

Eclectic university degree teaches managers 'people smarts'

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Test pilots and astronauts, according to author Tom Wolfe, have the right stuff.

The University of Pennsylvania's Center for Organizational Dynamics, according to Larry M. Starr, has everything else.

"We own the other stuff," said Starr, who has been the center's executive director and the director of Penn's Organizational Dynamics Graduate Programs since 2002.

By other stuff, Starr means the things that managers need to succeed besides knowledge of their profession and industry, which can be easily obtained. It's the other stuff that can get managers and organizations into trouble if they don't know it. And helping them get a grip on it is what the center is all about.

"What do you do if you're already a manager and you realize that, 'I'm managing other accountants or other people and there are all these silos?' " Starr said.

"Where do you learn the other stuff, the partisanship, the politics, the social side, the bringing-people-together component?"

Since 1977, managers have been coming to Philadelphia to learn those important soft skills from Penn's organizational dynamics program. Rather than draw only on the fields of management and psychology as many organizational behavior programs do, Penn's program draws on the knowledge and experience of Penn faculty across all disciplines, as well as that of adjunct faculty who run their own businesses in fields such as public relations and technology, and of its students, who are typically mid-career professionals.

"These [students] are highly educated people who have decided to come back to school to get something that is very different or is lacking in their background," said Ramin Sedehi, the School of Arts and Science's vice dean.

The programs have 425 students, most of whom are pursuing a master's of science in organizational dynamics. For students who want to go beyond the master's degree, the center offers a master's of philosophy degree. It has no

undergraduate degree and no undergraduate classes and doesn't plan to offer them.

"I don't think the undergraduates are ready to absorb the material," Sedehi said. "In fact, I don't think people in their 20s are ready to absorb the material. If you have never experienced office politics, it is very hard to read about office politics. It's very hard to read about why you should take a back seat at times and why you should lead at times."

The program traces its roots to the mid-1970s, when Nancy Bauer was approached by the National Science Foundation, which was interested in funding a program that connected a research university in a major metropolitan area with government and business. Bauer, then a textbook author, approached Penn with the proposal. The university made her an adjunct faculty member and in 1977 she set up a program called Interpreting America to Americans. The program went through several names and several locations at Penn before arriving at its current name and home.

In addition to running the program, the center does research; works with professional associations to enhance the organizational skills of their members; provides continuing education programs; and keeps program alumni and others up to date with the latest in organizational research.

The program is open only to professionals with at least five years of experience. Courses meet once a week for two to four hours over six to 12 weeks. They are held in late afternoons and early evenings on weekdays and Saturday mornings to accommodate students' schedules. Courses are typically limited to 16 students to encourage participation. Most courses are seminars, with class performance, written papers and projects, rather than exams, used as means of evaluation.

"This is not a theory program," Starr said, "it's an application program. And every day, people go back and try something out."

Martin V. Scott is a good example. Scott, who graduated from the program last year, is a manager in Verizon Communications Inc.'s Business Solutions Group, which sells Verizon products and services to companies with 20 to 300 employees. When Verizon acquired MCI Inc. earlier this year, the Business Solutions Group got a lot of new products to sell. That forced it to change its organization.

Scott was involved in making some of the changes, which started well before the deal closed. He drew upon what he was learning in the program to help him out.

"Techniques, the dynamics that are involved in change, those items that I learned either through reading, through projects, through course work [or] through class discussions, sort of informed the opinions, decisions [and] recommendations I

was making during this hugely tumultuous period for my line of business," he said.

Although it isn't traditional in many ways, the program does have a structure. That wasn't always the case.

Starr, who has a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, said that before he joined it in 2002, "whatever somebody wanted to teach, that was what was taught. The obligation was on the incoming person to carve out their own curriculum."

That approach may have had merit once, but by the early 2000s, Penn was looking to change it. So it hired Starr, who had spent years developing education programs for companies that sold emergency medical equipment, to make the program more conventional while keeping what was good and unique about it.

"The program's strength was its students and the fact that they were coming year after year and finding interest in it," Sedehi said. "Its weakness, however, was that it did not have a curriculum, it did not have a sense of beginning, middle and end to the educational process."

Starr set out to change that. He spent his first year talking to everyone who needed to have a stake in the program to make it go: students, alumni, corporations footing the bill for students, people at the School of Arts and Sciences, people at other schools at Penn and people at other, similar programs around the country.

From that, he determined what the program needed to have to look like any other graduate program at Penn but still retain its uniqueness. He put those features into place over the 2003 to 2004 academic year. The result is a program that Starr, Sedehi and others at Penn believe is like no other in the country.

In April, about 50 leaders of organizational development programs from universities across the country came to Penn for a conference Starr put together about enhancing the academic reputation of their field of study. Many, Sedehi said, are aimed at traditional college students or psychologists interested in going into organizational coaching. Penn is focused on mid-career professionals who have realized that their initial training has taken them as far as it can and that how they deal with and motivate people is going to be the ultimate determinate of their success.

"It really is geared to that," he said, "and we have students who find the whole process just fascinating."