

PLENARY SESSIONS

The Diversity Piece -- Where Does It Fit in the Puzzle?

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Abstract

“Multiculturalism” and “diversity” are terms that are frequently used on campus and in the work environment, but what do these really mean? How do we as educators help to build a more inclusive environment? How do students from underrepresented ethnic or racial groups survive and thrive in postsecondary settings? A panel of students and young professionals shared their thoughts and experiences about deafness and diversity as it relates to their secondary and postsecondary educational programs.



Elise Knopf: Good afternoon, everyone! Welcome to the last session of the day. I hope you've enjoyed today's workshops, and the networking that has been available to you.

We're excited to introduce the final panel. It's a wonderful group of diverse people from around the country who have come to give you a special treat. They will be talking about their experiences, their frustrations, their struggles, and you will hear their stories of their successes and their struggles.

Leading this session, facilitating will be Dr. Samuel Atcherson. Sam is a professor at the University of Arkansas. He is deaf, himself. He also has a cochlear implant, and he is an audiologist. I am really impressed. It's really nice to see that. So he will be leading and facilitating the panel. We ask that you hold your questions until the end. And if you have questions, please come up to the front. We're setting a communication rule here, and it's important because we want everyone to have access. So without further ado?

Sam Atcherson: Thank you. Welcome all of you. It's really a pleasure to be here, but it's really an honor to be in the presence of these students here. I have had a brief opportunity to chat with all of them, and their stories really – well, 75 minutes is not enough.

At the end of this presentation, you can come up and talk with them some more about their lives and their stories. They're just so wonderful. At lunch, the hair on my neck was standing up after hearing some of the stories they were sharing with me. So really it's a wonderful treat to be here.

I want to introduce them, but I am only going to say their first name because already in your program there is a short bio about each one of them. I encourage you to read them for yourself.

The panel includes Parvin, Teraca, Martha, and Minoru.

How do I start? There are so many questions that I want to ask. Let's start with some general questions, and then ask some very specific questions for each one of them. So let me just start by having all of you share something about why you are here now. How did you arrive here? Maybe something about family or your educational background.

Parvin Karobi: Hi, everybody. My name is Parvin. I am from Iran. I moved here about eight years ago. My dad had some reasons about why we moved to America. We had to get away from there. We went to Pakistan, and then we had to get accepted, and it takes a really long time. It's a really long process because you go to this huge building. It's kind of like an immigration, and they tell you that you can go to America, or you have to go back to your country, or they send you to another country. It depends on them. They make the decision. Because of my dad's good reason, they told us that we can come here. So after six months we came to America.

I was brought up oral. I just two years ago learned sign language. So to this day I am still learning a lot, and I had a really tough time when I moved here because of the culture, and language.

Teraca Florence: Hello. I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. I went to a mainstream school my entire life. What about my background and my family? Some of them had dropped out of high school. Some had gotten a high school degree, and that really encouraged me to get a better education. My goal was to get my high school degree and graduate with distinction. So basically, I'm the first in my family to do that.

All my life I've noticed that my parents have struggled. That's caused me to become a lot more independent, and for me to think about what I need to do to be successful.

Martha Davies: My name is Martha and I am from Africa. I am actually from Sierra Leone which is in West Africa near the ocean. I live in Minnesota now with my mom and with my grandmother.

First of all, when I was in Africa, we lived in a refugee camp. There was civil unrest. It was a horrible war, and we were able to escape to a refugee camp. There were no educational opportunities for me there, so we moved to another refugee camp that was called Gambia. We continued there for six years with no educational opportunities.

Fortunately we were able to move to America. We came with our family, and I'm living with my family now. I was able to go on to school and to college. I attended Hennepin Technical College. I was able to get my certificate of completion this past May. And that's me.
(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: I was born in Japan. The town that I was born in was Kyoto, and this is the sign for that. (*demonstrates sign*)

I went to the deaf school there probably until I was four or five. Throughout Japan in deaf schools oral education is a very common philosophy. From there I was mainstreamed for elementary school through high school. My dream was to learn English, a foreign language. I pursued that dream when I became a senior.

My dream was to go to a university and study foreign language. Mostly that foreign language was English. The problem was that most universities looked at me and said, "Well, you're deaf and how can a deaf person study a foreign language? How do we support that endeavor?"

I had a chance to visit several universities. I could apply, I could go in, and I could take the test, but once I got in, their philosophy was, “This isn't our problem. This is your problem. You need to take care of yourself.” And that caused a problem for me.

One option was to go to America. So in my senior year I made the decision that I was going to America. I arrived about 10 years ago, in 1998. I first went to school, and it was a ESL program. There were no support services for the first six months. It was a very frustrating experience. Lipreading English was tough. Reading and writing was okay, but lipreading was most difficult.

So I transferred to Harper College in Illinois for one semester. It was a wonderful semester with an ASL/ESL program for the deaf. After that I transferred to the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and NTID, and I have been there for nine years. I graduated with my BS degree in technology, BA in technology, and now I am working full-time at NTID while at the same time attending graduate school which brings me to where I am today.

(Applause)

Sam Atcherson: Now I am sure that many people here are curious about cultural barriers you might have experienced. One culture may be your country or your community, but another culture is the Deaf culture. I am sure that there were some shocks involved. So can you share some of that, not specifically educational experience, but your culture? How did that affect or impact your communication?

Parvin Karobi: Well, first of all, there is culture and also religion, too. I am Muslim, and I have had a hard time here because most of the people tend to be Christian. Sometimes people do not understand where you are coming from, or they could be a little bit racist. People misunderstood me sometimes because they think I talk really good and they assumed I was hearing. That happened, too.

Teraca Florence: As most of are you probably familiar with, the Black community, we tend to know everyone. People tend to be involved in gangs, and drugs, and violence and all of these different issues. And it's a lot of drama. But that's not always true. It's not true.

In the environment that I am actually from, it's much more the ‘hood. We use a lot of slang language quite frequently. It can be really hard for me because I have bad habits of swearing. I realize I have to change that. I know that I am in a different environment now from where I was. And English in a more formal environment is different.

So in my mind, I have to change what is normal to me or natural to me. I have to change myself and get out of that small box. I have to expand my mind and really envision learning from a different culture, a different community, a different language and everything that's involved in that. Everything was thrown at me all at once, and I've just had to adapt.

The high school dropout rates in the Deaf Black community are very high. But most of us have motivation, and that motivation is from our friends and from our parents. Because we feel like we have to hold those things, sometimes people say, “You trying to be white now?” We get that kind of attitude back from our community. “Oh, you want to be out there with white people. Oh, please, stay with us.” This mentality. And it's whatever they think. What's my response? No, I'm not white. I'm still black. Look at my skin. See? You see it's black. That hasn't changed.

Inside of me there is a change that's happening, but the outside is still the same as it was before. So that's something that I struggle with.

Martha Davies: Well for me in West Africa, wow, there were so many concerns that our family had in trying to go to the deaf school when I was a younger child. It was difficult. There was no education for deaf children there. There were no interpreters available. There were no teachers who knew sign language. It just wasn't even available.

There were a number of deaf children in my classroom, and we would wait for a teacher. The teacher would start speaking or writing on the board, and the deaf students in my classroom could not hear who did not understand. I would advocate for myself; I stood up and I said, "Excuse me, I can't hear you. What are you teaching us because I can't hear anything?"

The teacher looked at me and said, "You need to sit down and wait. I will talk with you after class. I will teach with you one on one. You wait."

I had to tolerate that treatment, and I felt so sad for all of the deaf children that were in this mainstream classroom. The teacher would speak and write on the board, and we were totally lost. When the teacher got finished, she immediately left the classroom. There was no one-on-one time, and how were we going to pass our course work? We couldn't. The education was so poor. So I had to tolerate that.

As time went on, I moved into high school. In high school I was the only deaf student in the entire class. The same education went on where the teacher would write on the board. I struggled and was frustrated; I got sad. I wanted to have education. I wanted to improve my experiences. I wanted to be on par with my hearing peers, but I felt so alone being deaf.

Then I felt that there needed to be more advocacy, and so I had to advocate for myself once again. I would raise my hand, and say, "Please, I am deaf and I can't hear what you are saying to me and I don't understand." There's no access. I got punished for that, for standing up for myself. The teacher did so with a rod and hit me on my head and I began to cry. Of course, all of my classmates laughed. And I had to endure that, sit in class, and cry. I realized that all of my grades were going down. My self-esteem was going down. We were very poor, and my family was very sad for me.

Once we moved to America, they saw a great improvement. I was able to work with Greta who is in the audience with me, and she was a great deal of help for me. She helped me understand what was going on. I didn't even know about currency. I was thinking that the dollar was equivalent to \$100. My mom, she used to give me \$2 and \$3, and I was able to say I am happy with that. Going to school with that I felt like I was rich, realizing now I was not.

(Laughter)

But to me, you have to understand, for me that was. Greta was able to educate me. She taught me about mathematics, how to budget my money, and about currency. Oh, okay, now I realize I am not so rich.

(Laughter)

When I went home, my mom would work with me and she would say to me, "Come with me. I will give you three or four or five dollars." I would say, "Fine, Mom." When she gave me money, I asked, "How much money are you giving me?" And my mom replied, "Well, you know this is the normal \$3. "Ah, Mom," I said, "That's not enough. I need to have \$20 or \$25."

(Laughter)

My mom would be somewhat shocked and wanted to know how I learned about these currencies. I told her that was why I was going to school. I am getting that experience. I didn't learn anything before, but Greta has taught me a lot, and so I appreciate that it's changed my life.

(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: Well, I have been here for almost 10 years, and memory has faded over that period of time. But I'll be leaving the U.S. in three months in July.

In looking back, one of the similarities among Asian cultures is that the parents tend to not praise you. You don't tend to hear "Congratulations, good job." Parents will tell you to work and get good grades, and you do that. Well, of course, that's what I am going to school and studying for. When I came to the U.S., I started receiving many more positive comments. In the back of my mind, it made me wonder, "Did they mean it, or did they not mean it?"

I was never exposed to that at home. Once in awhile I would get a comment, but, you know, you are supposed to be humble in public. Then here I come back and I receive these accolades and congratulations and everything directed at me. I am not saying that my home culture was wrong, but it was just different coming to America. I had to learn how to accept these compliments. That was a bit of a shock.

Sam Atcherson: Now I want to change the topic to something more educational. All of are you going to college, or maybe you just graduated from college. Can you share your experience what was interesting to you? What was shocking to you? What was maybe some of your barriers educationally when you went into college or school? I'm talking about after high school. What was different for you?

Parvin Karobi: This is my second year at Georgia Perimeter College (GPC). In college you have more opportunities, like you have more access like note-taking, sign language interpreters, and C-Print. In high school you don't have that many options. Not all schools have all the interpreters. For me, so far, I have been doing really good. I have no problems with anything at all So it's been good, yeah.

Teraca Florence: I've always grown up with deaf and hearing and in the mainstream. Most of my interpreters are pretty good, but it was always limited for me. I just graduated from high school a few years ago, so I am still learning what to do in college and how things go.

My first exposure in college surprised me. I sort of thought, "What?" They said, "You have to take care of things." And I said, "Me? I have to take care of it? You are relying on me?" Back in high school I was so spoiled. They would take care of things for me. They would say, "You need to do this, and now this is your homework.

(Laughter)

And in college, uh-uh. It wasn't like that.

(Laughter)

It's like it's all you on your own, girl.

(Laughter)

I thought, "Okay." Well, the first time my dad and I went to the disability service office, I remember we sat down and talked about all of the different things that needed to be done. My dad said, "Thank you. We're done." And I kicked my dad out, and I said, "I am going to take care of it

now. I wanted to be more independent.” I didn't want to depend on as many people so much. So I got him out of that room, and I did not want to have to be dependent on anybody. I only wanted to depend on myself. I wanted to be my own self-advocate.

When it came to class work and everything in my schedule, everything seemed fine. I was able to pick the courses I wanted. I am not a morning person. I hate the morning. So I picked all afternoon classes, and I really had a lot more options than I have ever had in high school.

High school seems so limited now. If I wanted an interpreter for a class, I couldn't ask for it back in high school because there were no interpreters there. But someone was already there taking care of it. Now in college, I can ask for and request a specific interpreter by name. Maybe some aren't available, but some are. There's no guarantee.

I just started to learn that sometimes we really can't get exactly what we want because of limitations, but if we know we can always speak what's on our mind. So that was a huge shock and change for me. I'm still learning, though.

Martha Davies: Well, remember coming from West Africa there was no education. What I did get, my education was poor. So when I came to America, I went to a school and participated in the Vector program at school. It's a transitional program that was where I was able to take a number of different courses, such as English, mathematics, reading, banking courses, and things like that. I was able to take a number of different courses, and I was able to work with interpreters one-on-one in each of those courses.

Then I took a course in the printing program at Hennepin Technical College. I was able to complete a certificate in that printing program, and I learned so many different things. I gained experiences on the various machines. I was able to learn how to do graphics. I was able to work with the various inks and the various colors that we had. Sometimes the machines were quite complex and I didn't quite know what the name of that was, or what this part was, and I would ask the interpreter, “What's this?” or “What's that?” and the interpreter was able to provide that information for me. The interpreter for me was really a huge help.

In Africa we didn't have that service. How was I supposed to learn? How was I supposed to gain a skill? In America you are quite lucky to have that.

The interpreter worked with me on the various machines that I had in printing. I was able to concentrate on how the machines worked, and I was able to work in my first class. We had to learn how to do maintenance and various machines and learn how to fix things. That was the first class I took.

The teachers were smart, too. They would do something to the machine that would make it not work right. We would have to try to come in and figure out what they had done. I wasn't stupid. I had read the manual.

(Laughter)

So I was able to figure out that it's supposed to look like this, and it's supposed to run like this. I was able to fix things according to steps -- number one is supposed to do this and number two is supposed to do this. And the interpreter would work with me. She was very encouraging. So that increased my motivation to learn. I wanted to do that.

Coming from Africa, you know, I knew that I wasn't going to learn anything. Now I had the opportunity and the motivation to gain education, and I wanted to finish it while I was still young. You people here have already gone through school and have already finished college. I have the same motivation as you to learn. So I am working with the machinery.

The first course I took was one-color printing, and then I moved on to two-color printing. After that, I took three-color printing, and that's all on one sheet of paper where you have multiple colors. My teacher even complimented me that I learned quickly, and I said, "Yes, when you have a good teacher it's easy."

We learned so much. So I've just graduated with my certificate of completion and I am looking for a job. I am also taking care of my grandmother. She has been quite ill, and so that's what we're doing now. Thank you.

(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: When I was in Japan we never had interpreters or any type of support services. I just relied on lipreading throughout that educational experience.

However, when I got to the U.S., I attended three different schools. Now, at the first school there were no support services. Harper College, the second school, had some wonderful support services there. The third school was RIT which has, as you know, over 130 full-time interpreters and provides thousands of hours of note-taking services. So I was able to compare these three experiences. I've had to adjust going from having nothing and not knowing how to advocate for what I needed.

Please understand that when I came to America, it was a new place. My ASL skills weren't all that great, even in the second situation where there were support services. I had to learn "A-B-C," and "My name is..." It's kind of hard to understand what's going on in the college classroom when you are learning language at that level. But they did provide CART services and captioning, and that was wonderful.

They tried providing an interpreter as an experiment, and that just worked well for me because I could go back and forth from there. With my strong English background through studying English in high school, I was able to pick up vocabulary. So my ASL skills improved as time went by. From there I was able to get into RIT.

RIT became more of a challenge because the academic level was higher and the information was much more complex. Sometimes the class moved at a pace that was much faster than I was used to with having other hearing classmates in there. But over time and by having accommodations and note-takers, I was able to get by. There was a challenge with resources there because there are so many deaf students. RIT provides excellent coverage, but there are last-minute exceptions where somebody is sick and can't show up. So, you have to deal with that.

I now am in my graduate program, and I am studying public policy. There's a lot of discussion that goes on in the classroom and the interpreter has to keep up with that. It's a little frustrating for me because the back-and-forth discussion is kind of hard to follow, and I am learning how to advocate for myself. That includes telling my classmates about using an interpreter and slowing the pace down. I say things like, "I am deaf, I have an interpreter. I need the opportunity to learn here. Can we create more pauses during the discussion?" and that works out well in that environment.

(Applause)

Sam Atcherson: Wow! I am already very, very impressed with this group. They seem like very, very goal-oriented people. But I am curious about something. What is your ultimate goal? What do you want to do? What do you see yourself doing in the future?

Parvin Karobi: My major is in social work. So that's like number one. I want to really get my bachelor's degree. Hopefully I will go to New York to RIT to get my master's. That's my number one goal.

(Applause)

Teraca Florence: My goal when I finish Georgia Perimeter College is -- well, let me back up before I really get started. I'd like to become a teacher.

I am from a small family. My friends and teachers also have motivated me because I tend to be more of a bossy personality type. That's just my habit. And I love to help kids. I want to show kids what you can do as a deaf person. I don't care whether you can hear or not. You can't stop us. So we need to put that aside, period.

I'm trying to get my bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and perhaps a Ph.D. We'll see how the money situation works out.

(Laughter)

I love to teach, and that's it. So we'll see how it goes.

(Applause)

Martha Davies: Well, my ultimate goal is that I need to get more education. The reason is I'm from a place that offered no education to me. I'm in a place now that I know that I need more education. I need to be focused and I need to continue in college educational experiences. I want to work toward a good job. I want to be like you people.

(Laughter)

(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: For me, I've had enough of education.

(Laughter)

I've been in school for quite some time and I'm ready for the world.

(Laughter)

I used to be in information technology, the IT field, and right now I am working at NTID in a program called PEN-International. I've learned a lot through that work over the past three years. I guess my passion is to involve the community on that level. So I've changed my major to public policy.

After I leave RIT, I hope that some day, in my 30s or 40s, I might be involved in the WFD, the World Federation for the Deaf, or the U.N. I'd enjoy working with a variety of different disability organizations. I am improving my skills working toward that end. So, you know, the dream doesn't stop. You continue on towards the dream. But school is done.

(Laughter)

(Applause)

Sam Atcherson: The next question that I have may not apply to all of you, but some of you have had to learn different languages. When you came to America you really had to learn English as one language, but you really had to learn ASL, too. Can you share with us your experience on that? Did you have frustrations? Are you happy about it? How do you feel?

Parvin Karobi: At home I speak Farsi. It's really hard because when I go home I have to speak Farsi with my parents because they don't speak English at all, and they don't know sign language either. So I have to keep translating back and forth. It can be frustrating because sometimes I know the words for English, but I don't know the Farsi. Sometimes I know the Farsi, but I don't know the English word. So that's a huge problem I have right now, even though I am trying and working on it.

Martha Davies: Well, for myself, there was a different language. You have to understand that in Africa it's a much slower pace. It's more like your old sign language that we use in West Africa, but it's in a much slower pace. When I came to America and I saw deaf people signing, I thought they went so fast and I would miss so much. I felt like saying, "Excuse me, would you slow down? I don't understand what you are saying."

Sometimes I would embarrass myself. I was too shy to even ask. I took a ASL course at the Vector program, and so I would start kind of "stealing" signs from deaf students. I felt that I'd miss so much if my eyes ever closed. I was afraid to blink them, and I would work with my friends and say, "Practice with me, practice with me." Sometimes my friends would say, "Wait a minute," and they would work on their SideKicks. And I'd wait for them, and we would practice and work on that. I got to a point where I felt I was more natural in my signing, and so now I have a SideKick, and now I tell my friends, "Wait a minute."

(Laughter)

(Applause)

So I have learned some things. I am "stealing" ideas from the bright kids as far as what they've already learned. They already know many things. I didn't want to follow people who didn't know how to learn. I wanted to learn how to do things, too.

When my mother had me, she said that I was born hearing, and that I had gotten ill; I became deaf, profoundly deaf, and I didn't hear anything. And my voice went down, as she said. But my family didn't know any sign language. They only spoke. But I never forgot my home language. I never forgot how I spoke with my mother, and so we have home sign languages that we use, but other people wouldn't necessarily understand that.

Now I'm able to communicate with my friends, and I feel like I am on par with them where I didn't feel that way before. I did have wonderful teachers in my school, and I really appreciate that. They worked so hard with me to improve my experiences. They were so patient with me. Two of my teachers are here. One is Greta, and the other one, Kathy, is here as well. They've been such wonderful teachers. I am proud of myself as well. So thank you.

(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: I knew Japanese Sign Language before I came here. It was a challenge for me to learn a new sign language. When I was at Harper College, that's when I was in for my first deaf culture shock. That was my introduction to American deaf culture. The friends that I met with were your tougher type of students. They would sign a particular way, and then they would say, "Well, you don't understand?" And they would just keep moving on. That's the environment that I learned in. I wouldn't ask them to repeat, but after a couple of months I learned how to behave with the

group. As time went by, say within three or four months, I started signing. I was able to express my opinion much better. But I had to do that by setting aside Japanese Sign Language. I don't have enough memory capacity for all of those languages.

(Laughter)

It was successful for me, but I had to put Japanese Sign Language on the side. I did learn ASL, and when I got to RIT it was a very diverse environment. It's a broad spectrum: you have oral students, you have some students that use Sim-Comm, you have some that sign PSE, and you have those who use ASL. You pick up the culture that you are in, and you learn how to traverse that continuum working with those who are oral deaf and those who use ASL. The deaf community is not a community of only ASL users. The deaf community itself is a diverse community.

(Applause)

Teraca Florence: I wanted to say before in my previous environment, we used to use Ebonics, which sort of means that we would -- I guess it means that we would not pronounce everything. Like "Wassup?" or "You is something, something, something," and we would talk like that.

It was so hard for me because I was signing, and there was English. When I was with my Black hearing friends, they're like, "Yo, wassup girl, and what's going down?" Et cetera, et cetera. I couldn't follow it. When I was signing with people, that kind of threw them off, too, because they couldn't understand me. I was trying to figure out who am I? Where do I fit in? Who am I talking to? It all depends.

With my mom at home, we have some home signs. I struggle a lot trying to teach my mother the right way to sign things because she wants to do it her way. When I'm talking with my friends, we sign and talk at the same time because we grew up with each other. I know hearing people. I know what they're like and I want people to understand me better. So I try to use my voice and switch a little bit.

With deaf people, I am different. I've been exposed to that since I was 14. It was a little late. I hadn't learned ASL until then. But I did Sign with deaf people around the age of 14. Some deaf people say, "Oh, you sign too English, girl. We're not going to sign with you." I was surprised and said, "What? I sign too English? I am deaf like you. I don't have a problem with you. I don't get it." So I thought, "Okay, fine. I am going to figure out what's going on." And I would study the way that they would sign with each other and their communication styles. I would figure it out, and now I think that I have improved 1,000%. It's the same people who used to put me down, but now I can go back to them and use American Sign Language with them and say, "See, I got it now! Uh-huh."

(Laughter)

It didn't take me forever to learn it, but I did.

(Laughter)

(Applause)

Martha Davies: You go, girl!

Sam Atcherson: I thought this was a panel and not a comedy.

(Laughter)

This is really wonderful. About 15 minutes before we arrived for this panel, I was just noticing that we're altogether in a room, and we have some people from international countries, and still we are

communicating. Wow. And I think that's something impressive about ASL itself. So now we have this great networking opportunity.

Anyway, changing topics, hmmm, what do you do for fun?
(*Laughter*)

Parvin Karobi: I love hanging out with my friends, and, of course, going to the club. It's good to go out in the mall shopping and fashion. I like just getting together with my family every Sunday.
(*Applause*)

Teraca Florence: I'm a teacher at heart and I just finished my second year of studying at GPC. I love dance and go shopping and playing sports, like basketball. I was into sports before, and I'm a fan of the University of Georgia. I like watching ESPN, and I'm very into sports. One of my goals was to be a dancer. I wanted to do dancing with the Atlanta Hawks. That's my dream.
(*Applause*)

Martha Davies: What I do for fun? I love to make people happy, and I just hate to be bored with anything at all. So I thank God that we, all of us, are able to use our hands and work hard.

I have been able to get lots of experiences making clothes. I make beads and chains and necklaces. So I have skills that I use to make jewelry. I feel quite good at it. I've made things at home, and when I've gotten bored I get all of my bracelets out. I've got them in a box. I get out my beads, and I come up with creative ideas about what I am going to do. What colors match? What goes with a particular outfit that I've got? So I will come up with some beautiful designs.

I have been able to sell some of my jewelry and make money from that. All of the beads have come from West Africa. I bought them here, but they originated in West Africa. There's one deaf boy who swims in the waters and dives to find some of the things in the water. He shapes those into beads, paints them, and does some intricate designs on these beads. He sends them to me in America, and I make jewelry and earn money. Then I am able to send money back to him for the work that he has done. Remember that West Africans are generally poor, and I am able to earn money here and send it back to him for the effort and work he has done.

At home I have been able to work with my family and we have fun. My grandmother oftentimes is very bored. So I ask her, "Granny, can you tell me about your past? What was your experience like? What was school life for you like? When did you meet my grandfather? When did you get married? I like hearing those stories. It's my time to hear the stories that you have to share." So my grandmother will share how she went to school and how things used to be. It's very fascinating to me.

I love shopping.
(*Laughter*)

When I go shopping, I have to be careful with my money. You know, with no job right now, I have to be careful. Sometimes I will go shopping, and I am addicted, and it's like, "Mama, can I have that one?" I am somewhat of a pest when it comes to that. Yeah, I like having money, but right now I have no job so I have to depend on my mom. I can't shoplift, and I can't take it without paying for it. So my mom has been very gracious.

What else do I do for fun? I spend time working with friends, text messaging, VP'ing with friends, making my jewelry, and having fun with family. Those are the things that I take care of, like the kids at home. I am a very happy person always. That's my nature.

(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: Well, you may think that I am boring person because I work all day and I go to grad school all night. Then I work on my thesis, so it's 24/7. I have no life.

(Laughter)

But it will soon be over this May when, hopefully, I will graduate.

I do love to travel. I've been to more than 30 states here in the U.S., over on the West Coast, the East Coast, and the Midwest. I haven't hit the southern states yet, but some day.

I also love to go out with my friends to coffee houses. We have a wonderful coffee house that's open until 11:00 or 12:00 midnight. Friends get together and we chat. We have tea. I complain about my work... yeah, who doesn't? But we do have a good time. And that's it. I really don't have the money to go out and shop, but, yeah.

(Applause)

Sam Atcherson: I am already seeing the four of you as future leaders. Maybe you already are involved in leading your communities, or your friends, or your school. If you are doing something now, you can share that? If not, what do you plan to do to impact your community and your friends? How are you encouraging them?

Parvin Karobi: I am going to think.

Teraca Florence: I need to think, too.

Parvin Karobi: That's a hard question.

Teraca Florence: Martha?

Martha Davies: Well, please understand I am not quite sure about this particular question. During one summer a couple of years ago, I worked at a camp in northern Minnesota. I worked there with a bunch of deaf children. There were other campers there as well who had physical problems, but there was one particular day where they had a deaf teenage party. It was on their last day at the camp, and I was able to teach a small group of kids how to act and perform. I had learned this in Africa.

So I took those experiences, and I shared that with the four girls and the four boys, and it was so wonderful. We got together. I shared with them. I said, "If you don't mind, I am going to teach you an African dance." So we worked that out, and we were able to show the audience what we did on our last day. We were able to do that before they went home. The kids were motivated to do it, so we taught them the entire week this particular dance routine. The boys and girls wore the same clothes, matching outfits. I was quite proud of what they did and quite proud of what I did as far as teaching them.

I was thinking that maybe one day I could become a leader for deaf individuals and teaching them dance and performing arts, and maybe try to be equal with the hearing community. Oftentimes we feel like deaf people can't do that. We're not animals. We can do things. We can do everything that hearing people can do, and that's what I've realized.

(Applause)

Teraca Florence: Okay. I am ready. I just realize what I wanted to say.

This summer I am going to be working with deaf children from 6-12 years of age, all deaf. I won't work the entire summer, but I am willing to give up part of my summer to work with children because I think that they need us as deaf role models more than I need my time because I'm not selfish. I'm more than willing to give back to the deaf community. I appreciate everything that they've done to give to me to help teach me to change my characteristics and become the person that I can be.

Also with the Atlanta Hawks, I want to dance with them. So, yeah, that's all.

Minoru Yoshida: Hmm, I'm feeling a little guilty because I wasn't really involved lately. I have been focusing on myself.

I am involved in NTID deaf international students group. These are students who have come, like us, and have made their way to the U.S. We've established a support group. I was one of the founders of this group back in 2003. It's moved along, and it's done quite well. I've worked on that. The group has grown. It showed marked improvement, and I am happy to see how it's evolved over the years.

For the future, you know, I'm just not sure yet. If I don't finish my master's degree, I don't know what I am going to do, but I want to go back to Japan. I do want to get more involved with the deaf community there. I left there when I was 18, but what my understanding of community at the age of 18 was compared to what it is now is entirely different, so I want to go back. I want to go back to my country of origin. I want to go back and meet with the deaf community there and work with the deaf community there and improve things for the deaf community there.

(Applause)

Parvin Karobi: I haven't involved with the community that much. It's really hard for me because of my parents' situation because I have a lot to take care of at home. So I taught as much as I can. In the future I hope to get involved more in deaf culture, and give more of my time. I just wanted to say that.

(Applause)

Sam Atcherson: When the four of you look out there in the audience, you see teachers. You see VR counselors. You see disability specialists. You see audiologists. You see administrators. What would you want to share with them? They are working with the future children, so can you give them some advice?

Parvin Karobi: I'm thinking.

(Laughter)

Teraca Florence: Well, she stole that. I am thinking, too.

(Laughter)

I know I could go on and on and on here. But for the people who are here, I want to say thank you. Thank you for bringing me here. I'm from Atlanta, and this is my first time heading up north.

I am really blessed that I have the opportunity to see some the world and to see it while I am young. You have influenced me to become what I want to become some day. And I'll pay you back one day. Guaranteed. You are the best.

(Laughter)

Love to all!

(Applause)

Martha Davies: Well, that is really a good question. For me, if it had not been for Greta and the other professors, I would not be here. I would not be successful. You know what I mean? If I didn't have the teachers out there, how was I going to be successful? The teachers are who made me successful, and I thank you so much for making my name out there, for sharing my experiences. I truly want to thank God for blessing me with you and those of how work with deaf children.

There are some teachers who are not really good at working with deaf people, who are somewhat clueless, and sometimes when they're trying to teach the deaf children need more. They need motivation. They need a way. I have concerns about that because they're not able to work with the children well.

But my teachers have been phenomenal. They have worked so hard with me. They've endured with me. They've had patience with me. I came from a place where there was no education. I came here to improve my experiences, and they have worked so terribly, terribly hard with me. They've sat with me one-on-one, teaching me the basics, teaching me currency, what one penny was, and what the "cheap" word was. The lessons went from what was simple to more complex concepts. It was hard work. I appreciate so much the work that you have done with me. I wouldn't be here today if it had not been for you. I appreciate your time.

You teachers in the audience, you audiologists, you administrators, be patient with your deaf students. Work with them. Help them improve their experiences. Help them become the person that they need to be. The students – we students -- truly, truly need your help. I thank you so much.
(Applause)

Minoru Yoshida: I could name all of the individuals, and then I would take all of the 10 or 15 minutes that we have left doing so. I just want to say that I do want to thank the people that have given of their time throughout this process of mine. Without their support I wouldn't be here.

But I guess one simple message that I want to say is that I've learned to be frustrated with people's attitude. It's an attitude of always thinking inside the box. Now, I've met people out there, and they say, "Well, you are different." What does that mean? Well, I understand their perspective. They see students all the time.

But I encourage people to think outside the box once in awhile. It's an important thing to do. For me, as an international student, my struggle is to let people know what I see and what I understand and what I've been through. As an individual without language skills in the past sometimes, you meet wonderful people out there. Sometimes you meet some frustrating people out there, and sometimes it's very hard to get people to understand what you are trying to convey. Yes, I've been here for many years, and I understand that it's difficult for humans to change, but understand that there are different perspectives out there. I encourage you to think outside of the box and discuss that amongst each other.

Parvin Karobi: I just want to say thanks. I am so blessed that I have VR, audiologists, I mean, everything. There is one specific person I really thank God that I met her, and that is Katherine Bruni. If I didn't meet her, I probably wouldn't be here. I probably would have given up college.
(Applause)

Teraca Florence: I wanted to add something. I was not motivated initially at college. I was willing to drop out, willing and ready. I wanted to sit at home and do nothing. But, no. Without the help, pouring out their hearts to me, I wouldn't be the person who I am today. Without the two of them I would not be here. I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have been able to learn as many things as I have. I wouldn't be where I am right now.

I want to tell all of you people -- all of you -- that you need to pour out your hearts to help children. It doesn't matter what they have. Help them. Be honest with them. Be patient with them. It's tough, I know, and it can get on your nerves and be hard. But be patient with them because one day they will thank you, just like I am right now. I am giving my thanks out to Kathy and to Debra. They have called me on all of these different things, because I have a habit of procrastinating. Oh, my goodness, they were on my butt to get me to where I am now. And they still are.
(Laughter)

So thank you. Thank you for that. I love you, mom!
(Applause)

Martha Davies: And I think, too, that being a teacher is quite important.

Sam Atcherson: Wow, anybody need a tissue?
(Laughter)

I think that we have 10 minutes left and I'd really want to open this up to the audience. Do you have any questions for our four panelists?

Audience member: I had the wonderful pleasure recently to go to a presentation about black deaf community. This man who is a deaf person and also African-American talked about how he balanced the two cultures, and actually how he chose to identify himself. So I am curious for you. Do you identify yourself first as a deaf person with the community and culture, or do you identify yourself as your ethnic culture, or do you balance both as a dual identity?

Teraca Florence: That's a good question. I don't know. I don't identify as black. I am black. Look at my skin. I mean, that's not a big point for me. But the point for me is to not label myself black, but I am, but to label myself as deaf, period. That's it, because that's my identity. I'm not being discriminatory to other people who label themselves, but you see my point? It's just who we are. It's a color of skin. So what?
(Laughter)

Martha Davies: Now for me, that question is probably a good question. Coming from West Africa to Minnesota, I have had to mingle with a lot of black people. I also socialized with the black and white communities. I have lots of friends who understand. I've met two black boys at my school who don't socialize with other blacks. They don't have that experience. They only socialize with white people. Does that mean they feel like they're white? No. But I have both black and white friends, so I really don't know much about that.

Audience member: I mean culturally, I know that you are Iran, so how do you balance the Muslim culture with the deaf community, and for Japanese as well.

Parvin Karobi: Ask the question, please, again.

Audience Member: As a Muslim person, there are a lot of cultural aspects. How do you balance that with the hearing community and as a Deaf person as well?

Parvin Karobi: It's hard. That's all I am going to say. I am just living through it. I keep going on. So, yeah.

Sam Atcherson: I am going to add to that question specifically for you. Which of those cultures do you feel strongest with?

Parvin Karobi: I would say American, because one problem with my culture is that... well, I don't understand them all the time because they are always talk oral, so I think that's a huge problem. If they would have signed more, I would say that it would be balanced more. But in America I am more connected and feel more for them.

Minoru Yoshida: Oh, me? I get to answer. Okay. I have to come up with an answer. In Japan it's a more homogeneous culture with about 95% of the people being Japanese. So in Japan I always looked at myself as deaf first. That was the only way I was different from other people.

When I came to the U.S., all of the sudden I have these different identities: I am Asian; I am male; I am deaf; and I am white. Suddenly I started wondering, "Who am I amongst all of these different identities?" Through that and through my experiences at RIT, that's what really helped me grow emotionally and mentally, and I can honestly say that I am deaf first. That's where I identify with my other friends.

We have similar struggles, similar issues, and culture around the world. I believe deaf people around the world struggle with the same things on a daily basis. I'll have to say that's my first identity.

Yet, at the same time, there is a part of me that goes back to the Japanese culture; as you know, they're more quiet and humble. That's a direct difference from the American culture which tends to be more forthright and straightforward. After 10 years I know that it's going to be hard for me to go back there and play the nice guy.

(Laughter)

But, you know, I will do my best.

Martha Davies: Now, for me, I love the world. I love the various cultures. I learn from various cultures. How does your culture work? What does it look like? So I like the diversity. I love the world.

Sam Atcherson: Wonderful. Are there any more questions?

Audience member: If each of you could change one thing tomorrow, what would it be?

Parvin Karobi: In general?

Minoru Yoshida: What do you mean? Change it to what?

Audience member: Right now I am giving you a magic wand, and you each have one. What would you change tomorrow?

Martha Davies: What I would change tomorrow?

Teraca Florence: Man, you kill me with this question!
(*Laughter*)

Martha Davies: Well, for me, if I saw something new that I had never experienced before, how I would look and think of that from my past experiences would be that I would look at that and try to perceive it. But if I looked at something new I would try to integrate that into what I am doing if I was impressed by it. I am not quite sure if I am answering your question.

Teraca Florence: What would I change? I'd stop cussing. That's one thing that I would definitely change.
(*Laughter*)

Martha Davies: Maybe that was a good question then, huh?
(*Laughter*)

Parvin Karobi: I don't think I would change anything because everything happens for a reason. So everything has a purpose. I don't think that I would change anything at all. No.

Minoru Yoshida: Change? Change the system? Change anything? Is that what you mean?

Audience member: We have an opportunity to improve something. What? Our world? Our world is better how?

Minoru Yoshida: If I had to pick one, what comes to mind is research and studies tell us that deaf people have a third, fourth, fifth-grade reading level. That's something that we struggle with. I would make it ninth, tenth, eleventh. We see 70% of deaf people in poverty, no education, or lack of parental support. It's not just because they are deaf, but yet, it is. Their hearing peers have an opportunity to go to school and get an education. They don't have an opportunity to learn sign. That's what I would change.

I've many wonderful, wonderful educational role models that inspire me, and I think that they could become that. But deaf people around the world don't always have that opportunity. That's what I would change. That's the effect that I would change. Deaf people like us go out and advocate and change that internationally. But, see, we have what we have in America because somebody had a dream, and we moved forward with it. That would be my dream.

Sam Atcherson: Please join me in thanking the panelists. This has been a wonderful experience.
(*Cheers and applause*)

Elise Knopf: Thank you so much, Sam, for facilitating this wonderful discussion. It's really been great. And to all of you, good luck! We wish you all of the best, and I hope to see you again soon. Come back. You are always welcomed this is your family. We'll always be here to support you. So always remember that okay? Thank you so much, everybody.

