



BRIAN LEONARD

College Requires Students Earn IC³ to Cope with Struggling State Economy and Prepare for 21st Century Jobs

Southwestern Michigan College faculty and staff are also required to earn IC³ digital literacy standard

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When Brian Leonard encountered Certiport® Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®), the world's only globally recognized standards-based certification for fundamental computing and Internet skills, he quickly realized the digital literacy standard had the potential to meet a critical need with which he and his colleagues at Southwestern Michigan College (SMC) were struggling: effectively articulating what it means to the computing and business industries to be digitally literate.



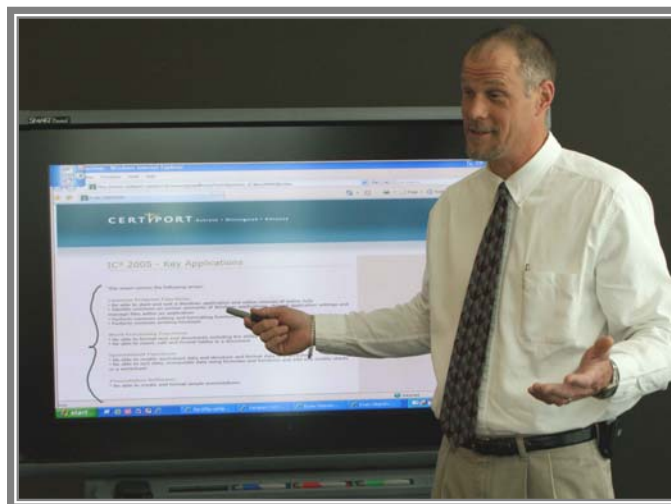
"In today's global marketplace, it's become imperative that individuals have a foundation of computer literacy to be successful," said Leonard, dean of academic development and assessment at SMC. "Although much of our curriculum was already aligned with moving students toward digital literacy, we had no anchorage with the industry's perspective related to this need. And, although we utilized advisory boards to make sure what we were providing in the academic setting was meeting local needs, we wanted to broaden our perspective to a national and global level so our students would have opportunities to be successful."

Ensuring students are certified and work-ready for 21st century jobs is good news for a state with a struggling economy. Michigan's unemployment rate has increased from 7.4 to 8.5 in the last six months, and layoffs across all industries have increased 84.8 percent in the past year. Michigan jobs in the natural resources, mining, construction and manufacturing fields are down a total of 24.3 percent from this time last year; however, jobs available in professional and business services, education and health services have slightly increased¹. Clearly, preparing students for employment in new fields within the state and for entrance in a more global workplace is becoming more and more important.

Leonard said many businesses in southwestern Michigan provide services in global industries, including local machine shops with U.S. military contracts and other companies that outsource services worldwide. "The idea of a global worker is vital," he said.

So now SMC uses IC³ in myriad ways to ensure its nearly 3,000 students and 300 faculty and staff develop critical computing skills and experience success. "Our training serves not only our students but also advances the professional development of our faculty and staff."

In March 2007, Dr. Diane Chaddock, executive vice president and chief operating officer, announced IC³ would be the standard used to define computer literacy as a degree requirement at SMC. Later that year, Dr. David M. Mathews, college president, gave a presentation about IC³ and recognized employees who were certified. Mathews, who is IC³ certified, announced he expects all SMC full-time faculty and staff to earn IC³ by 2009. So far, the college has administered more than 1,500 IC³ exams to students,





faculty and staff, and more than 200 individuals have certified.

SMC's emphasis on digital literacy skills has also motivated local high schools to add IC³ to their curricula. Whether they earn IC³ at the college or before they enroll, students need it to clearly demonstrate digital literacy. "As students come into the college environment, they are required to engage in a digital world," Leonard said. "It's financially advantageous for individuals enrolling at Southwestern Michigan College to have the certification, because we accept it as proof of digital literacy."

When SMC developed its digital literacy program, the IC³ exam objectives aligned very naturally with its introductory computer technology course. "Having the opportunity in our introductory courses to complete an externally validated certificate was a great advantage," Leonard said. "What IC³ provides us is a validation that our curriculum is aligned with industry standards not only on a local level, but on a national and global level."

In addition, the college's English as a Second Language (ESL) department implemented IC³ to benefit its 45 program participants. "They identified another important component of ESL: exposure to as well as understanding of technology," Leonard said. "As such, when we instigated IC³ as a general education and graduation requirement for students, we included it as a capstone to the ESL program. And, because many of our ESL students are international, they understand the value of a globally recognized certificate of this nature."

Leonard said students really start to realize the value of IC³ when they seek employment. Their experiences with the interview and hiring process have served as great examples of the value of certification. "One student was told the biggest difference between her and the other candidates applying for the job was that the hiring manager had no doubt she was functional in relation to the things she would be asked to do on computers. The hiring decision was based strictly on the certification, and she received the position."

As his work with digital literacy continues, Leonard said his greatest experiences have been seeing students' faces when they emerge from the college's testing center having successfully earned IC³. "They have accomplished something, and it's non-disputable," he said.

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¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20 June 2008.