

MC Forward Podcast  
Season 3, Episode 10  
Dave Bergtold  
Transcript

[Music]

[Mike] Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Dave Bergtold, manager of the Math, Accounting, Physics and Engineering Learning Center, Director of the Science Learning Center and one of the co-directors of the Virtual Stem Learning Center. Dave thanks for taking time out talking to me today.

[Dave] Thank you for inviting me.

[Mike] I want to start this conversation on leadership with the virtual stem learning center. It's a new initiative that was the result of the pandemic and having to meet students in a virtual environment. Can you talk to me about the leadership that you were involved in to get that started.

[Dave] Well let me start out by saying that the virtual STEM learning center is a collaboration among all of the STEM related learning centers. So that includes the Math Learning Center and the Science Learning Center at Takoma Park. The Ackermann STEM Learning Center at Rockville and then my two Learning Centers here on Germantown campus. And I'm sure that those of us who are here will remember getting...uh an indication on the Friday before spring break that we were not returning to campus and we needed to convert to doing everything online. So that put us in an interesting spot because up to that point... uh virtual tutoring was not very popular. Online tutoring was not something that students were looking for or were even trying to find. So we had about a week because it was spring break to figure out what should we do. So I reached out to my team and for my two STEM learning centers and said well we need to be online so I scurried about as the leader of that pack and found how to make zoom function for us. And we crafted two zoom rooms that we used for the virtual tutoring. And that went along for a while the other STEM learning centers did something similar. But we all had a different approach and by the end of the spring semester... that first semester when we were remote... it became apparent that students were having a hard time finding the appropriate help. There were at that time I believe four... no five separate zoom instances... uh the writing centers in a... in a collaborative move allowed us to utilize their WC online to... you know for... for online scheduling and you know thank bless them for that... um and... and so students couldn't find... you know they weren't sure where to go... which WC online to use... there were three for the writing centers at that time and then we were all using those so it was a bit of a hot mess.

Although we were helping lots of students we didn't leave them high and dry... um it was it was not... it was not the best scenario for those students. So I suggested at the beginning... at the tail end of spring semester... to the... to my co-directors of the other STEM learning centers that I thought I could craft something with a STEM learning center/WC online so there'd only be one place to go to make appointments to get help in... in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Accounting and so they were on board with that. So that began the collaboration. Um since I brought it up I ended up being a leader in making it happen. And nothing happened all by myself of course, everything was a collaboration with my fellow managers. and we crafted something that was very straightforward, easy for students to find. Easy for students to use. And move forward from that point forward. I think I think we stuck with individual... individual WC online instances until fall semester when we launched the Virtual STEM learning center. So what was involved... well you know I think that all leadership... at least having to do with me... has to start with caring about what's going on. and that care is at different levels so you have to care about the mission. So what was what's the mission of the college - taking good care of our students in my opinion... um and so that gave me the incentive to basically volunteer to do a lot of extra stuff to try and carve out this... uh this virtual stem learning center... um.

[Mike] Would you say that your...your leadership style then is... is based on one of collaboration?

[Dave] ...Uh yes... uh care and collaboration... uh you really... in my mind you really have to care about what you are doing, what your mission, is what your purpose is. You have to care about your... your team. There's the collaboration part... um and... and ultimately though you also have to take care of yourself. And so I think everything is care based and collaboration is a part of that caring. There are a lot of other... uh popular... I'll say buzz words but I take those words to heart in my leadership style.

[Mike] When you say take care of yourself, what do you do to take care of yourself? It was a busy two and a half years that's still a busy time. what do you do to take care of yourself so that your leadership mentality isn't compromised?

[Dave] Well let me start from my team. So you know I believe that my team needed to take care of themselves and so I strongly encouraged that they take regular breaks through the day - get up walk around, don't just sit and sit in front of that screen all day long. You know, get out take a walk. Take a break. Take care of yourself. Have coffee if you're a coffee drinker. And... and I... I firmly believe that if you're not taking care of yourself then you're not in top-notch shape to be taking care of anybody else. And since what we do is so important to so many students we need to be top-notch as much as possible. I also feel like a leader needs to lead by example. So I would encourage them to do things by doing them myself. So I would take a regular break. I would get up and walk. I... I took walks ... uh regularly at lunch time for example and I would share with them that this is what I was doing. I also... um made sure that the schedule was fair to

everyone so nobody got burned out. Now that's not to say that working at home was not... was not a lot of extra hours for all of many of us. I was often helping students basically from sun up until midnight if you want to think about it that way. But I made sure to take breaks in between, to stay fresh enough and vigorous enough to be truly helpful to the students.

[Mike] Where did this idea of... of care begin? what is in your background from a leadership standpoint that makes you want to focus on caring for yourself and for your team?

[Dave] Oh I will go all the way back to many many many years ago. I... um I... I was not in a position where I... uh took school seriously. I... I was born in... in dire financial circumstances and raised in that despite very hard work on... on the part of my parents so... so I was kind of kind of born in a rough neighborhood if you will. And so I ended up being a high school dropout and doing other... other activities. Until I was lucky enough to find a mentor and I think much of what I'm talking about here and much of my philosophy of life stemmed from that mentor who... who reminded me that you know I'm a valuable person and that no matter where I came from I deserved to do well for myself and my family. And that... and he pointed out ways for that to happen and he always emphasized that you can't be your best unless you're well rested and you've found some food to eat and you know just basic survival things... um and I think that's where caring about... he cared for me, he took care of me, in a lot of different ways. And so I'm kind of paying that forward. And then I've had other mentors along the lines along the way that that have done similar things um quite frankly you're... you're one of those. We... we have talks about, you know, taking care of ourselves when we meet at conferences and...and support each other and what have you so... so there's been lots of them along the way but... but the mentor - his name was Jim – who... who found me and you know in effect mentored me to better safety as a high school dropout, that's where it all began.

[Mike] Your... your story is fascinating because I think so many of us can relate in some fashion to that. I grew up in a very blue collar area east of Baltimore and had a choice when I was in high school either to take, you know, this path or take another path and a lot of my friends took a different path than I did and some ended up in in very very bad condition... um but I think and for me as well it was it was a high school... uh track and cross country coach who helped steer me in into a... a correct path. But I think at least for me that's when I look at our students I can see me in so many of our students and I think that's where the caring comes in and you know when I was a faculty member it was that same mentality. I...I've been there I see what you're going through and if I can provide any help then let me do it.

[Dave] Oh thank you that's a very nice offer and... um I may very well take you up on that.

[Mike] Absolutely. I... this idea of mentorship. Let's... let's talk about that for... for a minute because I think it's... it's important... um are all leaders mentors and are all mentors leaders?

[Dave] oh that's a loaded question. So I think the definition of a leader can be so varied... um and you know there are people that that lead by example, for example, but they may not necessarily mentor anybody. Not on a one-on-one basis. When I think of mentorship I think of a one-on-one kind of a relationship and you know there are some very good leaders who lead their teams or their organizations, their businesses whatever it is, and they do a good job and they have they have some compassion... um and but... but they may not have the time or the interest or the skills to do a one-on-one mentorship. The flip side of that, the other half of your question is, I know lots of folks that are happy to be mentors, they're really good at that one-on-one relationship but they have no interest in leading a team or... or dealing with the... I'll just... I'll say the complications or sometimes perceived as hassles of having a team... of being a... quote unquote... manager type. So... so I think there are mentors out there that are awesome at especially here at the college I know some really awesome mentors and they are really helping lots of students. But on a one-to-one basis and... and I know some of them very well personally and they have no interest in doing what I'm doing which is leading a team of people and then dealing with the perceived headaches that can come from that.

[Mike] Well let's talk about that... um because there are a lot of people we... we know a number of people who just don't want to deal with those headaches. In general terms what do you not like about leadership?

[Dave] Oh another loaded question. I guess I'm going to say there's... I like what I do so much that there's not really anything that I do that I dislike... um there are some things that I have been put in a position where I need to do something that is not comfortable. So those you those...those issues usually have to do with ...with you know interacting with a member of my team who maybe needs mentorship in a specific area or something has gone wrong and... and that's uncomfortable but I also think I care enough about people that I can be helpful and... and provide that mentorship and... and I enjoy that aspect of it the... the being helpful aspect of it. Um I think a part of your question though also is... you know... what is what is the perception that some people have of what might... you know what I might be unhappy with ...and I know this won't shock you at all but there's a lot of paperwork involved. A lot of that is electronic paperwork these days but there's a lot of paperwork involved and I don't mind that because I always have the... the end goal in mind of whatever that paperwork is but it takes up it takes up time and there are times when I I don't dislike it but I'd rather be with a student for example. Tutoring a student or mentoring a student. So and I think that's the part that you know people look at that and they say it's... it's complicated. I don't want to deal with people and... and people's different foibles I'll use the word foibles or ...or their different... you know approach to... approaches to life and what have you. Um but I like it, but it's not for everyone as... as you well know.

[Mike] What do you like so much about working with students? As... as we're talking and when... when this is finalized the... the listeners aren't going to see the... the facial reaction but I'll describe it you - you lit up when you started talking about students. You got the smile on your face talking about working with students. What excites you about working with students?

[Dave] Two... well I'll just say two... two primary things. A lot of things do but two primary things. One when I get to... to work directly with a student and explain a concept for example and the student's face lights up and I see they're having that aha moment. That is just awesome to me because that means I've... I've been effective. I've helped somebody to understand a concept which is going to help them down the line. And I put that first because really the reason I do what I do is because a mentor who steered me into education effectively saved my life. I firmly believe that. Changed my life so that I can be doing what I'm doing now. And each and every student that I get to work with I see as a potential me who may need some help. And may benefit from my help so that they can change their lives so that they can finish their education and go on and do bigger and better things. Or in some cases in during mentoring a student I'll help them to figure out what is it they really want to do so they don't spend time working on something that they don't really like but they don't know what else to do. So you know the helping students to sometimes escape places like where I've been or to... to improve themselves to do better for themselves and their families. that that is what gets me excited.

[Mike] Do you find yourself gravitating toward those students who have more of a struggle in life than maybe those students who... who don't face those hardships.

[Dave] I think every student has a story. And I can't... looking back over I'll just say maybe even tens of thousands of students because I'm getting up there in years. Um I can't think of a one that... like... kind of had the... the educational silver spoon if you will and didn't have some issues or some circumstances or... um some thought processes or what have you so... so I don't think I gravitate toward any given type because I think they all can... this might sound a little too arrogant... sorry, but I think they can all benefit from... from some help and some insight. And... and I hope that I'm able to give that to all of them regardless. Now I will say that some students... there are some students who have shared some pretty horrible things with me and so... um you know I might try extra hard to help them because they've shared the horrible things. But usually that's... that's me referring them to an expert... um rather than trying to handle the horrible things on my own. So does that does that give you an idea?

[Mike] It absolutely it does and... and I think your point about every student having a story is something that we can all take to heart because until we drill down and start asking students about their situations we don't have any idea. Some of them mask that their situations very well. And getting to know our students as faculty members as you

know, learning center managers, tutors, just staff in general I think is... is important because they all do have a story to tell.

[Dave] I agree 100%.

[Mike] Dave, this has been fascinating. I appreciate you taking time out to talk to me. Continue the great work that you do with all of the students that you interact with. I know they are... are more than grateful for the time that you spend with them.

[Dave] I appreciate what you have said but... but I also want to point out that this is a team effort. I have a pretty colossal team. and I have... uh the... the other learning centers are full of pretty colossal people too. And so this is really a collaborative group effort on our part to, as you said get to know our students and help our students as best we can. So I appreciate your sentiment but please, you know, be thinking that your thank you is for all of us.

[Mike] If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at [michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu](mailto:michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu). Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.

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