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Sometimes you have to view something from a new perspective to be reminded of what a good thing you have.

I experienced such a change in perspective when I recently attended an engineering education conference attended by universities and continuing education managers from industry. I was struck on several occasions during that conference of how different the educational format and philosophy of MEPP is from the norms for distance education at nearly every other distance education program discussed at the conference.

In virtually every other program, distance education meant streamed lectures recorded in an on-campus classroom, with homework delivered via e-mail to instructors or graders. Student-instructor interaction was typically limited to student-initiated e-mail and student-student interaction was very limited or non-existent.

In two presentations at the conference, universities described how they had established new master’s degree programs in partnership with industry. In each case they had chosen face-to-face weekend or evening formats because, “experienced engineers really value networking and learning from each other and you just can’t do that online.”

Internally I both smiled and frowned at that comment. I was contrasting that perspective with the comments I hear every year from MEPP graduating students who say they interact with members of their cohort far more than they ever did in an on-campus program. I smiled to realize how far the comment was from what is possible, and I frowned as I realized just how unfortunate that reality is for many students, instructors and employers.

I came away from the conference realizing what a special curriculum, learning environment, and committed, engaged faculty and staff we have in MEPP. This is world-class graduate engineering education with faculty, staff and students who are passionate about learning and are committed to continuously making MEPP even better.

I came away grateful for MEPP’s use of project-based, collaborative learning rather than typical instructor-focused, lecture-based courses. I also left the conference resolved to return next year to present a paper on, “Busting Myths of Distance Education.” Myth One will be: ‘Experienced engineers really value networking and learning from each other and you just can’t do that online.’
Focus on Students

Commencement 2007

The Class of 2007 celebrated with family and friends on the weekend of May 18-20 in Madison. It was an activity-packed weekend that included a picnic, class meeting, dinner, recognition brunch, and, of course, the UW commencement ceremony.

Twenty-seven students graduated as members of the MEPP Class of 2007. Bucky Badger showed up at the MEPP Commencement brunch to express his heartfelt thanks to the Class of 2007 for establishing the Badger Pals Endowment Fund (see accompanying article, page 4).

This seventh graduating class brought the ranks of MEPP alumni to nearly two hundred engineers. A program completion survey of graduating students revealed that nearly 60% of graduates have already experienced a promotion or raise that they attribute at least in part to their MEPP studies.

Congratulations Class of 2007!

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<td>Timothy Wilson</td>
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Commencement Images

Families and friends — from as far away as Malaysia — joined graduates and MEPP faculty and staff to celebrate. These photos tell the story better than words — from the Friday night picnic, Saturday morning program recap and Redshed awards, and Sunday brunch honoring graduates and their achievements. Much to celebrate and be proud of as a teaching and learning community.
Focus on Students

Badger Pals Endowment fund

On behalf of the entire MEPP community, MEPP Class of 2007 worked with the UW Foundation to establish the Badger Pals Endowment Fund. This program makes it possible for pediatric patients at the American Family Children’s Hospital and their guardians to attend on-campus Badger athletic events. These activities provide relief from the stress and anxieties that accompany hospitalization. Badger Pals covers the cost of refreshments, tickets and/or necessary medical staff.

Thank you Class of 2007 and the MEPP community for your generosity and thoughtfulness in providing some joy and encouragement to kids in the hospital.

How you can participate

Badger Pals is an on-going endowment fund, which means you can still contribute to this great cause. Here’s how:

Mail your tax-deductible gift to the UW Foundation, c/o Nancy Francisco-Welke, 1848 University Avenue, PO Box 8860, Madison, Wisconsin, 53708-8860. Questions? Call Nancy at 608-263-5960.

Focus on Alumni

MAD Series Continues

The sixth annual MEPP Alumni Development (MAD) Series provided an opportunity for alumni to learn and network via Live Meeting Webconferencing. Selected from an alumni survey, sessions included:

- **January 31:** Welcome and Open Discussion
- **February 28:** Product Lifecycle Management, with Pat Eagan
- **March 28:** Strategic Planning, with Jeff Russell
- **April 25:** Using the Engineering Library after Graduation, with Amy Kindschi
- **May 16:** Open Discussion and Future Planning, including an introduction to Moodle, the Web platform replacing WebCT this summer

MEPP Alumni Summer Workshop

The March online session provided an introduction to the two-day MEPP Alumni Summer 2007 Workshop, scheduled for August 20-21, 2007, the first two days of Summer Residency.

- **Effective Strategic Planning**
  
  Presenter: Jeff Russell

  Jeff Russell who has made guest presentations in Harry Steudel’s QEQM course and some previous Residency weeks. Jeff is a local management consultant who lectures widely and has also presented an EPD Webconference series on the same topic.

  All MEPP Alumni will receive a summer workshop invitation at their external e-mail address. There is a discounted registration fee of $395 for this workshop. Plan to join us in Madison again in August!
Since the beginning of the MEPP degree program, Technical Project Management (TPM) has been a foundational course for the program. Beyond specific project management skills, students learn what it takes to make a project successful from many perspectives and how they can contribute as a leader or as a team member.

Program Director Wayne Pferdehirt explained, “Developing abilities as an effective project manager is critical for future success. It gets at the heart of why students come to MEPP. They want to become more effective leaders and managers and TPM does this very specifically.”

When Dr. Bill Ibbs, who taught the TPM course for six years, announced that he was no longer able to teach TPM due to increased responsibilities at UC-Berkeley and in his consulting practice, a new team took over the course responsibilities for the Fall 2006 offering. Jeff Russell and Wayne Pferdehirt were lead instructors and responsible for course content and course activities throughout the semester. John Nelson, retired CEO from Affiliated Engineers, participated in Web conferences and forums to lend practical managerial perspectives. Bob Aloisi, MEPP graduate, assisted with grading assignments and providing timely feedback. (See biographies below.)

The team approached worked. Jeff remarked, “I think we really had a good team that had the right attitude. We didn’t know everything. We were trying to facilitate a process for learning to occur. I think everyone learned something. Students responded very well.”

Revisions lead to improved team projects and a new Web conference option

Building on a strong foundation of the materials developed by Bill Ibbs and Bruce Kieffer, Jeff and Wayne spent time revising the major team project and specifying a series of interim deliverables that students could work on throughout the semester. They decided to start the project earlier in the semester and established high expectations on the technical content and how that content might be communicated. To stay as realistic as possible, they told students right away that the group project assignment was a project in and of itself, requiring a work plan, schedule, and distribution of responsibilities.

All instructors felt that the quality of materials improved throughout the semester and were very pleased with the work of the teams. Jeff explained, “You’d see that the progress students made on their teams and the quality of their presentations and submittals. And I think they were very proud of it as well. That’s what you want. It’s not about the grade. It’s about excellence and trying to do your best. These students really did a nice job and at the same time balancing their own commitments between job and family. They clearly worked hard, learned a lot and were up to the challenge. We were pleased.”

Another change was giving students the option of either leading a week’s online discussion or presenting a 10-minute Web conference presentation on any PM topic of their interest. Options included an approach, a project, book, technical paper, or anything relevant to project management. Many chose the Web conference option and came in with some interesting presentations. John Nelson, who participated in the Web conferences, commented:

“Many of Web conferences had students doing assignments where they would go back into their organization and pull something out and bring it back to the group. I enjoyed that and the opportunity to see how students in the organization had applied principles in different ways. And then there were
some very interesting spontaneous discussions. One day we looked at the Airbus A280—what were the challenges and risk propositions associated with project. A couple of students knew a lot about this because of business associations. They gave interesting insights—very thoughtful.”

Learning is a two-way street

As a MEPP graduate participating in the course a second time around, Bob Aloisi reflected on the value of TPM in terms of applying concepts to work projects. In his case he was able to use TPM concepts to enable the launch of a major new product before a competing national brand could do so. About going through the course a second time, Bob said, “You always get new perspectives and a little more depth by going through the course a second time. Especially the risk management area seemed to have some additional topics, including the Crystal Ball software that does Monte Carlo analysis.”

Both Jeff and Wayne were new to teaching online. Wayne said, “I certainly knew it would be a lot of work the first time through. It gave me a firsthand empathy and understanding. I appreciated more than ever the work involved in quality online education and the quality of the work that MEPP instructors do.”

Jeff found the experience rewarding. He commented, “You can’t engage as an instructor in this kind of process without learning a great deal. There were a lot of insightful comments and questions that occurred that were very helpful.”

The new instructional team and students all learned something valuable and came out winners. TPM shows how MEPP strives to create a learning environment that recognizes the importance of student experience and contributions and engages students in relevant, meaningful discussion and projects.

Meet the instructional team

Jeffrey S. Russell, PhD, PE, is professor and chair in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering and a co-founder of the Construction Engineering and Management program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has a BS degree in civil engineering from the University of Cincinnati, has MS and PhD degrees from Purdue University, and is a registered professional engineer in Wisconsin. Recipient of more than 11 national and regional awards and four best paper awards for his research, Dr. Russell has published nearly 200 technical papers on construction topics and two books. He is presently chair of the ASCE Committee on Academic Prerequisites for Professional Practice, which is charged with defining the future education requirements necessary to practice civil engineering at the professional level.

Wayne P. Pferdehirt, PE, AICP, is the director of graduate distance degree programs for the College of Engineering and the assistant chair of the Department of Engineering Professional Development. Prior to joining UW-Madison in 1991, Wayne directed the Midwest solid waste consulting services of CDM, an international environmental consulting firm. Wayne also directed environmental, transportation, and water resource engineering projects for Envirodyne Engineers, conducted energy conservation and cogeneration studies for Argonne National Laboratory, and managed flood studies for the Army Corps of Engineers. Wayne is a co-founder and co-director of the Printers’ National Environmental Assistance Center. He has a BS in engineering from Carnegie-Mellon University, and an MS in civil engineering from Northwestern University.

John Nelson, PE, has served as project engineer, department head, project manager, vice president and chief executive officer at Affiliated Engineers over a three-decade period. Under John’s leadership, Affiliated Engineers became a nationally recognized engineering firm in the area of building dynamic systems for large and complicated projects. His background includes design, applications and research experience with dynamic building systems, along with business and project management. He has participated in more than 100 projects across the U.S., involving major companies and organizations. John’s academic training is in mechanical engineering, with a bachelor’s degree from Bradley and a master’s degree from UW-Madison.

Bob Aloisi is manager - new product / process development at Rockline Industries, a growing, family-owned company. The company makes most of the coffee filters sold in the U.S. and is the leading private label supplier of baby wipes and all other types of wipes—cleaning, makeup removal, furniture polish, car care, etc. Previously, he spent 15 years working with Georgia Pacific to develop new products in many areas, including Dixie cups, plates and lids, as well as towel, tissue, napkin, packaging, etc. He has an MS degree in paper science from the Institute of Paper Science & Technology, a BS degree in chemical engineering, and a MEPP degree from UW-Madison.
The spring 2007 Communicating Technical Information (CTI) course featured several changes, including the addition of Traci Kelly, who team taught with Christine Nicometo. CTI develops technical leadership and communication skills by looking at audience analysis, improving understanding of the organization and identifying opportunities to broaden scope and depth of technical expertise through communication.

Revisions lead to more project options

Since the beginning, CTI has involved a major course project consisting of a report, proposal or training materials to be presented to an on-the-job audience of stakeholders. Using feedback from students, Christine and Traci have revised the course project in several ways. They introduced the major project and initiated the planning process in the August Residency. This early start gave students more time to decide on a topic that would have impact, relevance and interest for them. Since nearly all of the assignments for the course feed into the project, it’s critical that the topic selected is of value and develops technical leadership.

Students also had more ability to determine the components of the project and adapt the project to their organization and needs. Christine explained, “We encourage students to carefully analyze the audience, carefully analyze the context and determine for themselves what areas they want to develop in a lengthy written deliverable that’s going to get readers to look at it.”

Traci offered her perspective on this issue and said, “Not only are we doing audience analysis but helping students understand the life of the document or presentation. If it sits on a dusty shelf, it doesn’t have a life. We need to make it work and put it in a format that gets circulated, listened to, and regarded with respect in the company.”

For a new project activity, students worked on a short elevator talk or pitch. In three minutes they had to very quickly and persuasively communicate the project and context to an audience of peers.

Changes in feedback and evaluation

Another change in the course was in the feedback and evaluation process. Christine and Traci each took half of the students and followed all of their work throughout the semester, rather than taking turns grading assignments from all students. This division allowed them to see the progress and growth of students over the course of the semester, while comparing notes to make sure they were handling grading in the same way.

Continued focus on audience analysis

Audience analysis and organizational understanding continued to be important aspects of the CTI learning experience. As non-engineers, Christine and Traci can help students reach all members of the audience in a presentation. Christine explained, “The good side is that we are those audience members they tend to forget. We remind them how important it is to reach all members of audience whether it’s part of technical peer group or marketing or sales or clients trying to gain more information about the project.”
Focusing on audience also helps students improve their understanding of their organizations. For students who have been in a company for a long time, Christine and Traci help them to look at their organization in a new light or from a different perspective. In this way they enable students to find ways to be more successful in their communication and as a result enhance their technical leadership.

Rewards of working with professionals

The spring 2007 course started off with a bang, with nearly 300 messages in the online forum in the first two weeks and 1800 messages by week seven. Traci and Christine were impressed with the quality of the posts and how students enriched and contributed to the content of the course by providing resources and advice for each other. MEPP students bring a wealth of experience and represent a wide range of organizations. Traci said, “We’re learning constantly. Maybe a little bit of knowledge about a lot of things can be dangerous, but I find it energizing.”

And it’s definitely different from working with undergraduates. Christine explained, “It is an exciting class. We get this lens into these organizations. Often I find this enhances the teaching of my undergrads since I get to hear about these places where my undergrads may work some day.”

For Traci, who has taught online previously, the Web conference is an essential ingredient for building trust, teamwork and engagement throughout the course and program. And speaking of teamwork, both she and Christine are happy to be working together. Team teaching offers an important opportunity to compare notes and make adjustments throughout the semester. In the same way the MEPP program strives to keep making adjustments and better meet the needs of students.

Instructor Biographies

Traci Kelly earned her PhD in 1997 in English. At that time, she was also the program director for the Scientific and Technical Communication BS degree at the University of Minnesota, Crookston. She came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to teach in the College of Engineering’s Technical Communication program in 2000, where she teaches technical communication, technical editing, Web design, writing user manuals, and other courses. She is active in the Society for Technical Communication, judging at the international level for the publications contests. She regularly holds workshops (both online and face-to-face) for practicing engineers on how to improve their technical presentations, and she is a review coordinator for the journal, Technical Communication.

Besides technical communication, one of Traci’s interests and research areas is culinary literature, especially regional cookbooks that document local history along with the food of various groups. She belongs to CHEW (Culinary History Enthusiasts of Wisconsin) and recently was one of the judges at the 2007 World-Wide Mustard Competition, sponsored annually by the Napa Valley Mustard Festival and held in Mt. Horeb’s Mustard Museum. Her husband is the editor-in-chief of a for-trade magazine, and together they have a three-year old boy who loves dinosaurs, bikes, aliens, the color yellow, and princesses.

Christine G. Nicometo, MS, has taught technical communication courses for undergraduate and graduate students at the UW-Madison campus since 2003. She received her master of science degree in rhetoric and technical communication from Michigan Technological University, where she taught technical communication and English as a second language (ESL) courses. She also taught ESL courses at Finlandia University where she was the director of a federal, TRIO, Students Support Services grant. Her interests lie in discovering how technology alters the ways we communicate, learn, and teach. She has directed nationally funded K-12 technology workshops and is currently the director of the New Educator’s Orientation workshop in the College of Engineering at UW-Madison.

Christine’s interests outside of teaching include travel, running, sailing, and keeping up with her toddler daughter who is preparing to become a big sister in late August (hopefully after residency!).
Balancing Act

By Nancy Rebholz

Managing family and work demands can be a challenge, but adding a third element of earning an advanced degree makes life a serious balancing act. Then imagine going through an intensive two-year master’s degree and immediately afterwards watch your wife go through the same program. Sound crazy? Well, that’s exactly what Ron and Tanya Higgins did while completing the MEPP degree, raising two daughters and working full-time at John Deere.

Ron and Tanya have always done some balancing. At John Deere Ron works in the new product and design area of engineering while Tanya focuses on processes and continuous improvement. She’s an early morning person who goes in early to work and gets home early to be with the kids, while Ron starts and ends his day later.

Both knew that earning a master’s degree was a key way to advance their careers at John Deere. And MEPP’s flexible delivery allowed them to do this while their daughters were young. Initially Ron wasn’t planning to do an advanced degree at all.

Ron commented, “I had no interest in pursuing a degree at the time and Tanya was the one pursuing it. She was looking at some local degrees and brought the MEPP brochure home. I looked at it, watched the video and signed up. She said, ‘Guess I’ll wait two years.’ I looked at it and this made sense. I can do this without traveling on the weekends. MEPP made it really convenient to work at night and I was always connected.”

So how did they do it? From the family side they needed to shift roles and cover for one another. Tanya picked up more of the family responsibilities while Ron was a student and vice versa. It helped Tanya that Ron had been a student first. He knew exactly what the demands were and could appreciate what she was going through. Tanya joked, “It was easier being the student than not.”

Tanya liked to work on MEPP assignments on a regular schedule, as soon as she got home from work and then again after the kids went to bed. Ron tended to work on MEPP assignments later at night and also later in the week and on the weekend. Both benefited from getting time at work to attend Web conferences and do some coursework.

But another critical ingredient in keeping all the balls up in the air is the MEPP cohort approach. As Tanya said, “The whole cohort model and that support system alone makes the degree manageable. I still keep in close contact with several class members from a career standpoint and a personal standpoint. I think they’ve got it right. The model is set up for people to succeed. You have to not want to succeed to not make it work for you. The flexibility that it offers, the atmosphere it fosters, and teamwork it teaches provide an amazing support system.”

Ron echoed these comments and added, “We always felt closer to our classmates because we had that instant connection. In a classroom you leave, get in your car and go different directions. We always had that communication back and forth, through project work and the online forums.”

And MEPP fosters a sense of commitment and encouragement. Tanya commented, “You never felt like they just wanted a student. You felt like they wanted you. A lot of universities just want students. To me MEPP didn’t want 30 people in the program, they wanted you in the program, for your skill set and what you wanted out of it. That also helps with your sense of commitment.”

There are many more balancing act stories out there. As Ron joked, “No one abides by the ‘have no kids in the program’ rule. There were nine new kids in my cohort. One had two babies during the two-year program.” (Ron was referring to one of several suggestions for reducing stress while in the program. The list of births elsewhere in this newsletter shows just how well this is heeded.)

That’s life in the 21st century. The need to keep up with change and improve skills while working and raising a family is today’s reality. MEPP’s approach just makes it a little easier to do it all. Completing the MEPP degree has led to promotions for both Ron and Tanya.
MEPP Platform and Tool Set Review

By Nancy Rebholz

Last fall members of the Distance Degrees staff began meeting to review the MEPP learning platform and plan for the future. The existing platform was complex, involving several tools for course delivery.

- WebCT/Blackboard course management system provided portal functions, email, discussion calendar, and announcements.
- DocuShare offered file exchange, version control, delivery of course materials and homework
- Live Meeting enabled live Web conferencing and audio conferencing.
- Zoomerang performed polling and survey functions.

Survey

We began by surveying faculty, staff and students to learn which features of the current system were most important to them and how well they thought the current tools performed.

- Students rated email, calendar, lecture delivery, homework management, library access, and Web conferences as very important functions. The quality of the current email, calendar stood out as needing improvement. Almost everyone would like a single login.
- Faculty wanted to see improvements in homework monitoring, grading and return; the ability to support groupwork; and calendar.
- Staff concerns focused on platform performance and the need for improvements in role management; ease of editing, revising and publishing; and overall portal functions and program-wide activities.

Priorities

In evaluating new tools, reliability and operability in the corporate network environment were top priorities. Also important was the ability to give students the flexibility to set up their own team workspaces, empowered with communication and collaboration tools and document management capabilities. A platform where alumni could have access to a rich toolset was desirable.

For course development, we looked at how new tools might allow us to streamline course set up processes and improve role management and permissions. Being able to easily support multiple instructors in a single course and train new faculty were also essential.

Plan for the future

Staff members chose an open source or commercial tools to research and provide a recommendation to the platform committee. After a series of presentations and discussions that extended through the fall and winter, we came up with this plan:

- We will upgrade to a new version of DocuShare, but continue to evaluate other document management options.
- We’ve started using the open source course management system called Moodle this summer. Moodle’s ability to integrate new tools and modules, its ease of use, and its adoption at UCLA and other leading universities pushed it ahead of WebCT/Blackboard. While not the perfect solution, Moodle came closest and offered the most potential for tailoring for our needs.
- We’ll replace Zoomerang, which posed firewall issues, with a survey tool developed at UW-Madison.
- We will continue to use Live Meeting for Webconferencing. While we have experienced some performance issues recently, we feel we can resolve these problems by working with the staff at Instructional Communication Systems.

Staff were busy this spring and put a great deal of energy into developing course and MEPP Community sites in the Moodle environment. The committee members and other staff are behind the change and are eager to provide a better learning environment for MEPP now and into the future.

The review team members included Lauranne Bailey, Stacey Binder, Wayne Pferdehirt, Nancy Rebholz, Amy Shenot, Tom Smith, John Stremikis.
Photo Contest Winner

Don Ritter (03), BAE Systems

Last fall we ran a photo contest of MEPP engineers-at-work to build a library of photos to use with various publications. The award winner could choose from (1) a $100 gift certificate at University Bookstore; (2) one night of lodging at the Campus Inn in Madison; or (3) free registration to a MEPP alumni short course during Residency.

Don Ritter submitted the winning photo. The contest is over but you can still send us your MEPP engineers-at-work photos.

MEPP, the Next Generation

Congratulations on new MEPP family members. (It’s been awhile since our last newsletter. Please let us know if we’ve missed anyone.)

- Jim York (05): Kevin born November 7, 2005
- Jared Schneider (07): Ava Anne born March 3, 2006
- Zachary Rose (07): Baby boy born October 9, 2006
- Misty Metschke (04): Allison Leigh born summer 2006
- Leah Frautschy (03): Lillian Johanna born November 20, 2006
- Jason Jirovsky (07): Judson Oliver born May 21, 2007
- Dave Rodgers (08): Del Christopher born June 12, 2007

Job News

Jim Jewell (08) shared that he received a promotion from senior engineer to staff analyst at Hamilton Sundstrand. Jim believes MEPP played a role, even though he’s just part way through the program. Congratulations, Jim!

Bill Deuerling (06) has been selected as the new Rockford PMAD site manager and IPT lead for the Orion / CEV program. Bill has an extensive background in the management of electrical systems projects, and will be transitioning from the Joint Strike Fighter program in the Hamilton Sundstrand Electrical Systems group. Congratulations, Bill!

Newsletter Acknowledgments

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