A Conversation with Wayne Blinka

Mark Long

I met with Wayne Blinka, Texas State Technical College Waco Engineering Technologies Cluster Director, over the course of a couple of afternoons earlier this year. His office is located behind the library among several of the technology departments that he oversees: biomedical equipment, lasers, telecommunications, and robotics. He is a tall fellow who is friendly enough but often seems to be drawing back just a bit as if to ask, Are you sure you're talking to the right guy? There are some other things that set him apart from the "typical" TSTC employee: he is a long-time vegetarian and his now-graying hair was a long ponytail for years before finally being cut off at the behest of his wife.

Mark Long: So, you're a graduate of TSTC yourself, right?

Wayne Blinka: I started at TSTI [Texas State Technical Institute, the precursor to TSTC] in 1976 in aviation maintenance. Actually I was more interested in what now would be called avionics which, unfortunately, did not exist at TSTC back then so I went into lasers.

ML: What's the biggest then vs. now difference?

WB: As far as the campus goes? The school is certainly more like a college campus now than an old air base. In fact, shortly after I graduated they broke ground on the electronics building which was the first big modern building project on campus.

ML: What would you say is the biggest similarity or constant from when you were here in the '70s until now?

WB: Without a doubt faculty have been the constant: always first rate. This is due to the school philosophy of hiring people who know how to do the job and then training them how to teach, a philosophy that is different from many schools.

ML: So what faculty stood out in your mind as a student?

WB: A few of the many faculty who made an impression on me—and, thankfully, many of them are still here—are John Simcik, Larry White, and Terry Kleypas. Dick Lovelace was an especially encouraging instructor, who was also chair of the Instrumentation Department [now part of Electrical/Computerized Control Systems and Robotics] at the time. He passed away many years ago.

ML: So what did these guys show you that made such an impression?

WB: The department was collegial and full of camaraderie: focused on getting students out and finding them jobs; that is, making good technicians.

ML: So, you graduated with a degree in lasers . . . then what happened?

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WB: Originally I thought I'd be doing research with lasers . . . after all, back then diode lasers were the thing and they cost thousands of dollars apiece. But, as it happens, after I graduated I never looked at a laser again except on rare occasions. Instead, I went to work for John Monroe, a local entrepreneur, who did some consulting work for TSTC in later years. Monroe's company was working on a project developing an airborne sensor to find uranium that was later sold to an oil company. I did a lot of report writing and technical documentation for the project. As well as electronics systems design and some programming.

After that I worked in Dallas for a while—couldn't take the traffic—and I came back to Waco to work as a programmer at the MHMR [Mental Health and Mental Retardation] center. Along the way I took enough classes over at Baylor University to make me, at this point, an 18-year senior.

ML: Given that you didn't work with lasers after graduation, what do you think the most valuable things you learned at TSTC were?

WB: Even though I didn't work with lasers after graduation I did learn the fundamentals of electronics, optics, and computers. I also learned to work with someone else through the pairing up of students to complete labs. People who know me will tell you that I'm not much of a group guy or a joiner. But, working in a group or team teaches you to rise above personal issues to be able to get the job done. I also learned a fair amount about technical writing and it opened my eyes to the importance of tech writing and communication.

ML: How did you end up back at TSTC?

WB: It was a complete fluke. My wife and I had sold some property and had a big tax bill to pay. So I came back here in '85 to talk to some former instructors asking for references. There was a position open in digital electronics and, even though I had never given any thought to teaching, I decided to go for it.

ML: How did you like it?

WB: I loved it. Although I have to say much of my success was due to the two-semester forerunner of the BITC [Basic Instructor Training Curriculum] that I took.

ML: What exactly did you like so much about teaching?

WB: That's a tough question. Watching people learn, helping them. It's exciting when things click in the classroom, fun to be able to help students out and get them jobs. It's one of those jobs that—when it's going well—you can't believe that you're getting paid to do.

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ML: Later on you moved into robotics, right?

WB: Right. I moved—abruptly—into robotics. In my second year Don Gillum took me aside, handed me a textbook, and said, "You've got an intro to robotics class for a group of CMT [Computer Maintenance Technology] guys starting in half an hour." So, I'm like, well, okay. But it was a great group of students and by the end of the semester they'd built an articulated robot. And this later led to four different robotics classes.

ML: Currently you're a cluster director. How did this move into administration come about?

WB: Well, I was a department chair before becoming the cluster director. About five years ago Elton [Elton Stuckly, Jr., current TSTC Waco President] became Dean of Instruction and asked me to fill in for him for about six weeks. Five years later I'm still here.

ML: So what exactly is a cluster director? This isn't a position that a lot of other schools have.

WB: Oh, I suppose it's the equivalent of a division director at other schools. The engineering cluster is comprised the electronics core, industrial maintenance, the recreational vehicle program—which is going great guns thanks to Terry Cooper—biomedical equipment and the like. The director's job is basically a lot of administrative paperwork to keep things running: employment issues, payroll/overload, raises. In addition, it's a matter of taking care of problems, often student related: they don't like their classes, don't like their teachers, they have disappeared for a while and want back in, they want a refund and so on.

ML: So what kind of people do you like having work for you?

WB: We need people who will always keep the school's mission clearly in mind: making good technicians fast. Also, it's important to be able to break bad news to people—faculty or students—without crushing them. That is, a student can earn an F but if you break the news to them the right way they'll still come back and give it another try whereas you can give a student a B and if you do it wrong you've lost them for good.

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ML: You've mentioned this point a couple of times: making good technicians fast. What exactly in your mind makes for a "good" technician?

WB: A good technician has good technical skills—of course—but also good people skills and work habits. As the advisory boards say, they want people who are going to come to work on a regular basis. That's one reason I encourage an attendance policy in the cluster although there is not a uniform one. That's because it's not just doing the class work but, rather, coming to class for the classroom experience as well. And, it's amazing, most issues students have about class attendance melt away as soon as their parents are in the room.

ML: So, overall, how do you like being a cluster director?

WB: I came to TSTC to teach, and in my heart I really miss being able to do that. For a while I tried to teach one class a semester as well as be a cluster director, but I felt like I was giving my students short shrift so I gave it up. So I'm hoping to be able to go back to instruction at some point.

ML: What's on the agenda for the future of the engineering cluster?

WB: First, to keep up with evolving technologies and figure out what the "Next Big Thing" is going to be (or isn't). Second, to make sure to remain consistent with the school's mission: make good technicians fast. Finally, to work to make the school's curriculum more integrated. That is, instead of having a vertical curriculum structure—all classes for a program working from top to bottom for that program alone—to have a more modular, horizontal approach where multiple courses can be used for multiple programs to make sure classes aren't being needlessly duplicated.

ML: So, who helps you do your job?

WB: Well, that's kind of a trick question. Either you thank a few folks and leave somebody out or you wind up thanking everyone plus your dog.

ML: Who's on the short list then?

WB: John Spradling [TSTC Waco Vice President of Student Learning] because of his support—financial and otherwise—and due to the fact that he allows me concentrate on the elements of my job that I do best. And I'd have to thank Elton for letting John Spradling do his job. The close working relationship they have was not especially evident in some of our previous administrations.

ML: Anyone else?

WB: Sandy Kleypas. She's my backup when I'm not around. Plus, she's an ideas person, and she offers her own different perspective. I'm not really a very imaginative person. I mean, I took a tech writing course here when I was a student at the same time as an English 1301 class at McLennan Community College here in Waco. I made a B in both classes. At MCC they said I was not imaginative enough; at TSTC they said I was too imaginative. So I need someone like her around.

And I have to mention Rita Walters, the cluster secretary, because she's the one who does all the real administrative work.

ML: So, I have to ask, how is it being a vegetarian at TSTC?

WB: Well, it's pretty tough, not just at TSTC but in Texas as well.

ML: I can believe it. I guess we can leave it that. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

WB: I'm still not sure you're talking to the right guy but best of luck.

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