

A Conversation with Rich Kirk

Marsha Hurley

Rich Kirk is the Director of the Student Success Office at Texas State Technical College Harlingen and I met with him on a drizzly day in early October of this year. Despite the rain outside, however, upon entering his office on the second floor of the Science and Technology building I found a place that was warm and inviting. The back wall of his office has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves—full of books, of course—and his desk showed the signs of someone who is constantly in motion. (It was also heartening to see the fall Best Practices call-for-submissions flyer thumb-tacked to his bulletin board.) As we talked about initiatives for student success at TSTC Harlingen he became more and more animated—punctuating his points by pulling books off of the shelves and papers from his desk—and it is easy to see that such passion and enthusiasm must be contagious to those around him.

Marsha Hurley: I can tell by your accent that you're not from Texas. Where are you from originally?

Rich Kirk: I actually come from Washington, D.C.

MH: How does a guy from the East Coast end up in Harlingen, Texas?

RK: I was working with a group called Bread for the World, a Christian citizens' movement against hunger. It's basically a lobbying and grassroots organization that mobilizes citizens to lobby elected representatives for anti-hunger legislation. It is interdenominational in membership and maintains a bipartisan approach to anti-hunger legislation. Anyway, at that time I was also a member of a Catholic religious community that wanted to start a community organizing project along the border of Texas. I and three others came down between 1988 and 1995 to start and continue that project. I left the project in 1995, got married, drank the water, and stayed in the Valley.

MH: It sounds like you're here for the duration.

RK: That fact dawned on me as well when I found myself buying a cemetery plot here.

MH: You received a Title V grant several years ago to develop a DORI freshman seminar class. How have efforts in that area affected student success?

RK: On average retention rates for students who enroll and complete the freshman seminar are close to 17 points higher when compared to the overall technical program

new student retention rate from fall to fall. These figures are from fall '02 and fall '03.

In addition, persistence rates are higher when we compare them to the 2000-2001 Title V baseline. For example, persistence rates for two succeeding semesters for the fall 2000 cohort was 43%. When compared to the 2001, 2002, 2003 cohorts, the rates are between 8 to 10 points higher.

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Finally, a graduation baseline was established with the 2000-2001 graduation rates for new students starting in fall 1998. For technical program students, this meant a 32.4% graduation rate. The Title V grant has an objective that by the end of the grant period we will see an increase of 20% in graduation rates over the baseline.

MH: Does your feeling of accomplishment come from these kinds of figures?

RK: My personal satisfaction comes from students succeeding and, most importantly, taking ownership of their education and the education process.

For example, I had a student come in recently who was having problems with a class and decided it would be easier to drop instead of dealing directly with the situation. I told her: it is certainly your prerogative to drop the class. But, I encouraged her to take a look at the bigger picture: how this was a pattern of behavior that might affect her in the future— withdrawing from a difficult situation instead of struggling through it—and that there were other options available to her. By the time we were done she had decided to stay in the class but, most importantly, she seemed good with the decision. That all gets back to a fundamental belief I have: no one can give you success. It's your achievement. The school can only offer doors for you to choose to go through to achieve it.

MH: How does this relate to concept of the freshman seminar course?

RK: The freshman seminar has a philosophical basis. It is rooted in a deep commitment to lifelong learning and setting this path for first-time college students is the course's charge. Striving for excellence is the motto for the course. This excellence and commitment to lifelong learning is done within the context of human development, so no two students approach their learning in exactly the same way. Therefore, the desired positive influence of the freshman seminar that will hopefully remain with students is that they learned how to apply both traditional and innovative learning strategies, knowing that the will (or motivation) to learn is something they can tame by regulating their challenges and opportunities as they pursue their life goals.

MH: What are some specific features of the freshman seminar that from your perspective make it so successful?

RK: We do several basic things. First, we provide an overview of basic learning strategies so students can learn how they learn and what options are available to them. Also, they do a career assessment through a needs portfolio. And, as well, we work to make them self-regulated learners and critical thinkers. To aid in this they use the on-line version of *StrengthsQuest* that identifies and assesses their five major signature themes out of thirty-four areas including adaptability, ideation, and intellection within themselves. Finally, we use learning communities as much as possible.

MH: Learning communities? Why do you think these are important? Can you give some specific examples of learning communities at the Harlingen campus?

RK: Learning communities are important because they help faculty and students see the connection between courses, and this facilitates the goal of shaping lifelong learners.

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An example is the present learning community that links ITSC 1309 and the freshman seminar. The freshman seminar presents skills and motivation to assist students in their adjustment to college learning. The technology aspect of the ITSC 1309 course is applied to help students demonstrate and articulate their learning process in creative, flexible, and enjoyable ways. The technology component of the learning community provides students with electronic resources to use to reflect high order thinking that surfaces with the skills and will of becoming self-regulated learners emerging from the freshman seminar course.

Of course, all of this goes with the idea of active learning. Recently my students made their own brochures and flyers to promote the principles from the "Adventures in Reading" segment we covered. First, this put to the test what they had learned: did they know enough to make a brochure? Second, a brochure indicates an audience beyond just the teacher so all of a sudden they wanted to make sure their brochures weren't "boring." (This was a concern they hadn't really voiced when it was just me looking at their work.) Third, constructing the brochure allowed them to use the computer skills from ITSC 1309 to relate this information from the freshman seminar.

MH: Next fall you're morphing your non-credit DORI freshman seminar course into a four-hour WECM course, Psychology of Personal Adjustment. What were the big-

gest challenges in this transformation?

RK: The major challenge is scheduling the classes to fit the present academic calendar, especially with the offset class start and finish times. Because the course is going to a four-hour course, it does not fit neatly into the present time slots.

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In addition, the fall semester is the greatest challenge because of the number of students who enter, and since our enrollment is growing I suspect this to remain a constant challenge. This is mostly in the area of finding classroom and lab space.

And, as well, training instructors to teach this course, if the numbers prohibit the current Student Success Advisors to meet the demand, is a potential obstacle. This course is designed so that whoever teaches will need to have at least a semester's worth of training in the course curriculum. More importantly, instructors must have a passion for students and be willing to go the extra mile in time, research, ongoing class preparation, taking on individual and team assignments, meeting with students and faculty,

and enjoying learning. Teaching this course is not for the person who believes that they just have to teach their classes, stay for office hours, and leave for the day.

MH: Was it a hard sell to get the faculty on board with having this for-credit freshman orientation class, especially in terms of incorporating it into degree plans?

RK: Not really. Once I went around to all the departments and showed them what the class was designed to do in terms of increasing student retention and graduation as well as being able to back this up with real numbers, they bought into it pretty quickly. I can't emphasize enough the fact that the faculty has been a great source of support for the Student Success Office and, because of this, the great majority of faculty were eager to continue this support with a for-credit student success course.

MH: That's good to hear. Along those lines, who are the people and/or offices in particular that have made all of this easier?

RK: There are a lot of people who have made all this possible.

First of all, I need to thank the staff of the Student Success Office. The student workers and work study students, tutors, mentors, student success advisors, secretary, tutoring coordinator, and career advisor all contribute to the day-in and day-out challenges of

assisting students to achieve excellence in their educational and career endeavors.

John Garrett, chair for social and behavioral sciences. He is a great help in assisting me with scheduling and providing ideas for student success.

Dru Doros was a great help in gathering statistical data for retention and persistence reports.

Juan Garcia, Division Director for computer information systems. He has been a great ally in helping to teach the first learning community as a pilot for future learning community projects.

Pam McCurdy, remedial instructor. She has been a great help in developing learning communities with our office.

Sue Garza, coordinator for curriculum. She has been a strong supporter for a credit freshman seminar course and for learning communities.

Al Guillen, Sam Nauman, Barbara Bennett, and Frank Lewis, Division Directors, whose support has helped communicate to faculty and staff the importance of first-year initiatives for student success.

Servando Villarreal, Pat Hobbs, Cathy Maples, and Steve Vassberg, from administration, for their influence and direction to help me navigate the college system to get things moving and accomplished.

MH: From the time you received your Title V grant there's been a lot of forward progress. What's ahead in the future?

RK: I guess, sure, that looking backward it looks like a steady progression but I think in reality we were always doing the best we could—the best we could do to hang on!—at any given moment. But, for the future, we'd like to create even more learning communities within and among the technical and academic divisions. Also, having all first-semester classes linked as communities within a division should help retention and graduation.

MH: It sounds like things are going well here. I wish you best of luck in the future and thank you for taking the time to meet today.

RK: I enjoyed our conversation. Peace and every good.

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