

Seizing opportunities

MTCC's Randy Hollifield goes from student to teacher

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Every building at McDowell Tech seems to be a repository of fine jewels these days – filled with some of the greatest faculty and staff you'll find at any community college in America. Each of them is bright, talented, caring and student-focused. Randy Hollifield is one of those persons. Hollifield is the college's Cyber Crime Technology Instructor.

"Randy is a true McDowell Tech success story," said Dr. Brian S. Merritt, MTCC's President. "He is a former student leader, an MTCC graduate with multiple degrees and certifications, and now he is transforming students' lives in the classroom."

"I fall asleep at night thinking about our students," Merritt continued. "But, then my mind quickly shifts to our employees because our people make our programs what they are. We rely on great faculty like Randy to create quality learning experiences for our students."

Seizing Opportunity by the Handfuls

Hollifield's path to head of the class was not an easy one. Sixteen years ago, Hollifield worked at a textile manufacturing facility that was downsizing and handing out pink slips right and left. Although he made it through the first few cuts, he knew that it was only a matter of time until he, too, would lose his job to foreign competition in the U.S. textile industry.

"Although I had been with the company for more than 22 years,

I knew that I would eventually receive my pink slip, just as so many before me had," said Hollifield. "Rather than wait around for the inevitable, I resigned in 2005 and took some classes at JobLink (now NCWorks) that made it possible for me to receive my High School Equivalency in May, 2006.

"In the fall of that year, I began taking curriculum classes at McDowell Technical Community College with a declared major in Business Administration (which I changed to Computer Information Technology after my first semester at the college). My intentions at the time were to get an Associate's degree and go back into the manufacturing field in an entry-level leadership position.

"However, things changed quite drastically over time as I continued my education, both at McDowell Tech and beyond," Hollifield continued.

Over the next six years, from 2006 to 2012, Hollifield took advantage of as many educational opportunities as possible at McDowell Tech, racking up four degrees and/or diplomas: an A.A.S. (Associate of Applied Science) in Computer Information Technology, a diploma in Networking Technology, an A.A.S. in Web Technologies, and an A.A.S. in Business Administration.

"It's kind of funny," Hollifield stated. "I started out in 2006 declaring Business Administration as my major, changed to Computer Information Technology, but in the end, my third and final associate degree was in Business Administration. The breadth of

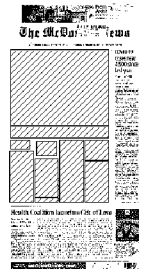
my academic preparation and all of the experiences I enjoyed or endured (!) at McDowell Tech have made me a well-rounded individual and instructor, in my opinion. I would not change a thing if I had to do it all over again."

Hollifield's educational curiosity also found a practical, vocationally-oriented friend among the various certifications offered to students in many technical programs: certifications. All total, Hollifield studied, prepared for, took, passed and received eight professional certifications during those first six years at McDowell Tech: ATI (Assessment Technologies Institute) Academy Certified

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Proctor, CIW (Certified Internet Web Professional) Certified Instructor, CIW Certified Testing Center Proctor (PSL-901), North Carolina Career Readiness Certification, CIW Web Foundations Associate (1DO-510); CIW Network Technology Associate, CIW Site Development Associate, and CIW Internet Business Associate.

While he was studying for his degrees and certifications, Hollifield also began working a part-time job at the college in 2008 as a peer tutor and lab assistant. When they were available, Hollifield sought and received additional part-time positions as a computer lab associate in the Academic Resource Center, as a testing specialist in the Student



Enrichment Center, as an associate in the MTCC library and others. In 2010, he became a part-time instructor in the Business Technology Department.

“It was quite a change of pace from the fast-paced production environment I was accustomed to in textile manufacturing,” said Hollifield. “My previous supervisory experience, the information I learned while earning my first degree and diploma, along with on-the-job training, gave me a good working skillset for tutoring and assisting students in the computer lab.”

He also credits others at McDowell Tech for helping him achieve his goals, academically and vocationally. “Having support from various mentors, advisors, and instructors was very helpful throughout my entire experience as a student at the college. Moreover, being a part of the Student Government Association and president of the MTCC Computer Club for several years, and having the opportunity to develop that group’s first website, was very beneficial for my personal and professional growth.”

Launchpad to Success

Hollifield’s foundational studies at McDowell Tech quickly became the launchpad for higher-level academic work as he enrolled at Western Governors University, where he received his Bachelor of Science degree in Information Technology in 2015 and his Master of Science degree in Information Security and Assurance (MSISA) in 2017.

As he had done at McDowell Tech, Hollifield prepared for, took, passed and received additional certifications while completing his bachelor’s and master’s

degrees: EC-Council C|EH, EC-Council C|HFI, Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA), CIW Database Design Specialist, CompTIA Security+, CompTIA Project+, CompTIA Network+, and CIW JavaScript Specialist. In addition, he is a Certified proctor.

Economically, it was tough paying for graduate school and living expenses on part-time jobs he scrounged at McDowell Tech. Sometimes, he can’t believe how little he lived on during those years. “In 2016, my taxable income for the year was just \$8,993.79,” he said. “Hard to believe, huh?”

In 2019, however, his severance paid off when he was hired as a full-time instructor at the college.

“It has been said that, ‘Good things come to those who wait,’ and I truly believe that,” he said. While he is not flush with money, by any stretch of the imagination, education has certainly changed his socio-economic status significantly. “It just took a little time,” he laughed.

Singing Praises

Hollifield has a unique perspective on McDowell Tech, having been a student with multiple MTCC degrees, as well as a relatively new faculty member. Asked what he likes best about McDowell Tech, he quickly responded: “It’s the people! The employees, and the students. Working at McDowell Tech is like being part of a large family, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I love my job. I never have those ‘Sunday blues’ that I used to have with my previous employer.

“In my opinion,” he continued, “you’re not going to find a school with a more caring group of people any-

where. The instructors here really want the students to succeed, and they go out of their way to ensure that happens. With the instructor-to-student ratio being so low, students get a lot of one-on-one time that they would not likely find at a lot of larger colleges and universities.”

Hollifield also appreciates that MTCC administrators are innovative and proactive in looking for in-demand, technology-focused career paths with solid, long-term employment potential when evaluating new curricula. He offered the introduction of Cyber Crime Technology, the program in which he teaches, as an example of curriculum innovation.

“According to Bureau of Labor Statistics, the demand for cybersecurity talent continues to outstrip supply. Employment for Information security analysts is projected to grow 31 percent from 2019 to 2029, much faster than the average for all occupations. Demand for jobs in cybersecurity is expected to be very high, as these analysts will be needed to create innovative solutions to prevent hackers from stealing critical information or accessing unsecure networks. There are only 6 North Carolina Community Colleges in the entire state that offer this program,” he said.

Faculty Retention

Merritt looks at Hollifield and other highly qualified instructors at McDowell Tech and worries about how we will hang on to them long term. The competition to recruit and retain highly qualified faculty is often extreme. “NC Community Colleges rank 40th in the nation for pub-

lic 2-year faculty salaries. If we want to retain great faculty like Randy, we hope our community college employees will receive the 5% salary increase in 2021 that many other State employees received in the last biennium," he said.

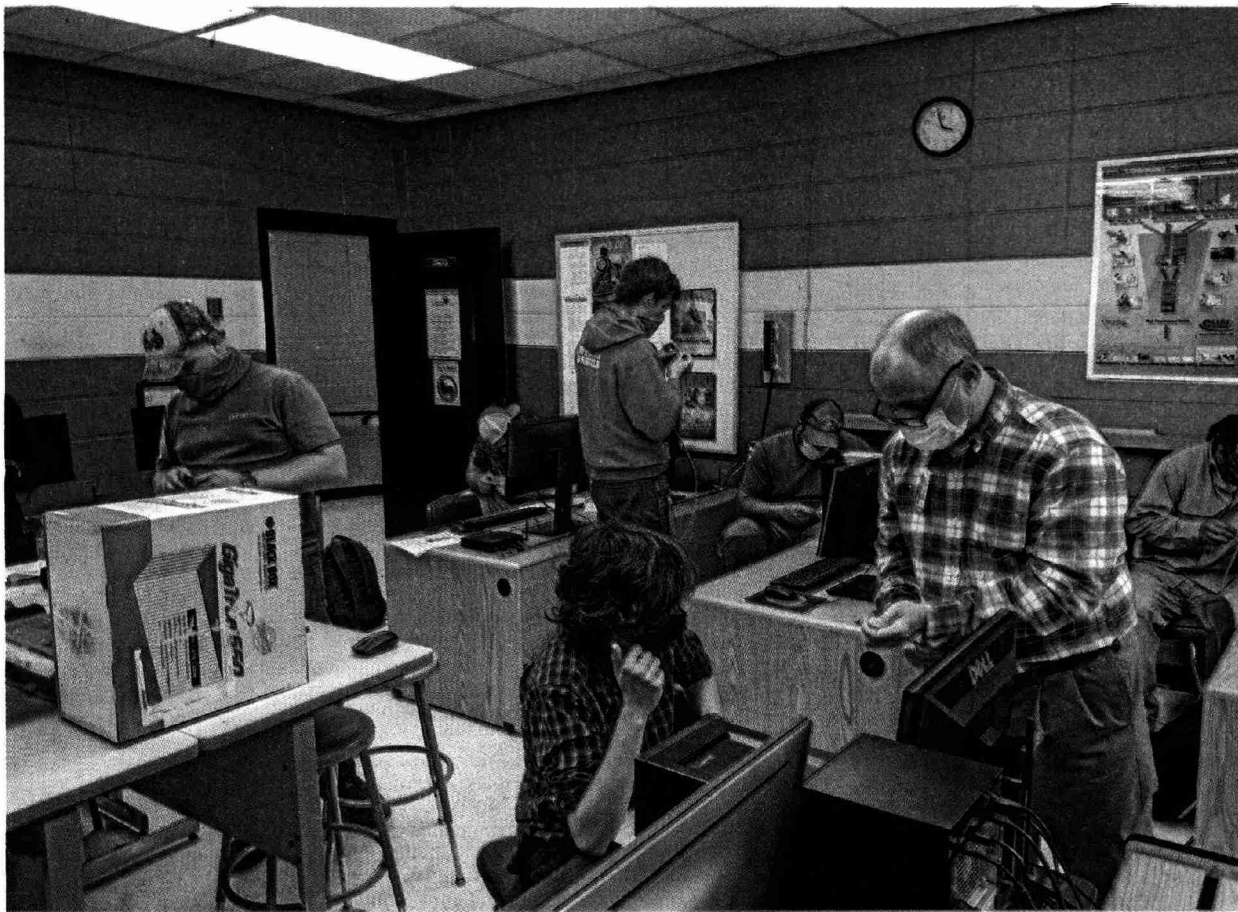
"We need voices like Randy's, faculty who have been

where our students have been, who understand their problems, frustrations, financial difficulties, hopes and dreams. More importantly, we need to recruit and retain faculty like Randy who know how to motivate and inspire those students to persevere and be successful, as he has been."

Randy Hollifield: A McDowell Tech Success Story. A McDowell Tech Voice.

Editor's Note

The following is another in a series over the next several months titled MTCC Voices, highlighting McDowell Technical Community College's students, faculty and staff.



SUBMITTED

Randy Hollifield is the MTCC Cyber Crime Technology Instructor.