A third mentioned that it is harder to joke or tease international students like the professor would with an American student.

SQ: 5 asked, “How do international and American students differ in their interactions with other students?” One professor mentioned that American students act one way among themselves, the same is true of international students, and students behave a third way in a mixed group of American and international students. Another professor mentioned the differences between students are “quantitative not qualitative.” Like students have a tendency to clump together, one professor mentioned that he feels it is his job to manipulate the environment by breaking up these groups and encouraging students to interact with others. When conflict arises between international and American students, one professor stated, “If they do have a problem, I do not interfere, but let them resolve the conflict themselves.” Another professor mentioned that prejudice can arise from both sides, not all countries are fond of Americans.

SQ: 6 asked, “Do you find that international students who speak English as a second language (or Deaf students) have larger degrees of communication apprehension? How do you help international and deaf students overcome their shyness?” Many professors

feel the largest diverse population on campus is Deaf students. Professors also mentioned the problem of communicating with Deaf students through an interpreter: communication misunderstandings and the lag time necessary for interpretation seem to be the biggest issues. One described it as Deaf students being “in limbo.” Some also mentioned similar frustration experienced by other students in the class. All international students are not the same and what trends they follow depend on where they are from and how long they have been in the US. Many did not perceive a problem with international students speaking in class, however a few noted that international students might avoid speaking in large group situations. When this apprehension occurs, small group situations can help to empower reluctant students to communicate. One professor pointed out that some international students are actually very eager to practice their English in class. Strategies for working with diverse students included strategic pairing for group projects, working with students one-on-one outside of class, think-pair-share activities, creating new ways to communicate including online and small groups.

## **Discussion**

The present research investigated how RIT professors address topics of diversity in their classroom. A benefit of using open-ended questions in the survey allowed for an in-depth conversation with each professor about diversity. After carefully reviewing related literature about various aspects of diversity in education common themes arose and these themes stood out during the interviews as well. Based on their responses, it is clear that the Eisenhart Outstanding Teaching award-winners feel that diversity is important to address and incorporate when lecturing and interacting with their students.

The discussion will compare the professors’ interview responses to the literature previously reviewed. In response to SQ: 1, professors commonly felt that RIT is attempting to address diversity and enforce the importance of the need for diversity-related content to be incorporated in lectures and class activities. Previous research has also noted the importance of recognizing international diversity in educational settings (Yook & Albert, 1998, Nakene, 2006, and Holmes, 2005). Furthermore, Johnson & McIntosh (2009) noted the need for professors to be trained in understanding the challenges that Deaf students face in education. The RIT professors discussed that they do notice differences in the interaction of international students and American students with themselves and with their classmates. Research by Yook & Albert (1998) supports the responses to survey questions 3 and 4. They found that differences exist between feelings towards the appropriateness of negotiation between Korean and American students, the American students were found to feel that negotiation situations were more appropriate in 12 of the 13 situations studied (Yook & Albert, 1998). Another study found for students who do not speak the native language of the area in which they attend college, that their likelihood for participation varies between Japanese students attending an Australian school and the native Australians (Nakene, 2006). Nakene (2006) noticed that Japanese students did not usually participate unless called upon by their professor.

This is important to note because the RIT professors discussed that they do encourage students who are more shy and quiet by calling on them specifically. In response to SQ: 6 professors provided other options for participation such as the online website discussion boards that are provided in RIT's Online course environment called MyCourses.

After reviewing the responses to the survey questions, many common themes appeared. These themes suggest that there is a relationship between the professors who are Eisenhart award winners and their ability to address diversity well in the classroom. Most professors felt that diversity training is attempted at RIT, while three responded that they did not feel it was necessary to be taught skills or teaching qualities that should already exist if you are a professor. One respondent stated, "If you are going to be a professor then you should already have an understanding that the students must be treated equally and fairly. Diversity training has never taught me anything that I did not already know."

RIT provides its community with a unique experience for both professors and students by being the home of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). NTID brings an added component of diversity to the campus in which students who are deaf and hard of hearing take classes with hearing students. The same can also occur with a Deaf professor teaching to hearing students. Professors responded that more training would be welcomed about interacting and assisting Deaf and hard of hearing students in and outside of the classroom. All eleven respondents had similar answers to the six survey questions. Most important to point out are: professors commonly said that RIT has room for improvement when providing diversity training, and that RIT's attempt to ensure a diverse student body and campus attitude has been noticed but not fully brought to fruition. Historical equality issues are still noticed by professors when it comes to the number of female students compared to male students, especially in the computer science department and that the majority of students that make up the student body are primarily upper-class.

The professors all demonstrated their concern for students to interact with each other and in class discussion. To encourage interaction from shy students, international students, or Deaf students, they use strategies such as breaking up the class into small groups, conducting think-pair-share activities, even using the online course tool MyCourses for class discussions. Professors found that the online environment really adds to the amount that these students participate, suggesting that RIT professors notice differences in communication apprehension just as the reviewed literature found (Johnson & McIntosh, 2009, Holmes, 2005, and Nakene, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

As suspected when this investigation began, the distinguished outstanding professors at RIT are knowledgeable about the importance of a diverse student body and classroom along with the need to possess the ability to address and explain that they feel it is important for students to learn and work with classmates that are from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Being able to encourage and break the ice between students is

important to the Eisenhart-winning professors. They feel that diversity in classmates and course content adds to the overall experience and lessons taken away from the course. They feel the ability to work with individuals from various cultural backgrounds leads to the students becoming more open to a diverse world once the class has been completed is a priceless life skill to be able to teach. These feelings are consistent with previous research done by Gottfredson et al (2008) that found a positive relationship between classroom diversity and the student's belief in equal opportunity and cognitive openness.

Our study brings an added insight into the qualities that Eisenhart Outstanding Teachers possess and provides scholars who focus their research on the need for diversity in the classroom evidence that outstanding professors have a deep appreciation for diversity in the classroom and the need to encourage all students regardless of race or culture to participate and interact with their classmates and professors.

Like any study, ours is not without its limitations. This was a qualitative study, which means that our results are very subjective and have not been scientifically proven. The interviewer also added an extra variable to our study. Our results were somewhat inconsistent because each interview was conducted by a different person and recorded in a different style—some of the interviews were recorded and written verbatim, others were paraphrased. We also used a convenience sample of RIT's Eisenhart award-winning professors, which is certainly not a representative sample for all of RIT's professors. Despite the study's limitations, it has a framework that could easily be applied to other schools across the country and globe to uncover a wealth of knowledge about diversity in education. As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century our colleges and university are becoming increasingly diverse and such studies can teach us a great deal about teaching in diverse settings.

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## **Appendix A**

### *Interview Schedule*

#### **Eisenhart Interview Questions**

Begin the interview by introducing yourself, the course, and the goals of the project.

Ask if you can audio record and/or take notes. Let the interviewees know that responses are anonymous and multiple interviews will be compiled. These interviews will serve as data for writing scholarly papers, hopefully to be delivered at RIT's Faculty Institute on Teaching and Learning (FITL) or some other education conference.

Each interview will be different. You should attempt to keep the interview like a "conversation with a purpose." While the following questions should be answered, you will want to ease into them with introductory comments and asking for general impressions, experiences, and opinions. After your interview you should type up your notes in an organized manner so members of the other research groups can make sense of them.

I suggest you begin by asking for your interviewees' background in teaching (why they do it, what they like about it, what are the biggest challenges they have faced, etc.). After these ice-breakers, introduce the four main topics and begin the questions.

As mentioned in class, it is best to ask about the topics in various orders. So, feel free to ask about them in any order you like— hopefully natural variety will occur.

#### **Topic: Diversity**

1. Does RIT put appropriate focus on understanding diversity-related issues in teaching?
2. Have students' perceptions about race ever created conflict in the classroom?
3. Have you participated in pluralism or diversity training at RIT or elsewhere? How has participating in diversity programming influenced your teaching?
4. How do international and American students interact differently with you?
5. How do international and American students differ in their interactions with other students?
6. Do you find that international students who speak English as a second language (or deaf students) have larger degrees of communication apprehension? How do you help international and deaf students overcome their shyness?