TECHNOLOGY OF HUMANITY— INSTILLING HIGH TOUCH IN HIGH TECH DEPARTMENTS

One Issue

In the early 1990's, we saw a dramatic integration of technology into our local industry and a parallel increase in instructional and assistive technology in the classroom and laboratory. The need for advanced technology skills was evident and, once developed, immediately productive for both educators and businesses. Technology had the immediate effect of supplanting many mundane routines of humanity. Faculty was on a regular in-service training regimen for implementing many new strategies, as well as new software and hardware. While we were increasing our skill levels considerably with integration of various technologies, we were not improving our human skills for instruction, advisement, and the sundry other duties of student-oriented faculty. Faculty noted, "We are getting farther from our students, and they are getting farther away from us and one another"; "We have students that can 'word process' but cannot write or adequately communicate with others"; and " I see people on our staff in the hallways whom I hardly know. Is it like that for our students and graduates?"

Technology faculties are some of the busiest people I know—learning new skills within an expanding discipline, implementing new software and hardware in labs, while maintaining the integrity of their labs. It is easy to lose contact with the rest of the campus.

A Multi-Faceted Solution

First, we set a divisional goal to increase our technology (of humanity) skills. We planned workshops and seminars that emphasized alternatives for the high tech in-service programs. "High touch" skills and attitudes became the focus of these alternative activities: problem-solving skills and their implementation in curriculum; Pryor Report seminars on personal skill development or related issues; motivational books, videos, and publications purchased, reviewed, shared, and discussed in division meetings; bi-monthly publications such as *The Professor* (DeBruyn) and books such as *The Monster Under the Bed* (Davis and Botkin) and *LogoLearning* (Parnell) for interesting discussion. These in-service programs appeared to be successful; so, the faculty, staff, and I began looking for other ways to improve our skills and attitudes.

One strategy developed from the divisional goal was to recognize excellence. Each divisional meeting begins with recognition of articles published, awards received, professional activities noted by peers, and community leadership efforts that improve quality of life. Collegewide recognition is an annual event, honoring outstanding new faculty and an outstanding veteran of five years or more. Our division submits nominees annually.

With such diversity in disciplines, curriculum and lab demands, and classroom schedules, faculty and staff often feel isolated. We instituted a monthly social, hosted by individual departments; no business is discussed, and the emphasis is on camaraderie. The social has been very successful, and departments take their turns hosting.

An annual end-of-term, one-day retreat is held each year. The retreat engages the entire faculty and staff in visioning, planning, and sharing ways of providing an even higher level of service for our students throughout the following year. A planning team works to develop an agenda of engaging activities to ensure fun and productivity.

Finally, all faculty members are academic advisors and may be asked to assist students with academic problems. Sometimes, a student not yet enrolled in a program area will require assistance with developing a semester schedule and identifying the requirements of the selected program of study. Occupational-technical programs are dynamic in maintaining current standards and remaining abreast of the evolution of technology and thoughts or theories. So, a program of study can change courses required for graduation, textbooks, content, or instructional delivery methodology regu-

larly—confusing for part-time students and advisors not directly involved within the program or technical field.

In each monthly division meeting, a program of study is showcased to assist with these advisement and assistance problems. Faculty will demonstrate or relate instructional best practices. Changes in program requirements are illustrated and reviewed. New distance education courses are introduced and reviewed by peers for content, purpose, and delivery methodology.

The Beneficiaries

The students are the direct beneficiaries of these activities. The curricula of all divisional programs have adopted general education content requirements and added problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. A senior thesis has been adopted by two associate degree programs in which both research and writing skills are emphasized. Programs now require additional writing, speaking, and interpersonal or team-based projects. A steady improvement in exit-test scores in writing and thinking skills has been documented. Graduate surveys indicate an increased appreciation for academic attainment. The nursing program reports steadily improving scores on problem-solving and psychology skill segments on the standardized tests for licensure. Follow-up graduate and employer surveys indicate increased satisfaction with the "soft" skills for success in the workforce—e.g., interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Faculty and staff benefit from timely information so necessary to improved quality of academic life, as well as improved instructional and advisement strategies. Each person can learn more about neighbors' and colleagues' pathways to success. Reducing isolation and distance can bring in-touch humans to the technology roundtable.

Earl R. Dodrill, *Chairman, Applied Science and Engineering Technology*

For further information, contact the author at Patrick Henry Community College, P. O. Box 5311, Martinsville, Virginia 24115-5311.
e-mail: phdodre@ph.cc.va.us

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