

Lean in Higher Ed: Service Excellence Really is for Everyone!



In this interview, Ruth Archer, Director of Continuous Improvement for **Michigan Technological University** discusses lean in higher education!

Karyn: Ruth, can you tell us a little about Michigan Tech, your role, and what you are currently working on?

Ruth: Michigan Technological University is a global technological university of 7,000 students in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I manage the continuous improvement activities for the university, including training people on lean thinking and integrating continuous improvement into the day-to-day activities of students, faculty, and staff. I also teach academic courses on lean principles, teamwork, and communication.

One project we're working on in the office of continuous improvement is creating a training and development program for our lean facilitators so we have a structured way for them to grow in their thinking and practices.

Karyn: I know that many people many not have thought that lean - and service excellence - was even a consideration in higher education. Can you tell us how using lean has helped Michigan Tech?

Ruth: At Michigan Tech., using lean principles enables us to improve safety, support students as they focus on their education, and increase the quality of faculty research and teaching, while keeping costs low and morale high. Lean helps us create university programs that are more effective and efficient and enables us to meet university goals on time and within budget.

Since our campus is like a small town, we have a broad range of activities to improve! Some examples are the creation of a standardized process for partner employment relating to new faculty hires in academic areas, improving the project editorial process for university marketing, and the creation of a process to assign and track safety training for our student employees.

Karyn: What are some of the challenges you've found in 'translating' lean into higher education?

Ruth: One challenge has been integrating lean across faculty, students, and staff. We've found that engaging faculty requires a different approach than engaging staff, which is different again from engaging students, most of whom have never heard of lean.

Another challenge is that the same label is used to describe these three different communities: First, people, like myself, who are practicing lean with the faculty, staff, and students at the university. Second, faculty who teach lean courses and do lean research. Third are units who provide lean training to organizations outside of the university. From the outside, we all are doing lean in higher education, but internally we have different types of work and face different challenges. This makes it more difficult to find the most appropriate colleagues for a community of practice.

Karyn: What advice do you have for people who want to use lean to focus on customers in 'non-traditional', 'non-manufacturing' industries?

Ruth: We've developed an embedded lean facilitator model that gets our frontline supervisors and employees solving problems and making improvements. In this model, volunteer employees are trained in lean fundamentals and principles, coaching, and facilitating. These facilitators then model coach and teach others. Right from the start their training has them applying lean practices to their immediate work environment, so they develop self-confidence and create useful examples! Then we encourage them to practice in a no-blame environment and provide administrative and subject matter support so that they can improve the university.

Karyn: What strategies have helped you most in learning how to apply lean to higher education? What would you suggest for others who would like to start?

Ruth: One strategy that we've used is to see our vision of a lean university as a picture of what we're making when we engage in the craft of spreading lean, then follow the pattern to create the vision. It's like creating an afghan. You see the picture of the finished blanket, then start working on the individual squares. Depending on your time and the availability of yarn, different squares will grow at different rates, but that's okay! Rather than seeing isolated, unfinished piecework, in our mind's eye we can see the progress toward the completed afghan. As we continue our work, the squares grow; eventually we'll knit them together into a beautiful afghan that will blanket the university.

Another strategy that has worked well for us is developing relationships with colleagues who do what we do at other universities. We've attended a few lean-university-related conferences, and we've also used LinkedIn to identify possible colleagues and then connected with them by phone! We also have invited many speakers to campus, who have become our friends and partners in our lean journey, including Karyn!

If you'd like to learn more, please feel free to reach out to Ruth at raarcher@mtu.edu

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