

Carolbelle Branch (BA, '99) recalls the day she was let go from one job and began her search for another.

"I was laid off from a place where I had worked up to a managerial position that paid a living wage," says Branch, now executive director of the West Plains Chamber of Commerce in Cheney.

"When I began looking, there were plenty of jobs out there that I could do, but I quickly discovered they all required a degree."

A degree she didn't have.

Steve Whitford (BA, '02) was self-employed as a remodeling contractor for 20 years. When he hurt his back in August 1998, he was forced to find a new way to make a living.

"Everywhere I went," recalls Steve, "I heard the same question: 'You have great experience — what's your degree in?' Without a degree, I wasn't invited to even fill out applications for positions I felt qualified to fill."

"Carolbelle and Steve are typical of many people we help," says John Neace, director of Eastern's Interdisciplinary Studies Program (ITDS). "Many of our students owned their own businesses or had risen to managerial levels during a time when college degrees weren't required. Then, suddenly, they found themselves out of work and without the degree that today's jobs require."

Neace's students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and career fields. Their skills are far reaching and varied. Yet, despite the diversity of their personal and professional lives, all of them have found exactly what they needed through Eastern's (ITDS) program.

The program offers three options: A) Liberal arts, B) Prior Learning and C) Interdisciplinary Studies. The first is for students following a traditional "liberal arts" education.

"I had a wonderful job opportunity presented to me but it required a degree," recalls Nicole Roetter, who enrolled in the liberal arts option in 2002. A paramedic at the time, Roetter had been offered a chance to become a field clinical representative for Guidant Intralife-Inland, a medical company which guides doctors in the implantation of pacemakers and defibrillators.

"But even without this job offer, I realized that to advance in the medical profession, I needed to advance my education."

Roetter plans to graduate this year and has already been hired by Guidant.

The second option is for adult learners

an Eastern program for working adults

By John Soennichsen (MFA-'97)



"The interdisciplinary program gave me the flexibility to take the courses I believed to be of specific value based on my career plans," says Carolbelle Branch, executive director of the West Plains Chamber of Commerce, Cheney.

with specialized experience. It gives them the opportunity to have these experiences evaluated for a block of elective credit.

"This program is perfect for people who have hit a barrier in their professional lives and need more education to advance or move in a different direction," says Neace.

The third option allows students to design their own curricula to facilitate specific academic and career goals.

"This is the closest we have at Eastern to a 'design your own degree' program," says Neace. "It's perfect for people who find it hard to decide which of a few fields to pursue. We allow them to combine elements from two or three majors of interest to them."

Prior Learning Option

Clearly the most popular of the three ITDS options is the second — Eastern's Prior Learning Option—with 100 stu-

dents currently enrolled.

"What makes our program different from others in the region," says Neace, "is that it allows for prior learning assessment (PLA), and lets students design a degree program tailored to their professional or personal goals. Other adult degree programs tend to prescribe the students' programs."

The value of Eastern's PLA option was not lost on Carolbelle Branch when she enrolled in 1996.

"I had a variety of opportunities in my work experience," she says, "and it really seemed like all that practical learning should have some value at least on par with reading theory from a textbook."

"I liked the idea of receiving credit for all the work/life experience I had," agrees Kim Kelley ('83), manager of human relations and training for Avista Advantage, a subsidiary of Avista Corporation in Spokane. "I felt that this type of program would be more meaningful for me as a nontraditional student."

The prior learning is documented by students in a Portfolio Development course which helps them prepare a document that articulates, demonstrates and validates learning outcomes and skills they have gained during their careers. The portfolio is then submitted to an EWU academic department for review and assessment by a full-time, tenure-track faculty member.

"The backgrounds I see are pretty amazing sometimes," says Jeff Stafford, professor of communication studies at Eastern. "I've reviewed portfolios by vice presidents of major companies, general managers, the owners of businesses — people who have achieved significant levels of success though they had no degree."

Michael (Mick) Brzoska, EWU professor of engineering technology and multimedia design, has had similar experiences.

"One person I evaluated worked mostly at HP/Agilent Technologies in Liberty Lake for 20 or more years," says Brzoska. "He started in fabrication, moved to design, then engineering design, then became a supervisor and then a manager of a large division. He earned many certifications and was sent to many training sessions. Another person began as an electronic technician, then became responsible for more complicated designs that required knowledge in advanced electronics and data communications, then he became a division manager."

A Unique Program

Most PLA programs in the United States are found in private institutions, and Neace considers it unique for state-support colleges and universities to be involved in this system of experiential evaluation. Eastern's PLA is distinguished also by its direct link to an academic degree program, as opposed to being a stand-alone program.

"This makes us much more successful in guiding the student through a baccalaureate degree," says Neace.

Mick Brzoska believes that Eastern has such a program specifically "because EWU faculty and staff are typically willing to put in the extra work that this type of program requires."

After a portfolio is approved and submitted for credits, the adult learner works with John Neace to design an upper-division emphasis that meets the student's specific goals and objectives. This commonly includes departmental minors or certificates, pre-professional program requirements and graduate programs.

"I was confident that having a degree from Eastern would be a good career move," says Patsy Gayda, who was a branch manager for Spokane Teachers Credit Union (SCTU) when she started



"It feels really great now to present my resume with the educational piece complete — showing that I have a degree from EWU," says Kim Kelley, manager of human relations and training for Avista Advantage, Spokane.

classes at Eastern. "My CEO, Steve Dahlstrom, had received his master's from Eastern and his positive feedback was a great endorsement for an EWU education," she adds.

Since getting her Interdisciplinary Studies degree, Gayda has been promoted to Director of Branch Operations at STCU.

Many ITDS students have specific career goals in mind, but others acknowledge that they simply have not felt "whole" until getting a college degree.

"What I'm noticing as a result of

completing my degree and participating in the Interdisciplinary Studies program," says Kelly, "is that I feel more self-confident and sure of myself, having that experience. I guess it was really a totally selfish endeavor."

"I think what I enjoy most about my job," says Neace, "is watching students make personal as well as professional gains through this program. They speak better, write better, and have much elevated attitudes and images of themselves afterwards."

"Without John Neace and the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, I would never have tried," says Steve Whitford, who is now a customer support and service representative for Norlift, Inc. "I have the degree, the career, and the confidence that comes from achievement. All of the knowledge I gained on my educational journey serves me well in my everyday life."

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From left to right, Frank Deabreu, Jason Clerget (ASEWU president), Sen. Larry Sheahan, Dr. Stephen Jordan, Neil McReynolds (chair, EWU Board of Trustees), Jim Kensok '92 (Avista), Leroy Nosbaum (Itron), and mayor Amy Jo Sooy (Cheney). Official groundbreaking ceremony for the School of Computing & Engineering Sciences. A "digging robot" was on hand from Eastern's Department of Technology.