



Tri County Tech: A Story of Grit and Grace

by Lindel Fields
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I enjoy watching outtakes of old football games—the films are in black and white, the player's pads were made of rolled-up cloth, and the helmets were constructed using sparse pieces of leather. Gritty guys who loved the game would show up after work and battle it out in a pasture that doubled as an open field. Much has changed in the one hundred years or so since football started. The equipment is much better. The grounds are pristine, thousands show up for the game, there are referees, super-hero athletes, and there are clear game plans. The goal of every team is clear—win the championship. The players of yesterday with their antiquated equipment would not likely qualify to carry the water in modern-day football. Still, no one can argue their love of the game was any less than the passion displayed by those that play today.

Tri County Tech, a 2018 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipient, committed to a decade long performance excellence journey and can appreciate the evolution of football. While the two are very different, both would agree that hard work and passion, while essential factors to success, aren't enough to win a championship.

Tri County opened its doors as the first Oklahoma Vo-Tech center in 1967. The center has helped tens of thousands get training that led to great careers. Like the game of football, career tech education has evolved. The programs have changed. The facilities are modern, and teaching methodologies have improved. Tri County did a good job of keeping up with the changes, but not great. In some ways, we were playing with tattered leather helmets and without a solid game plan. We worked hard and loved what we did, but understood that wasn't enough.

In 2003, we recognized we could do better. We knew that if we were going to help more students realize their hopes and dreams, then we had to have a game plan. So we began to look at Baldrige. When we examined

the criteria: **Leadership, Strategy, Customers, Measurement, Workforce, Operation, and Results**, they made sense. However, it wasn't long before we realized the Baldrige criteria, or any plan for that matter, would not work until we had a workforce capable of executing a plan. We had good people who worked hard, but working hard without a clear vision is playing football in a field with no scoreboard.

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We spent several years learning the Baldrige criteria (the game plan) while getting our workforce in order. We were talking about getting the right people on the bus, but it wasn't until we set a destination for the bus that things began to take shape.

In 2009, we rolled out Vision 2020 (**leadership**)—A bold vision intended to establish Tri County as one of the premier educational institutions in the United States. The Vision included earning the designation as a top place to work in the United States and earning the Malcolm Baldrige Award. We knew where we were going, and when you know where you are going, you can create a culture capable of making the journey (**workforce**).

We had a vision. Our workforce was clicking, but that was only the beginning. Each year, we would set out to win the championship. We were experiencing good years, but based on what? Did we have more



Lindel Fields, Superintendent and CEO of Tri County Tech, and his team celebrate winning the 2018 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

customers, were our completion/retention rates improving and were our customers satisfied and engaged (customers)?

We knew we needed to thread our years together to accomplish our long-term Vision. We began to focus on our strategic planning, which took place at off-site retreats, something I highly recommend (strategy). As a result of these sessions, our planning got sharper, and our plans more concise. We realized we were trying to be everything to everybody. As a result, we focused on the basics: blocking and tackling. We quit trying to run reverses and throw Hail Marys (operations). We stuck to the basics—our reason for being.

It was about that time we developed the “Tri County Way.” It was the spirit that emerged as a result of us focusing on being something more significant than anyone of us could accomplish alone. It is who we are, what we do, and how we do it. It is this grace-filled culture that makes me the proudest.

The game plan was working, or so we thought. We were getting better. We were attracting and retaining more students. We were benchmarking but often used the excuse that there was no one quite like us. When you figure out what you want to be when you grow up, you realize that you are not that unique. You also realize there are plenty of world-class organizations with world class-results to learn from to benchmark. We looked at the very best educational organizations and also found tools like Net Promoter Score (NPS) to compare ourselves to other sectors (measurement, analysis, and knowledge management). We discovered we stacked up well.

The discipline we exercised was working. We created a culture capable of attaining world-class results, and our



Lindel Fields, Superintendent and CEO, enjoys sharing the stories and lessons of Tri County Tech's journey in pursuit of performance excellence. Here, he shares lessons with the Baldrige examiners at the Examiner Recognition event.

students and communities became the beneficiaries. By adopting the Baldrige framework, we earned a spot on Fortune's Top Places to Work list four years in a row. Additionally, our enrollment grew from 8,000 in 2009 to over 20,000 in 2018. Our NPS matched that of the Ritz Carlton and Costco in 2018 and 2019. Furthermore, our student retention/completion rates averaged 93 percent over five years, with an average student debt of fewer than three hundred dollars (results).

Most would agree our results were significant. However, many things happened that didn't or won't make the stat sheets. I refer to these as the unintended positives.

We created a workplace where employees thrive by having friends they can call on when things go wrong. Everyone at Tri County has experienced this grace. We have helped many students in many ways, but when you learn you helped a family break the cycle of poverty is when it hits you. It is at that point that you win the real championship—Baldrige works.