CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATION

Thinking of how to improve the future of higher education institutions and the future of our society is what Dr. Latricia Hylton does on a daily basis. Dr. Hylton is a mathematics educator and the Mathematics Coordinator at the Academic Learning Center at the University of Northern Iowa.

Dr. Hylton began her post-secondary education as a McNair scholar at the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee. She graduated with her undergraduate degree and decided to attend graduate school. At this point her plans changed from becoming a teacher in the K-12 system to teaching at the collegiate level. After obtaining her Master of Arts in Mathematics at UNI she taught mathematics at Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo. Though content in her position, helping students get excited about Math, Dr. Hylton returned to the UNI campus 5 years later to become the Director of the Upward Bound Math & Science Program. Later, she moved to her current position as Mathematics Coordinator at the Academic Learning Center and sought her Doctorate of Industrial Technology (DIT) from the Technology Department. One of the reasons for pursuing the DIT was that she wanted a program where she could apply her mathematics background and continue to help students learn.

Dr. Hylton structured her DIT electives around the idea of Six-Sigma to get a better understanding of this process. Being able to choose her electives to focus on her research interest gave her the opportunity to build her own degree. This is what she feels many people are looking for in a graduate program, the flexibility to focus on their interests. She expressed her appreciation for all the faculty of the Technology Department saying, “A strength of the department is that no matter your path or focus, all the faculty work together to help you succeed. They keep track of their students. They want you to be successful.”

It was through the process of obtaining her doctorate that she became more focused on teaching and learning mathematics. Because of the diversity of the DIT program, she was able to collaborate with people from various fields and backgrounds. She believes UNI’s DIT program makes better graduates by encouraging them to interact with students in other departments. Real-world problem solving requires people to work with professionals in other fields of study and collaborate with them. These kind of partnerships help open everyone’s mind, rethink problems and develop better solutions.

Dr. Hylton’s interest in process improvement (making things better) led her to focus her dissertation on the Six-Sigma methodology. Six-Sigma is a tool used to evaluate the effectiveness of a process. This is done by giving employees opportunities to provide input and develop solutions, in turn creating a sense of ownership, buy-in, and trust for all those involved. Six-Sigma is normally used in the industrial sector. Many within education feel that tools used in industry should not be used in education. Dr. Hylton wanted to see how this tool would apply to education. She sees a connection between industry and education. She

“Be aware of the novel things around you and keep up with the trends but also think about where you are going. The job market is rapidly changing with technology but employers still expect you to come to work on time, dress appropriately, and be able to write in complete sentences.”

-Dr. Latricia Hylton
Dr. Hylton has some key ideas that she believes will help students of all backgrounds:

- Recognize what you don’t know and be okay with this. Because until you are comfortable with the idea that you are not sure of something, you will not be courageous and move forward to ask questions.
- Build relationships. Find your allies. Find a mentor. Build your community.
- Do not be afraid of the challenges that are part of obtaining your education. Be willing to learn and find where you fit into this new environment.
- Recognize your contribution to the education system, embrace this, you are making an impact on the UNI campus.
- Take advantage of your resources (such as the Academic Learning Center).
- Be willing to spend the time necessary to effectively learn, not just memorize.
- Celebrate your accomplishments.

wanted to show these improvement efforts are necessary for the viability of educational institutions and the students they serve.

Six-Sigma ideas have been implemented on a small scale with the tutors Dr. Hylton supervises at the Academic Learning Center. For UNI tutoring, Dr. Hylton asks the staff to share ideas and take ownership. The process to help students become better learners is constantly being improved with new ideas being implemented.

Dr. Hylton’s other passion is helping students learn and understand mathematics, not just memorize theorems. She believes that any student can learn. It is a matter of how the student approaches the course and the information. Once a student shifts his/her approach from learning by memorization to understanding why and how concepts are connected, then true learning can begin.

This approach to learning is passed along to the tutors at the Academic Learning Center. Dr. Hylton is changing the way students and tutors work together and think about learning. All students learn differently and at different speeds. This is key to understanding how tutors help students become better learners. Tutors must try to find what is preventing the student from learning the subject and develop a relationship with the student. In the end, the students come away from the experience with the tools and knowledge they need to continue to learn effectively. Tutors find this experience rewarding as well.

Dr. Hylton is a passionate educator on the UNI campus. She is here to help students. She strives to make UNI a better higher learning institution and the students better learners through change and continuous improvement.