



LEARNING ON THE JOB

AN INTERVIEW WITH GALE SPAK

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GALE TENEN SPAK, NJIT associate vice-president, heads the Division of Continuing Professional Education and the Office of Instructional Technology and Media Services.

NJIT Magazine: Tell us something about the history of continuing professional education at NJIT.

Spak: Although continuing education programs at NJIT date back some 60 years, it was former president Saul Fenster who emphasized addressing the needs of professionals already in the workplace as a key part of our economic-development mission. We now serve these individuals with many options, enabling them to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees, take short courses, and benefit from training specifically designed to increase proficiency in the work they're doing for current employers.

When I joined NJIT in 1992, the university had just completed a Middle States self-report and visit. A suggestion arising from that visit was to create one home for three educational initiatives then administered separately — the Center for Distance

Learning, the Office of Extension Programs and the Division of Continuing Education. That's when the Division of Continuing Professional Education came into being. A few years later, I was asked to head the Media Services group, which was renamed Instructional Technology and Media Services. The reasoning was that they provide the technical foundation for distance learning as well as meeting internal and external needs for other instructional resources and video services.

NJIT Magazine: What distinguishes continuing education at NJIT from other schools?

Spak: We have the resources and flexibility to help every school and center at NJIT repackage programs to serve populations other than our own students. I believe no other college in New Jersey has a centralized continuing education program such as ours. At other schools, individual departments offer continuing education only in their particular disciplines. We're a turnkey continuing-ed resource, and not just with respect to bringing students and course content together. We also facilitate billing

and registration, making the experience of working with NJIT efficient and seamless for clients such as corporations and government agencies.

NJIT Magazine: What do you consider to be your most innovative programs and services?

Spak: There really are many, both in terms of content and technology. As an approved education vendor for the State of New Jersey, we're helping state agencies to train their workforces in specialized areas as rapidly as possible, using the latest online educational technology. For example, we're working with the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the State Police to educate our state troopers about advances in counter-terrorism. We're one of the partners in training New Jersey's first-responder community, the fire, health, and law-enforcement personnel on the front line of any homeland security emergency. We've also worked with the state's family services agency to educate thousands of employees about the food-stamp program so that they can improve service to people in need.

We partner with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to deliver on-site training in specific skills that the private sector needs. In the last 15 years, we've trained nearly 55,000 employees at 514 companies. Another aspect of working with the department involves providing online training through county-level workforce investment boards. For instance, we recently received a contract from the Atlantic-Cape May Workforce Investment Board to develop and teach various career tracks, such as pharmacy technician, information-technology specialist, and cable-TV technician.

Our graduate certificate programs have been recognized as among the best in the country. They focus on career areas where the jobs are, not just in New Jersey but across the nation. We also customize certificate and degree programs for employers, as we've recently done for Verizon Wireless and Stryker Osteonics in New Jersey.

NJIT Magazine: Are there new initiatives you would like to tell us about?

Spak: Yes, the NJIT Weekend University for working adults who want to earn an undergraduate degree is very exciting. All courses will have what is known as a hybrid-learning format. Some of each course will be given in the classroom and some online, making use of tools perfected at NJIT for quality online learning. The online component means many stu-

dents would be on campus only every other weekend. Our goal is to use the latest technology to accommodate motivated adults who have full personal and professional lives as well as educational goals.

NJIT Magazine: How do you think your programs will evolve in the near future?

Spak: As always, we will continue to be sensitive to the learning needs of individuals and to every organization's need to see results from their investment in training. We'll be building even stronger partnerships with corporations, government agencies and other organizations that must educate and train people in their areas of expertise. They'll provide the basic content and we'll design the best possible courses for teaching that content. We'll also train their trainers. I know we'll see increasing online instruction as well. A case in point is teaching New Jersey state troopers about counter-terrorism, which I mentioned earlier. Agencies such as the State Police know what must be taught. We can take what they need to know and put it into the most effective format, which in this instance is clearly online. After all, that's the best way to reach thousands of troopers who serve across the state and who have such varying duty schedules.

NJIT Magazine: Are geographic considerations, or the requirements of specific industries, likely to influence the future direction of your program?

Spak: We are focused on New Jersey; there's no doubt about that. But our efforts do have national and even international potential. For example, we're part of African Virtual University, which gives students in 14 sub-Saharan countries access to instruction in information technology. Nationally, my expectation is that we will build relationships in other states like those we have with government agencies in New Jersey. Similarly, we are assisting many pharmaceutical companies based in New Jersey with workforce training, which has led to our being asked to provide comparable instruction at locations outside the state.

NJIT Magazine: Finally, when it comes to continuing professional education, what sort of courses seem to be the most interesting to individuals these days?

Spak: Courses that help people land and keep good jobs. That's the bottom line. ■

Learn more about the new NJIT Weekend University and Continuing Professional Education at <http://cpe.njit.edu>.