Career Education REVIEW™

The Career College Information Source

Transformer-in-Chief

With Dr. Richard Shurtz, Stratford University

Published by: WORKFORCE COMMUNICATIONS

627 Bay Shore Drive, Suite 100 • Oshkosh, WI 54901 • 1-800-558-8250 • www.workforce-com.com • www.careereducationreview.net

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Leadership Profile

Transformer-in-Chief

With Dr. Richard Shurtz, Stratford University

How did Stratford University get started, and what led you to it?

I'm a research physicist. I have a PhD in Physics. I have done research on uncooled thermal imaging, semiconductor lasers, fiber-optic communications, satellite imaging systems, ground penetrating radars and nonlinear optics—a wide range of topics starting at Night Vision Lab and ultimately going to the BDM Corporation, where I was vice president of physical sciences. So I did research physics for around 19 years.

Meanwhile, my dad had a small company—American Transportation Institute—where he did travel agent training and consulting in the travel business. He started that in 1976, and by 1986 he was losing money and the company was going to go bankrupt. So I took it over, and I had to figure out what to do with it.

I kept my job at BDM when I took over American Transportation Institute in 1986. I didn't leave BDM until 1990. So I kept my day job for four years. Everything I had done up to that point was in some way related to the defense business. I decided I didn't want to spend my entire life working on weapons and weapon systems. I wanted to do something that would actually make a difference.

When I sort of stumbled into this opportunity to turn my dad's business around, after our first graduation I realized we actually were making a difference. That was appealing to me. So in 1990 I quit BDM and started to work on the school full time. I changed the name from American Transportation Institute to ATI Career Institute. We were getting so many phone calls about potholes and transportation problems. The name really didn't reflect what we were doing.

I decided I didn't want to spend my entire life working on weapons and weapon systems. I wanted to do something that would actually make a difference.

We started adding programs—Computer Business Applications, Culinary Arts, Networking and Networking Security Programming. Employers began asking us to provide soft skills so people could write, communicate and speak, so we added a general education component. By 1998, we had created associate degree programs in response to what employers wanted. Then we changed all of our programs to the associate degree level—AAS—and changed the name from ATI Career Institute to Stratford College.

When we went to the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia, they looked at our associate degree programs and told us that what we were teaching

at the associate degree level was normally taught in graduate school at the master's level. So the following year I submitted three master's degree programs. In 2001, once we had master's degree programs, we became Stratford University. So I had associate degree programs and master's degrees programs, but no bachelor's programs.

A master's degree is a lot like a certificate program, because there's no Gen Ed. But it's taught at a higher level. Instead of students just learning facts, they have to figure out problems. It's more problem-centric. You're teaching the application of fundamental knowledge to a problem instead of teaching the fundamental knowledge. So it was relatively easy for us to add the master's degrees. Then a couple of years later we added bachelor's degrees.

This idea of embedding critical thinking in the classroom is actually the way that you can get students to learn and think and be successful.

We added Software Engineering, Information Systems and Telecommunication Systems. In the business area we offered an MBA degree, an international MBA and a Master's in Accounting. In Culinary Arts we only added the bachelor's in hospitality management at that time. We didn't have a degree in hospitality initially. Now we offer a master's in international hospitality management. About four years ago we started Health Sciences, and offer a whole suite of degrees in health sciences. We've got Health Care Administration. We've got a bachelor's in Nursing. We're looking at adding more.

You operate in a very competitive market. What are you doing right?

We teach the way students learn. We teach the four learning styles. I've spent a huge amount of time teaching our teachers how to teach by asking questions like Socrates did, embedding within our curriculum the eight elements of critical thinking, intellectual standards against critical thinking. I've done a lot of faculty development. So that helps students actually solve problems. It results then in year-over-year retention in excess of 85 percent.

This idea of embedding critical thinking in the classroom is actually the way that you can get students to learn and think and be successful. You apply critical thinking to some problem you've never seen before to come up with an innovative solution. We're formally embedding that in the classroom.

How difficult is that for the faculty to understand and adapt?

DR. SHURTZ is a research physicist who has become an entrepreneur and educational leader. An expert on competency-based education, critical thinking in the classroom, curriculum development, and educational management, Shurtz has published over 30 technical publications and holds 15 patents. Shurtz was named the Ernst & Young 2009 Entrepreneur of the Year for the National Capitol Region in the Education/Services Category.

A frequent speaker at conferences on competency-based education, he believes it can be used for both career and economic development.

In recent years he has led the Stratford international activity and established academic partnerships in China, India, Sri Lanka, and Canada.

Shurtz's Saturday morning Tech Talk radio show has gained him an international following via the Web.

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It takes about three years. It is difficult, because the faculty is the coach rather than the god coming down from Mt. Olympus. They have to get down at the level of the student. They have to ask questions. It's very difficult to know what questions to ask to guide the student through the process. The faculty really has to internalize the eight elements of critical thinking, because once you internalize that, then you help the students clarify those eight elements through your questions. Not everyone makes the cut.

Then we also do blended instruction. All our courses are blended. I've got a Moodle platform. Moodle is an open-source learning management system. It's an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. Martin Dougiamas, who has PhDs in computer science and in education, developed it at the University of Perth in Australia.

So you don't need Blackboard or E-College?

No. Moodle is going to put them out of business. It's the fastest-growing global LMS in the world.

The students are given a challenge question and they have to demonstrate thinking in writing on the Moodle platform. We can actually see the classroom discussion carried onto the online platform and we can see what happens.

Now what does this accomplish? First, it forces all the students in class—not just the talkative ones—to actually contribute to the discussion. Second, it forces them to write in a low-risk environment. The only way to learn how to write is to write. If you only assign one big term paper at the end of the term, and a student can't write a sentence, they can't write a paragraph. If they can't write a paragraph, they can't write a term paper. So you give students a term paper assignment and they're forced to plagiarize, because they actually don't have the skill set to write it. By putting them on Moodle, forcing them to write every day in threaded discussions, we help them develop their writing ability.

So we're accomplishing two things: We are letting them demonstrate critical thinking and also improve their writing skills. It also gives us the ability to measure learning outcomes on a continuing basis. I can go in and trace a student's writing samples throughout the whole program. This is what the accreditors like to see.

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So there's no cut and paste from the Internet when you have to write every day.

No. It's low stakes. The writing is all tailored around the classroom discussion. It's probably easier just to write a couple hundred words than to find something to copy. Moreover, the teacher is going to know if you've copied it, and you'll get enormous flak from your peers who know you've copied it. As soon as you post your entry, then you can see all the other posts. You can't see anyone else's posts until you post yours.

Let's go back to this idea of a Socratic method. You have to give the students certain key pieces of information. How do I do that in a question form? I still have to lecture them, don't I?

There's a trend in K–12 education that's called "flip the classroom."

Basically the students would get the lecture material on their own outside of class. Then they come to class and they work on problems. The traditional way is you come in to a classroom and you listen to a lecture. The problem with a lecture is that students don't listen. They text. They e-mail. They doodle. It actually, by and large, is a monumental waste of time that is designed in a fashion to make the professor feel extremely bright. But it is not designed around the way students learn.

My teachers who get it, who really get it, can't get the students to leave. They just want to stay in class and continue the discussion. It actually makes the whole educational process enjoyable.

Contrary to popular belief, you teach yourself. Education comes from the Latin word educare, which means to draw out. It doesn't mean to stuff in. So a teacher's task is to ignite the engine, to draw out the student, to show him why he should learn, to inspire him to learn so he teaches himself. That's what a true educator does.

How does a typical student respond to this style? This has to blow their minds when they first walk in.

The classroom experience becomes fun. My teachers who get it, who really get it, can't get the students to leave. They just want to stay in class and continue the discussion. It actually makes the whole educational process enjoyable.

It's an imperfect implementation. Not all my teachers get it, okay? That's why we've got to do continuing training and development on the teachers. But it is an aspirational goal that really defines the way we teach.

I really got into this big time when I had to set up and train faculty for our schools in New Delhi, India. In America we do have a certain degree of student/teacher interactivity that is just sort of part of our educational system. That interaction is the hallmark of American education and the reason why American education is better than education in the rest of the world. I didn't appreciate that until I had lecturers from India coming out of the traditional Indian educational system. They come in and lecture and they do not expect the students to say anything—and the students don't. The students just sit there for the lecture and then they're gone. I had to change that culture. But you cannot just tell somebody, "Ask questions." They have to know what questions to ask, and why. So we have to teach the teachers the elements of critical thinking.

A lot of the most prestigious faculty members in India will not tolerate coming down to the level of their students, so not everybody can make the cut. Only one out of five instructors makes the grade. When we hire faculty in India, they actually have to team-teach for one class, and only if the master faculty member that they've team-taught with says they are good teachers will we hire them. Not everybody will even subject himself or herself to this process. To the extent that they have that arrogance, they're probably not going to be a good fit for us. This turned out to be so effective that we brought it to America.

You've got to be able to measure the critical thinking ability of the students. That is what employers want. If I send a Culinary Arts graduate out into a real-world kitchen, and all of a sudden three people don't show up that day and they've got one supplier that's not coming in and they've got a banquet that's got to go out on the table at 12:00—employers want someone who can solve that problem. They don't

necessarily care whether you can dice carrots perfectly; they want somebody who can analyze the situation, come up with a solution and get the product out.

Employers want people with the ability to think, problem-solve and innovate. Our initial placements are at the regular entry level, but you look at our students after four years on the job and they're moving into management positions because they can think and they can problem-solve.

This is the way out of the gainful employment conundrum. You don't focus on placement; you focus on promotion after placement. The only way to be successful at that is to give students the ability to solve problems. It's not about low-level skills and entry-level competencies. It's about the ability to think. The value of true education is what you know after you've forgotten everything that you've memorized. The only thing left is your ability to think.

What role does technology play in all of this?

I think education is going to have to reinvent itself, and I think technology is going to be at the center of how that reinvention will occur. I've already said that the lecture is the most inefficient form of delivery of information that's ever been invented. Once you call that into question, then you call into question everything about seat time. Seat time is based on the lecture format. How much lecture has a student sat in his seat and listened to? Once you no longer lecture, and once you let students learn by themselves, exactly what is education? To the extent that schools can figure that out—can figure out what they do well and how to deliver a quality educational experience—they're going to be successful. I think technology is going to play a big role in that reinvention.

You've got to be able to measure the critical thinking ability of the students. That is what employers want.

How do you explain that to people like Senator Harkin and Senator Franken, who struggle with the concept of distance learning? How do we make this transformation?

People who believe the lecture is the best way of delivery are never going to be satisfied with online education or any kind of technology. When I say technology, it's not just in the delivery. Technology can be used for all kinds of things. We have online programs. Most of our students who take online classes are also taking residential classes, and they take an online class because they're traveling or there's a schedule conflict. So a huge component of our revenue is online, but we don't have that many purely online students. Those students are comfortable with online learning, because all of our classes are blended. Even our culinary classes have an online component.

I sent two of my education deans down to the University of Tennessee where there's a great method for measuring critical thinking that's been

accepted by the Southern Association. They took "Train the Trainer" courses and now they're training our other faculty. To measure critical thinking, you've really got to focus on how to do that. It's actually difficult. Schools were much happier with saying okay, I've got some high-level professor who's lecturing for 45 hours, so therefore it must be a quality program, because you can measure faculty credentials and seat time. But if you go to a very high-level university, the elite university, the kids teach themselves. They probably don't even go to class. They just teach themselves. The class just provides a framework for them.

The value of true education is what you know after you've forgotten everything that you've memorized. The only thing left is your ability to think.

I think when we reinvent ourselves, we must be extremely good at being able to measure learning outcomes. That's why I measure writing samples in every single class. I measure the student's ability to think in every single class. I have a system to measure critical thinking as students go through the program. I'm trying to transform my entire institution so that I measure learning outcomes every step of the way. If we say it's important, we measure it. That is part of the reinvention of education.

Technology gives you different methods for connecting with the student. But one thing does not change: The questions and the inspiration come from the teacher. It doesn't matter whether the teacher delivers the questions online, or if they ask the questions in the classroom—the inspiration and the guidance come from the teacher. That will never be lost. That will never change. I've got one online instructor in Canada and he's the most inspirational teacher we have. Kids take his online class because they learn more math because of the questions that he asks. Our math class has completely flipped the classroom.

I do think technology is going to allow schools to deliver education at a cheaper price. I think we're going to have to reinvent education to deliver it at a lower price point, and technology will allow that to happen. Schools that don't seek that out as an objective are going to fall by the wayside.

You're going to see a transformation of education through technology just like what happened in the book business and newspaper business. The availability of information at your fingertips really changes everything. A school such as Stratford would be able to define competencies required by employers. Then they would be able to create a curriculum wrapped around those competencies that employers want, and they would be able to measure the learning outcomes that employers want. So there's a system of academic rigor that has nothing to do with seat time or delivery method. You have to be able to do that and do it well. If you focus on the right things, you're fine. We've been forced to do that in India. In India, we have a 93 percent placement rate.

Why did you decide to go international, with schools in India? What does that bring to the organization?

I should say India discovered me. I had 500 students from India before Stratford was in India. We discovered that having international students really makes the classroom much more lively and vibrant. I have students from 27 countries. I have students from all religions. I've got Muslims. I've got Hindus. I've got Buddhists, Christians, and Jews. We have a prayer room here

for our Muslim students. We celebrate the Hindu festivals. We celebrate the Buddhist festivals and the Christian festivals. When you have an international mix of people, the classroom discussions are really interesting. What was amazing was that the students from America had never talked to a Muslim or a Hindu. So to find out that these are just regular kids was really quite enlightening for them. It made our classroom experience far better.

India is going to produce 25 million students over the next 15 years in the demographic bonus in the north. The bulk of the global workforce is going to come out of the demographic bonus in northern India. So why not go to where that demographic bonus is going to occur? We're in the process of working to set up an Indian university in Shanti Nagar north of Delhi. We're laying out a framework of 26 campuses in India.

I thought law in India did not permit for-profit education.

We have a joint venture partner. If you look in the details of it, the biggest source of black money is non-profit education. It is the most profitable business in India. It's another culture. You have to understand the culture. We've figured out how to work within that regulatory framework.

What is black money?

Black money is off the table, untaxed money. Non-profit education in India is one of the most profitable businesses in India, but not officially. But for Stratford University to operate within the Indian framework, we had to be well connected. Our joint venture partner is a $3 billion operation, the Modi Group. K.K. Modi, the chairman, spent a lot of time getting to know me as a person before we entered into this venture. He met my children and he met my wife. When he decided that he wanted to have an alignment of families, he decided that we could work together. So after quite detailed discussions, we negotiated the joint venture agreement.

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An alignment of families?

This how they do it in India. For years K.K. Modi was known to do business on a handshake. No written contracts. We ultimately did bring lawyers in, because it's international. It's a very complicated agreement.

Is this a Stratford brand in India? Does your accreditation cover it?

Yes. ACICS has been over there. They sent a whole team over there twice. It's fully accredited.

What motivates you in India?

I'd like to make a difference in India. The goal is not to make money; the goal is to create educational programs that will help corporations in India find employees that can meet their needs, and to make a difference in the Indian market. If I can also find a way to provide education in the Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, I can help some of the lower stratum in India move up the economic ladder.

So my measure of success in India is how can I help India? We're developing India-specific degrees. We're training Indian faculty. We're getting some expats to teach in our school.

But the fact that I'm primarily motivated by helping India and not by making money is one reason I get along so well with the Modi Group. We have commonness in vision. I've never been motivated by money.

Where does that come from in you?

It's just who I am. You need money to oil the machine. If you want to grow, you've got to have cash flow. So money is like oil. Money allows the machine to grow and to prosper, but money is not the objective. The objective is to build an educational system that can make a difference for students and employers. You need cash flow to make that happen. But if your sole objective is the cash flow, you will eventually go horizontal because you'll make the wrong decision at the wrong time.

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I like to build things that will make a difference. Ultimately, I want to find a way to crack this educational delivery system, so I can be a global education force. I'm working on a joint venture agreement in Sri Lanka. Then I want to go to Kuala Lumpur, then Bangkok and then Ho Chi Minh. I'll do the whole Asian rim. It is all very similar culturally. But you've got to immerse yourself in it to understand it.

Most of the education institutions that go to India, parachute a bunch of people in and they set up these really expensive programs. They train people for the U.S. market and they deliver American degrees. They don't really care about India. We've got a COO in India that was CEO of several very large billion-dollar companies over there. He's now going in to the top levels of the businesses of India and we are now deciding what programs they need and we're developing India-specific degrees. We'll be working with these corporations to develop degrees that they need. They are mostly businesses processing

outsourcing. That's the big work over there with all the call centers. I'll be training the people who are taking the outsourced work in India.

Are you also expanding in the United States?

Yes, we are.

How do you find enough time in the day to do this? Your desk is empty!

It really depends on how you manage the enterprise. I've spent quite a bit of time looking at that. You have to retool yourself if you want to expand. The only way to expand is for the people at the top to change behavior.

In 2009 I won the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year award here in the Washington area, which is usually just all tech companies. It was the first time an education company had won that. I don't view that as a personal award; the team actually made it happen, and I was like the point man. I went out to the Ernst & Young strategic growth forum in Palm Springs. Then I brought my entire team out there. As a result of that Ernst & Young experience, I was immersed with all these high-growth, highly successful companies. As a result of that, I joined what's called the "CEO Project." I've got eight other peers in high-growth companies and I'm basically thinking in a different way. That has made all the difference in the world.

Tell me about the structure of your campus leadership.

Each campus has two leaders: Campus Director and Campus Dean. All the operations go under the Campus Director: Financial Aid, Business Office and Registrar. They basically run the profit center. The Campus Deans have all academics under them. That would be the library, all the department chairs and all the tutoring. They're accountable for academic achievement and outcomes assessment.

They are equal in my hierarchy. It's like I have a dual ladder. It's like the research side where you've got the management ladder and you've got the technical ladder. So this is like the management ladder and the academic ladder. They're separate. The academic ladder reports up to my Chief Academic Officer, and then the Campus Director reports to the Chief Financial Officer. So we want our Campus Directors to hit the numbers, but if they do anything that affects academic quality, I expect the Academic Deans to protest.

You have to retool yourself if you want to expand. The only way to expand is for the people at the top to change behavior.

So at the campus level, if there is any kind of issue where you have the trade-off between business and quality, it's handled at the local level through a form of creative tension. They work it out and then I'm assured that somebody on a particular campus is not going to take a shortcut that I really wouldn't be happy with. So that dual ladder, which I'm very comfortable with because I came out of the research industry, has worked really well for us.

What's the future picture? Where do you see this taking you? When will you be done?

I don't know. I'm enjoying myself. When it's no longer fun, I suppose I'll exit. In a way this is my retirement. I was a physicist for 20 years. So this is my retirement job. You could say that this domestic expansion could be one

company. The whole international operation could be a carve-out for another company. Then I'm developing this whole technology solution to reinvent myself, which I'm already hiring programmers for, and that could be a third company.

Explain that—a technology solution to reinvent yourself?

I'm not going to tell you exactly what that is. But it's related to this thing about education having to find a way to deliver at a lower price point. I'm hiring programmers to help me put that together. I don't want to give all the details on it yet. That's going to be a highly innovative initiative within the company, which will be sort of designed to put us out of business in a way.

What the CEO Project has really taught me is how to organize the team. My goal is to inspire the people here to lead and to help the organization grow.

What the CEO Project has really taught me is how to organize the team, how to set up an HR system with organizational development so people can move up within the organization. My job now is not to do anything but to simply think and inspire. So my desk should be empty. I've really turned into more of a psychologist. Whereas the goal of a teacher is to inspire students to learn, my goal is to inspire the people here to lead and to help the organization grow.

What does that coaching look like? Is it endless committee meetings? Is it one-on-one?

You've got to do internal NPS studies to find out what people don't like. Then you have to fix them. NPS is Net Promoter Score. What's good, what's bad, would you recommend that a friend or colleague work here? In the NPS scheme, you've got promoters and detractors. It's usually done to measure external customer loyalty, but I hired somebody to do an internal NPS. We're now systemically addressing all the issues that employees have. This all comes as a result of my contacts in the Ernst & Young group. This is how companies grow. These guys are superb at HR, people management and inspiring people. They have helped me transform our people management systems within the school.

From your initial skill set, I wouldn't accuse you of being a real people person as a research physicist.

When I started with the CEO Project, I didn't know what NPS was. I had to look it up. I didn't know what OD was. I thought it was overdose. It's actually Organizational Development. That was my weak suit. So now, every quarter when we meet, all my peers in the CEO Project grill me on this and I'm held accountable for taking care of whatever my top issues are. I've got good mentors.

Let's talk about your radio show, Tech Talk. How do you have time to do that?

I've been doing Tech Talk for the last 11 years. It's a one-hour radio show every Saturday on current technology or any kind of technical thing that I'm interested in. It's new material every week. If I start preparing it at the beginning of the week, I spend all week doing it. So I've developed a new method: Every Friday night I get up at 2:30 a.m. and I work until 8:00 a.m. I drive to the radio show and I do it at 9:00 a.m. If I start at 2:30 a.m., it doesn't take me any more than five-and-a-half hours to prepare. That's my routine.

What kinds of things do you talk about on the show?

I'm on iTunes. Look up Tech Talk Radio; you can sign up for the podcast. I talk about things in technology that interest me. What I'm good at is taking a very complicated topic and making it simple. I might talk about security breaches. I might talk about the Large Hadron Collider, where they're trying to discover the Higgs boson particle, or I might talk about space science. I might talk about the space elevator. I've talked about time travel. It's a wide range of things. I try to make it interesting.

Each week I feature what I call Profiles in IT. I take one guy and I ask, what did he do? What did he accomplish? Did he make any money? How did he get into it? Did he go to school? I profile a new guy every week. I started that three years ago, so I'm up to about my 180th new guy.

I used to do the show from around the world, from wherever I was. I've called in from Alaska. I did it from China. I now have 11 years of material, so my co-host can put together a "best-of" when I'm traveling. He takes segments of stuff and weaves together a new show, which is all a "best-of." My one concession over the years is that when I'm traveling I'll no longer do the show live.

How does that fit into the bigger picture of Stratford University and everything else you do?

It started out as a marketing tool, but it's just on the local market. It does influence my perspective on where technology fits. We're getting ready to do some pretty innovative things with technology in India, and that's really influenced it. When I launch those things, I'll be able to talk about them. So it does influence how I think. I'm basically a teacher at heart. It's a classroom of the airwaves.

But you're lecturing!

I'm lecturing, but I also take e-mails. I typically cover about 20 topics per show. When you're in radio, you've probably got a two-minute sound bite and then people get bored. So nothing can be too long. I'll do some trivial stuff and I'll do some more complicated things. But there's something for everyone. I've got loyal listeners and I really kind of enjoy it, so I do it. When I stop enjoying it, then I won't do it.

Is there another generation coming along to take over Stratford University?

Well, I don't know. I've got two kids, so they have to decide whether they like it or not. It's not clear that that's their passion. But on the other hand, I told my dad that the one thing I would never do is to get into education. I said I'm going to go into physics, I'm not interested in education; I'll never do it in a thousand years. So here I am doing what I said I would never do, so who knows?

Career Education REVIEW

Edited by Judi Ditzler.