

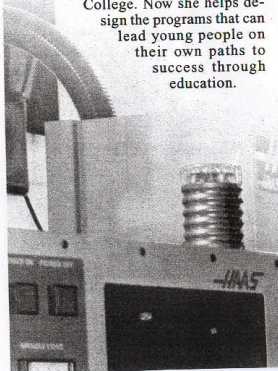
Forging the technical future at MCC

Dianna Phillips, dean of technical education at Monroe Community College, spent 14 years in the Navy

By JANICE BULLARD PIETERSE

At age 8, Dianna Phillips played as a teacher to her younger cousins in rural West Virginia. She recognized early that learning held the key to breaking out of difficult circumstances.

Phillips, raised by a grandmother who gave her more books than the local two-room elementary school owned, followed a winding, determined path to her post as dean of technical education at Monroe Community College. Now she helps design the programs that can lead young people on their own paths to success through education.



Phillips, 48, is the top manager of 98 faculty and staff with a \$6.2 million budget for an array of academic programs that train technical workers for jobs in fields from optical systems to automotive technology.

She sees promise in the Rochester manufacturing economy where some see stagnation. She is working with leaders at local manufacturers to adapt technical programs at MCC to their ever-changing needs.

Her professional path has taken her through traditionally male-dominated fields, a fact that she says does not present particular challenges.

"Maybe that's because I spent 14 years in the Navy, which is absolutely male-dominated, and I had to learn to take command of a situation," she says. "I don't think of technical education that way on a daily basis—it's not part of my consciousness, so it's not part of my decision making either."

"That's not to say I don't catch the occasional look and know the thought going on there, 'What does she think she knows about this?' The world is not a place where those kinds of stereotypes are acceptable, so that makes it easier as well."

A single mother, Phillips says the most fulfilling part of her life is her 11-year-old son, and she has molded her career around raising him.

"She's one of the superwomen," says Louise Woerner, president of HCR Inc., a health care resources service.

The child of a teen mother who lived in Ohio and a father who died when she was young, Phillips read books her grandmother gave her to open a world beyond southwestern West Virginia, near Huntington. She was the first in her family to earn a high school diploma.

"My grandmother told me I could be anything I ever wanted to be," Phillips says.

She recalls her first memory of wanting to do something seemingly impossible: As a child she wondered what it would be like to be on a ship in the middle of the ocean. Later, she served more than a decade in the Navy.

At age 13, Phillips' grandmother gave her the option to live with an aunt and uncle in Cleveland, which she accepted. On bus trips to visit relatives she had seen greater opportunities in more populated areas, even from the perspective of a child.

"The playground—there were swings," she says. "Our playground was a big old tire with sand in it."

In the Navy

Phillips joined the Navy after high school. The military stint took her into technical communications and

enabled her to earn a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1989. In her last four years of service she worked as a master trainer in what she says now would be known as Internet security.

The military exposed her to exciting locations—London, the Bahamas, California—but Phillips says she knew she needed to further her professional development. She left the Navy in 1990 to take a post as academic adviser for Bryant & Stratton College outside Buffalo, then pursued a master's degree in student personnel administration at SUNY College at Buffalo.

"I knew about teaching," she says. "I needed to come at education from another perspective. I thought student personnel—that was a gap. So I pursued studying students in educational institutions, their development, how we care for them, how they learn, their impact on the institution, the impact of the institution in their lives."

She had no thoughts about doctoral work until a professor said he assumed she would pursue it. As that idea took hold, Phillips decided to focus on adult educational environments while also learning about the history of higher education.

She put those interests together at SUNY Buffalo, studying social foundations of education, focusing on organizational, financial, policy, historical and international perspectives.

Phillips defended her dissertation in 1995, eight and a half months pregnant with son Ian. Her pregnancy, she says, rendered her a poster child among classmates who were consumed with finishing their doctoral work: Phillips' state symbolized life beyond the dissertation, helping to keep that work in perspective.

When Ian was 2, Phillips and her husband separated.

"I put 100 percent of the responsibility on my shoulders 100 percent of the time. When you are a single parent, you have to become incredibly resilient," she says of that time.

She has been lucky, Phillips says, that her work has given her considerable flexibility and autonomy—even if those arrangements have meant spending time at her home desk at 2 a.m. and on weekends.

The Greece resident likes biking and recently has taken up gardening. When she has a free weekend, she likes to visit college campuses to admire inspiring architecture.

Studying adult education helped Phillips learn about herself and appreciate the role that reading, primarily, played in driving her toward education.

"I didn't understand why I became a first-generation college student—why did I need to go in this direction?" she says. "A formal education is just that. If you don't use it to reflect on your own life and make it better and use it to make the lives of others better, in my opinion you haven't fulfilled the obligation of that privilege of acquiring an education."

Joining BOCES

Before taking the MCC job in November, Phillips served for six years as director of the Center for Workforce Development at Monroe 2-Orleans Board of Cooperative Educational Services. She previously had been a program coordinator at SUNY College at Brockport and at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

At BOCES, Phillips brought new ideas and vision, says Mary Ellen Spennachio-

Wagner, who moved into Phillips' former role as director of the Center for Workforce Development. Phillips was instrumental in coordinating programs with the Rochester Works! Inc. career center and moving adult-training programs to a separate campus on Buffalo Road so that it became independent of activities in the traditional kindergarten through 12th grade system.

Phillips developed systems to align adult education programs with expectations of higher education institutions, Spennachio-Wagner says. Staff created syllabi so students could see expectations and businesses or other colleges could see what students were learning.

"She is an educator who also wants to educate her staff," Spennachio-Wagner says.

Phillips, always sharing an engaging sense of humor, started leadership groups and projects to develop skills among the staff, she added.

"She was like a mentor leader," Spennachio-Wagner says. "She believes in herself. She has a strong image of what she believes will happen. She has a vision and she's open to new ideas."

Woerner recalls Phillips as one of the most hardworking and creative thinkers at the Workforce Investment Board. The group is charged with implementing requirements of the 1998 federal Workforce Investment Act designed to coordinate job services. Among the group's projects was a study on how day care affects the employability of low-income women.

For HCR, Phillips led a program to help paraprofessionals advance to nursing work through scholarships for remedial English and mathematics courses at MCC, Woerner says.

"That removed a huge barrier that had been there in the past," she notes.

Military influence

"She has a very wonderful leadership style," Woerner says. "She's created a leadership model partly crafted from military experience, I think, but partly crafted from female-modeled leadership. Dianna's always been a very effective woman in a man's world, so I think she would easily be able to be a leader changing a technical program."

"She's no nonsense," Woerner adds, "and she has a collaborative style. When things need to happen, she doesn't hesitate to bring things toward an end."

Phillips acknowledges the military's influence on her leadership style in the sense that she gained an appreciation for understanding systems and the political culture of institutions. She says, however, that she stays in tune to her own beliefs.

She remembers leading an all-female crew at a communications center in Iceland that supported the Navy's North Atlantic Command during the early 1980s, before the end of the Cold War. Russian planes would fly over the North Pole, travel along the U.S. coast to Bermuda and return. Phillips' crew served U.S. planes that tracked the Russians.

Phillips' captain said he was going to break up the female crew—simply because it was all women.

"I said, 'You can't do that. It's discrimination,'" Phillips recalls. "He guffawed, but he didn't break up my crew."

"I learned that lesson at 22, and I've been doing it ever since: There's a line you can't push across, but you can push the boundaries. Sometimes you don't win, but you kind of have to have the passion to do it."

At MCC

She is passionate about the role MCC's technical education can play in Rochester's success. She oversees programs in automotive technology; civil and construction technology; electrical engineering; heating, ventilating and air conditioning; hospitality management; office and computer systems technology; optical systems technology; precision tooling and machining; and travel and tourism.

"We're fighting a mainstream misconception about manufacturing," Phillips says.

"In the aggregate, we still have a huge manufacturing base in this community. Now it's small and emerging companies, a broad array of industries, with manufacturing as the foundation: It's diverse, broader and very fragile—and it's trying to emerge in the national and global economies."

"I believe that you can have a very rewarding and lucrative technical career in this community," Phillips adds. "(But) you have to go about it differently than your grandparents did."

MCC is identifying industry clusters such as electronics, biomedicine, optics and information technology, and determining skills that cross industries, Phillips said. Students who possess those skills will have flexibility if they choose to advance in management.

A science fiction fan who cannot stand closed minds, Phillips says she visited Integrated Nano-Technologies LLC of Henrietta where she saw nanobots building themselves in beakers. If the nanobots did not assemble correctly, they would disassemble themselves.

"That blows my mind," Phillips exclaims. "Tell me that doesn't blow your mind!"

Phillips is meeting with industry groups such as the Rochester Chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Association to determine skills needed and translate that information into a meaningful curriculum. She also is working with Rochester Institute of Technology because she wants students to have a foundation that will enable them to further their education at RIT.

Ideally, a student would earn a two-year associate's degree at MCC and be hired by an employer who would help with the cost of a four-year degree, Phillips says.

In a recent meeting with 14 employers in the electronics and engineering fields, Phillips says, nine companies reported job openings they were unable to fill because of a lack of qualified workers.

"A formal education is just that. If you don't use it to reflect on your own life and make it better and use it to make the lives of others better, in my opinion you haven't fulfilled the obligation of that privilege of acquiring an education."

"Small and emerging companies are all trying to be nimble," Phillips says. "They can't afford to worry about three years down the road. I'm trying to help them now and three years down the road. The pace of business has changed dramatically."

She is excited about a new program in which not only students but also MCC faculty will be embedded in businesses, similar to job internships, so they can bring information back to the school.

A public school such as MCC functions as the people's college, Phillips says.

"You are obligated to serve the community, to give access to higher education that people wouldn't otherwise have," she says.

"I have a quote somewhere: 'Education isn't preparation for life, education is life.' I believe some contradictory things too, that when you have a lot of formal education, in order to keep it in balance, it's not that you have a disregard for it but you have to realize that it is only of value with your accordance to use it wisely."

"One of the things I've always wanted to be in my life when I grew up was wise," she adds. "I don't know if that ever happens. Merlin was always my role model because I thought he was very wise. I don't know if I'm there yet."

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CLOSE-UP

Dianna Phillips

Title: Dean, Technical Education,
Monroe Community College

Age: 48

Home: Greece

Education: B.S., National University,
San Diego, 1989; M.S., SUNY College
at Buffalo, 1992; Ph.D., SUNY
Buffalo, 1995

Family: Son, Ian, 11

Hobbies: Cycling, gardening

Quote: "I am most proud of my son.
Beyond that, to go from a two-room
schoolhouse in West Virginia to a
prominent university with a Ph.D.,
I'm proud of that. I believe there are
very, very few countries in the world
where that would be possible."

