

Innovative Graduate Programs Bring Access and Mentorship to Young Scientists

By James J. DeCaro

Madeline Beach possesses an affinity for working with the elderly and a knack for statistics. She learned about the field of biostatistics while earning her bachelor's degree at Boston University, but didn't know if she would be accepted into a Ph.D. program because she is deaf. Madeline graduated in May from the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) with a master's degree in applied statistics and is entering the Ph.D. biostatistics program at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, thanks to an innovative mentoring program called the Rochester Bridges to the Doctorate Program.

"Applying to Ph.D. programs is competitive—students need top research experience, letters of recommendation, and high GRE test scores to be seriously considered for acceptance," Beach says. "As a Deaf individual, this was a barrier for me—there are few research opportunities available to Deaf students."

People who are deaf or have a hearing loss are vastly underrepresented in the ranks of research scientists in the behavioral or biomedical sciences. To address this disparity and provide role models for aspiring doctoral students, Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf (RIT/NTID) and the University of Rochester Medical Center's National Center on Deaf Health Research (URMCNC-DHR) established two innovative programs funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to build research career pathways for people who are deaf or have a hearing loss.

The first program is the Rochester Bridges to the Doctorate Program

(deafscientists.com), which trains deaf and hard of hearing students earning master's degrees at RIT to enter research doctoral programs in behavioral and biomedical sciences. Students are mentored, tutored and work in research labs at NTID, and take selected doctoral-level courses and work in research labs at URMC. To date, all four scholars completing this two-year program have been admitted to Ph.D. programs around the country.

The second program is the Rochester Postdoc Partnership for Research and Academic Career Training (RPP), whose mission is to provide highly trained biomedical and behavioral Ph.D. scientists who are deaf or have a hearing loss with the knowledge and skills to pursue research and teaching careers in academia. What sets this research postdoctoral experience apart from traditional postdoctoral research training is the emphasis on teaching scholars "how to teach" and design new courses at RIT/NTID in full-inclusion classroom settings for deaf, hard of hearing and hearing undergraduate students, making it the first such postdoc program to provide this opportunity.

Born and raised in Rochester, New York, Sarah Latchney is the first and only deaf person in her family. She majored in biology at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, and went on to complete her Ph.D. in molecular toxicology at the University of Rochester. After completing a research postdoc in neuroscience at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center and working as a medical writer for a private sector company focused on oncology

drug development, Dr. Latchney decided to return to Rochester and join the RPP to further her research and academic career training.

"The RPP is uniquely positioned to train and develop research scientists who are deaf or have a hearing loss," Latchney says. "The opportunity for mentored teaching at RIT is very rare, as most postdoctoral fellowships are solely focused on research. I am very excited to continue my postdoctoral research and to develop critical teaching skills in a very deaf-friendly environment."

Presently, there are several postdoctoral openings in the program. Applicants are considered for the RPP on a rolling admission basis. Find more information at deafpostdoc.urmc.edu.

The Bridges to the Doctorate and RPP programs are the first steps in the creation of a national Hub of Excellence in Rochester for preparing deaf and hard of hearing people in biomedical science and health-related careers. The Hub will support the academic development, professional training and career advancement of individuals who are deaf or have a hearing loss as research scientists and leaders, both through programs directly hosted by the Hub and through collaboration with other national Hubs of Excellence throughout the country.

Multi-disciplinary programs of research aimed at identifying key factors contributing to the success of deaf and hard of hearing research scientists in diverse NIH-related disciplines will focus on the interrelated domains of psychosocial development,

continued on page 46

Hearing Loss Magazine

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS

abilityJOBS.com	37
Advanced Bionics	47
CapTel	3, 11
CaptionCall	6
ClearSounds	24-25
Cochlear Americas	5
Dry & Store	46
Hamilton CapTel	2
MED-EL	48
Sound Aid Warranties	11

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Innovative Graduate Programs *continued from page 44*

educational innovation, professional socialization, institutional culture change and communication access technology. Such a hub strongly aligns with NIH's ongoing commitment and efforts to enhance the diversity of the U.S. scientific workforce in NIH-related disciplines, reaffirmed recently by NIH's development of a National Strategy to Enhance Scientific Workforce Diversity.

"Being profoundly deaf and requiring American Sign Language interpreters for effective communication, I have faced my share of obstacles in advocating for my rights," Latchney says. "It was the knowledge and understanding of my communication needs from my academic advisors and the RPP that removed these obstacles. My communication needs—and consequently, my research success—would not have been met if it was not for the support from my mentors and specific training programs that recognize the full communication access needs for deaf and hard of hearing research scientists."

To learn more, contact Dr. Stephen Dewhurst at Stephen_Dewhurst@urmc.rochester.edu, Dr. Steven Barnett at Steven_Barnett@urmc.Rochester.edu, Dr. PJ Simpson-Haidaris at pj_simpsonhaidaris@urmc.rochester.edu, or Dr. Peter Hauser at pchgss@ntid.rit.edu. **HLM**

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