New dean wants to “change lives for the better”

When Kurt Linberg came to Duluth to interview for the position of dean of the School of Business and Technology (SBT), a chance encounter provided an insight. He met a graduate of the SBT program who “told me that he loved Duluth, loved the program, but found no jobs for economists here in Duluth,” Linberg said from his Tower Hall office. “I realized that part of my job has to be to work with businesses here to create opportunities locally, and to foster entrepreneurship. We won’t have many Fortune 100 companies coming to Duluth. We could, however, have lots of new small businesses.”

Since becoming dean in 2009, Linberg has worked on creating opportunities with local businesses to further the mission of the SBT. “That can mean anything from having a local business hosting internships for our students or participating in our advisory board so we can be sure we're teaching the right things, to giving us funding to enhance our computer simulation lab.”

Over the last year, six local companies have offered new internship opportunities for SBT students. In addition, SBT faculty received a National Science Foundation grant that will expand the enrollments in computer science programs.

Bringing two into one

Internally, Linberg is overseeing a restructuring to better integrate the “business” and “technology” aspects of the School. Previously organized by discipline, with a department of Management and a department of Computer Science and Computer Information Systems,
the school is transitioning to being organized by program level. The new structure will support greater collaboration across the School in sharing best practices.

Tom Gibbons now serves as chair of Undergraduate Programs in Business and Technology. He and Bob Hartl, former chair of the Management department, are collaborating this summer to ensure a smooth transition and Hartl will return to full-time teaching for 2010-2011. Randall Zimmermann will serve as chair of Graduate Programs in Business and Technology beginning in the fall. He’ll direct the Master of Business Administration and Master of Arts in Management programs and will work closely with Brandon Olson, who remains director of the Information Technology Leadership program.

Linberg said he wants to grow the graduate programs 20 percent a year, “because if (we don’t) I know who will – Capella (University), (the University of) Phoenix and a bunch of other online providers.”

The SBT is doing better at differentiating its MBA and MAM these days, he said. “The MBA is traditional,” Linberg said, “geared for the middle manager. The MAM is really more for the executive who’s leading major change initiatives in an organization. But there’s a solid academic core shared by the two. So if I’m a prospect I can take that core, get that MBA, and take the additional courses for the MAM to become a really complete business leader.”

Long-term, he said, the MBA and MAM will require additional differentiation in the market.

Faculty members are being challenged by students to offer more online options. “Ten years ago students were more forgiving if an online course or course management system didn’t work very well – today, there is no room for a poor online course experience,” said Linberg, who has an extensive background in developing online programs. “Students, especially busy working adults, will have no patience for low quality. They’ll vote with their feet. “We are taking our time to develop our online courses so that they are done very well. We won’t compromise the learning for the flexibility that online and hybrid education offers.”

Linberg is working closely with faculty leaders to pursue a business program accreditation that fits with St. Scholastica’s emphasis on teaching excellence rather than research or publication. He also wants to strengthen the SBT’s emphasis on global awareness, because “our graduates will be dealing with global concerns even if they’re in a small business.” The School is offering capstone experiences in Russia and China, and growing its network of other sites.

Despite his full load of administrative duties, Linberg taught a hybrid in-class/online course and plans to teach at least once a year. “The students are just amazing. They’re sharp. Respectful. I’m teaching a capstone course for seniors, so I am getting to see the end product, so to speak. The discipline-specific knowledge, the critical thinking skills, the communication skills are all there. If there is one thing that these students lack, it’s confidence. Having more internship experiences will help build that.”

Linberg’s path to St. Scholastica was far from inevitable: “I would never have envisioned being a dean,” he said. “I started my career working on F-15 (fighter jet) avionics software. I entered into an area of software that was a great place to start – right out of school I’m talking to very top managers at McDonnell Aircraft. I found myself managing people
because I could bring engineers and managers together.” For the next decade he worked in software development for several companies, primarily in military applications. He left because “down deep, I felt a sense of a greater purpose to help people.” He joined the medical device manufacturer Medtronic. “They were 10 years behind their lead competitors. Risk-averse. Weren’t putting software into their pacemakers. A number of engineers from Honeywell, Control Data, and other high technology companies came in and forced innovations, and it made tremendous business sense. We would generate new products every six months instead of the two years that was the mold before. In eight years of record growth the stock split five times.” At Medtronic’s Christmas parties, the company invited patients in to tell the engineers how Medtronic’s medical devices had changed – even saved – their lives. “That stayed with me,” Linberg said. “I realized that was how Medtronic could keep some of the best and brightest engineers, who could probably go anywhere. They saw they were making a difference in people’s lives and they chose to work at Medtronic.”

As much as he enjoyed technology – he has 10 patents solo and with partners – he grew more fascinated with motivating people and with leadership. Insatiable reading (“a techie digging into human behavior!”) led to a Ph.D. program in applied management and decision sciences. He gravitated toward online education, a groundbreaking field at the time. At Capella, in Minneapolis, he helped build the business and information technology degree programs from scratch. “We were creating a university from the ground up. At times, it felt like we were building a ship in the middle of the ocean and plugging holes as we went. When I started, we had just over 1,000 students in the university. When I left we had over 20,000. Today, Capella has 34,000 ... I loved working with students. It was like those experiences with Medtronic patients – you’re offering them the hope for a better life. I could see it changing lives for the better.

Well situated for the future

After almost 10 years, “it was time for me to have an experience in a smaller community where I could not only work with online students but actually see in-classroom students, see the faculty, see the community.” He liked St. Scholastica both for its “innovative approach for broadening educational access through extended campuses” and the traditional bricks-and-mortar aspect of the business and technology programs. He believes the college’s liberal arts foundation and Catholic Benedictine values situate SBT graduates well for industry needs in the 21st century. “When you talk to employers today in high-tech fields, sometimes they don’t even mention that they want someone who really knows the professional discipline, like computer programming. That’s a given. They want someone who knows how to keep learning. Someone who can communicate well. Someone who can work effectively with others. That’s liberal arts.”

As for the values of the Catholic Benedictine nuns who founded St. Scholastica: “They form such a great foundation, then our faculty build on that with their focus on professional effectiveness, ethical decision-making, and a strong sense of social responsibility. “I’ve got to believe that, long term, students who are exposed to those values will realize that they’re the same values that sustainable businesses need in the future.”