FOCUSED ON STUDENTS

Q&A WITH VICE PRESIDENT CHARLES FEY

Dr. Charles J. Fey, who joined NJIT in September 2012 as vice president for academic support and student affairs, recently offered thoughts about his role at the university in an interview with *NJIT Magazine*. Fey came to NJIT with nearly 40 years of leadership experience in student affairs. Previously, he was vice president for student engagement and success at the University of Akron, where he managed a staff of 386. His five years at Akron followed a decade of service at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) as vice president for student affairs.

What are the defining responsibilities of your position?

Student success. Nothing else matters. If we help our students obtain a degree, if we help them achieve that dream, then our work is worthwhile. A major part of my job is to find out why our students aren't graduating at the rate they should and then to improve that number by helping students to overcome whatever obstacles they have before them.

How many years should it take for a student to graduate from NJIT?

I think five to six years is reasonable. It's the national average for college completion. A typical student can't do it in four years any longer. It's partly because students have to work more to help pay the bills, and sometimes they have to drop out for a semester to work full-time to save enough money to come back the next semester.

Many colleges and universities have also had to increase the credit hours needed for graduation because of the requirements of bodies like the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology. But there really is a great incentive for institutions to reduce the number of required courses that students must take so they can graduate sooner.

At UMBC, we had a campaign urging students to register for fifteen credits instead of twelve. Many students were taking twelve so they could work. We tried to help them understand that if you take at least fifteen credits, you'll graduate more quickly and start making "career" money more quickly. We should do the same thing at NJIT and help students see that finishing their degrees as quickly as they can makes the most sense in the long term. With our graduates earning on average $50,000 to $60,000 and more to start, it is to the student's advantage to graduate sooner to begin earning these higher wages.

What other steps can NJIT take to help students graduate sooner?

We need to look at the gateway courses required for various majors, particularly in science and engineering, and find ways for students to successfully complete those courses faster. Up to half who take calculus don't successfully complete this or other requirements in the first two semesters. So if you can't pass through this gateway, or it takes you another year to do it, you're automatically into five years for what could be a four-year program. Engineering could take five years anyway, and if your entry is delayed for a year you're running into six years.

We can also try to ensure that students who want to come to NJIT choose the right major from the start. For example, a student might have done well in math in high school, but if their math SAT score is 550 or so there's little chance they're going to succeed in an engineering program at this institution. We could guide such a student to other related majors. Engineering technology, or management with a focus on information science. We're going to look at how we admit students into our various majors, how we advise students who are accepted, and how we can be better at helping students get through gateway courses in their first year.

What are some of your other significant challenges at NJIT, as an advocate for student well-being and engagement?

Students choose NJIT because they want a degree in engineering or some other technological or scientific field. They don't come here because they want to join a club or organization. But we know that what students experience outside the classroom in clubs, service organizations and other groups definitely helps them succeed. The best-trained engineer in the world might not be a very good CEO of an engineering company if she or he hasn't learned how to interact with people, provide leadership, or motivation. They won't necessarily get that in the classroom.

Basically, we need to provide a living environment and learning environment that offers our students as many options as possible for out-of-classroom activities to prepare them for life after graduation. But you need the resources to do this, and understandably the academic side takes precedence when budgets are under pressure. It's a considerable challenge to get the resources for providing the richest educational experience, but a challenge that we need to overcome.

How have the challenges for someone in your position changed over the years?

Is America today different than it was in 1970? Certainly. Technology has changed the way people interact. Consider how much time is spent on Facebook and Twitter, and less in face-to-face interaction. Two students in the same classroom waiting for the instructor will sit there IM-ing each other and not speak a single word: "Do you want to get something to eat after class?" "Yeah, that's a good idea."

How do we encourage young people at NJIT to develop the interpersonal skills, the leadership skills they will need to be

successful? That's one of the great challenges today. Each era has its own challenges, one of ours is electronic. But it's exciting to work on positive change in every era.

Are there challenges unique to NJIT?

I'll add to what I said about social inter-action. The students we attract are really focused on the academic side of the house. They have to be to succeed academically in science and technology. Most of our students are studying all the time. But that means they're less prepared when it comes to the social skills they'll need professionally, or even for interviewing when they're going for their first job. This aspect of our students' experience does deserve more attention.

How can the interaction you mention be encouraged?

A challenge is that only about 25 percent of our undergraduates live on campus. Students who live in a residence hall are almost forced to interact to a greater degree than those traveling to campus, going to class, getting back in the car, and leaving. There's a lot less opportunity for us to work with them to encourage interest in activities outside the classroom. Faculty, staff and students who are engaged in the NJIT community do try, but it's hard. So we would like more students to have the opportunities for interaction that come with the residence experience.

However, there are things we can do for all students. For example, we're creating learning communities, a program now in its second year based on majors. My goal would be to have every first-year student in a learn-ing community with about thirty other new students, taking the same classes and being in the same study groups together, having the same mentors and tutors. These students can become involved with each other and learn from each other in a unique way. The hope is that when these natural cohorts go in more individual directions after a year or two the members will continue to interact, to remain good, supportive friends.

PHOTO: JED MEDINA

But even though it's important to do more to encourage more interaction among stu-dents, I have been impressed with how stu-dents as well as faculty and staff respond to social needs like those we've seen after Hur-ricane Sandy. Students spent spring break helping with cleanup and restoration, and as an institution we responded very quickly by establishing the Center for Resilient Design to offer solutions for better building in areas like the New Jersey shore.

Finally, what are your thoughts on the global economy and the student experi-ence at NJIT?

I guarantee that the young people studying at NJIT today will work with someone from another country when they graduate. There's a good chance that they'll work overseas for part of their career. That wasn't the case when I went to school. We have an obligation to prepare students for this global environ-ment. What better way to do that than to have the world being educated right next to them, alongside an increasing number of international students?

I also think we need to beef up the study abroad program here so our American students have a chance to experience the environments where they might be work-ing in the future. These are among the many opportunities we have to best prepare our students and graduates to provide the leader-ship society needs. These initiatives will help our students succeed. ∎