Alumni use Whitman learning fundamentals to lead “Best Small Company to Work for”

Paul Garrett ’13, former vice president of General Motors Corp., had a special kind of student in mind when he established the Paul Garrett Scholarship for Men at Whitman College (a companion to the Claire Sherwood Memorial Scholarship for Women). Garrett wanted to reward scholars “whose personal qualities and records of achievement hold promise that they will assume roles of constructive leadership in business and industry in their mature lives.”

Garrett fellow Steve McConnell ’85 and Mark Nygren ’85 have made good on that incentive. Last year, their company, Construx Software, was named Best Small Company to Work for in Washington State by Washington CEO magazine.

Steve McConnell ’85, founder of Construx Software in 1996, believes the company owes much of its success to “exceptional employees.” He also thinks Dilbert has something to do with it.

“Sorry, that Dilbert. The comic strip character who sees corporate culture as a Kafkaesque nightmare of bureaucracy. If you look at Dilbert or at any number of stories about businesses, a lot of the message is how the company gets in the way of their employees and stymies their talent,” said McConnell.

For McConnell, a philosophy major at Whitman, values are 95 percent of the big picture at Construx. The tangible ones sound quasi-European, if not un-American: six weeks of annual paid time off from date of hire, flexible work schedules, full health coverage, bonuses and a 401(k) plan up to 10 percent of salary.

“I never liked the idea of the boss getting lots of perks that employees didn’t get,” he said.

The intangible values include openness, accountability and flexibility. “We have a philosophy that we hire people who are good and then we let them do their jobs,” said Mark Nygren ’85, chief operating officer of Construx.

Construx provides technical consulting in software development as well as software seminars, on site and on location, to hundreds of leading companies. Its client list includes Amazon.com, Apple Inc., Boeing Co., Google Inc., IBM, Intel Corp. and Microsoft Corp. Its employees are carefully chosen to handle the high-profile, high-stakes portfolio.

“This is a bad place for anyone who prefers to sit in a corner,” McConnell said.

By the same token, Construx is a dream job for “the kind of person who does most of the work while others get by,” in McConnell’s words. In 12 years of business, Construx has lost two employees that the company didn’t want to lose, according to Nygren.

“The reason we were the named the best company to work for has little to do with the perks we provide,” said Paul Donovan, director of business development at Construx. “It has everything to do with Steve and Mark’s management philosophy. They hire the right people and trust them to do the right thing.”

Construx sits in the center of the action in downtown Bellevue, a Seattle suburb now bursting at the foundation with commercial building projects. Cranes dominate the city’s skyline. Traffic snarls in and out of Bellevue Square, the city’s high-end mall. But on the 13th floor of 10900 NE 8th St., headquarters for Construx, all is composed and congruent, even when the phone rings full volume.

“I started Construx because I’d seen the level of stress and burnout that often goes along with the software industry,” said McConnell. “I simply got to a point in my work where I didn’t want that anymore. I founded the company so that I’d have a place where I wanted to work for the rest of my career.”

Nygren, an economics major at Whitman with an MBA from Harvard University, joined the company eight years ago. He and McConnell knew each other from a distance in high school. McConnell grew up in Puyallup, Nygren in Federal Way. Both were student body presidents of their respective schools. At Whitman, they had one class together, Religion 1 with Dr. George Ball, “an experience and a professor that neither one of us will forget,” Nygren noted.

After graduation, Nygren went off to Boeing, then to Harvard Business School and then into manufacturing. McConnell jumped directly from Whitman into the software development stream and started writing books on the subject. One of his five titles, “Software Estimation: Demystifying the Black Art,” topped Amazon.com’s list of best computer and Internet books of 2006.

“I’ve often thought about what Whitman and Construx have in common, and the matter of accountability always seems to stand out,” said Nygren. “If you’re in a class with five people, you participate. You can’t just sit and listen. But you also get the benefit of other participating students, not just the professor.”

At Construx, which employs 17 “mostly senior staff,” the expectations are similar. “We expect employees to contribute work broadly across a number of areas,” McConnell allowed. “It’s a lot like what a liberal arts college expects and honors.”

The new business mantra is “best practice” — guides the workday at Construx. Hallway conversations are a best practice. Discussions about clients’ needs are abundant. Ribbing among employees is constant. “There’s a lot of fun and fooling fun,” said Nygren.

Does any of it target the higher powers? “I wouldn’t know where to start,” McConnell said. Suffice to say that the Construx crew made sure their CEO had a Mini-Me doll added to his office, never to leave the room. That Nygren, who’s fond of wearing tennis shorts to work, received as a holiday gift a pair of shorts better suited to an NBA player circa 1970.

Disagreements, too, are a best practice at Construx, and opinions are aired. “You can’t improve by being defensive to criticism,” said McConnell. “Getting past the knee-jerk reaction and accepting valuable feedback is critical to learning, to getting better at what you do.”

“For me, it absolutely goes back to my time in college. The older you get, the more you learn, and the more you know how much you don’t know.”

— Mark Nygren ’85

“I’ve often thought about what Whitman and Construx have in common, and the matter of accountability always seems to stand out. If you’re in a class with five people, you participate. You can’t just sit and listen.”

— Keith Raether
ALUMNI NEWS

Whitman Alumni Book Collection


Anne Basye ’78 is the author of “Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal.” Her fifth book is intended to amplify the conversations within the church around examining the ethics and sustainability of our consumer lifestyle.” (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Augsburg Fortress Publishers.) See www.augsburgfortess.org or www.simpleliving.org.

Debra Dean ’80, author of “The Madonnas of Leningrad,” has written her second book, “Confessions of a Falling Woman and Other Stories.” The book gathers 10 of her short stories, five of which have never been published. (Harper Perennial, 2008)


Matt Manssferl ’91 teaches constitutional law at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Wash. He was elected to serve as president of the faculty senate for 2008-2009. He just published his second book, “A Heretic’s Voice from the Ivory Tower,” which, in part, explores his days as a Whitman student. E-mail manssferl@charter.net.

Many alumni books are available at the Whitman Bookstore. Call (509) 527-5274.

Power!
Summer College
For parents and alumni
June 8-13, 2008
A week of intellectual challenge on campus with instruction by professors and alumni, a field trip and social events.
Visit www.whitman.edu/content/alumni/events/summercollege/
to plan your trips.

Whitman Alumni Book Collection

Fortieth Reunion
Weekend 2008
Class of 1968
April 24-27, 2008
www.whitman.edu/alumni/reunions/clm

Twenty-fifth Reunion
Class of 1983
www.whitman.edu/alumni/reunions/clm

Thirtieth Reunion
Classes of 1977, 1978 and 1979
April 24-27, 2008
www.whitman.edu/alumni/reunions/clm

Fifth Reunion
Classes of 2002, 2003 and 2004
www.whitman.edu/alumni/reunions/clm

Tenth Reunion
Class of 1998
www.whitman.edu/alumni/reunions/clm

TRIPS
TOURS
EVENTS

Sea-kayaking Costa Rica with Paul Yancey, professor of biology
Nov. 23-30, 2008
Costa Rica river by raft and coastal wildlife from a kayak as you relax during this winter week in the sun. Visit www.whitman.edu/content/alumni/events/tripschedule/ to plan your trips.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival with Theresa DiPasquale, associate professor of English
Aug. 17-22, 2008

Canoe the upper Missouri River with Don Snow, senior lecturer of environmental humanities
Jan. 2-14, 2009

Tanzania with Delbert Hutchison, associate professor of biology
Limits: 22 participants

For reservations for alumni trips, call Margaret Hoglund in the Alumni Office at (509) 527-5167 or (800) 835-9448, ext. 1, or e-mail hoglund@whitman.edu.

Any income generated from participation in the Whitman College Alumni Association travel program is used to pay for the travel expenses of faculty and staff and promotional costs associated with the travel program.
**ALUMNI NEWS**

**Alumni honor hand-transplant surgeon with award of merit**

Dr. Gordon Tobin ’65 is one of a team of surgeons who has performed three human hand transplants— including the first successful one — and is preparing to transplant a human face. The University of Louisville (Kentucky) professor of surgery and former director of the division of plastic surgery there also is a pioneer in reconstructive techniques for major cancer surgery.

Yet Tobin is perhaps most proud of the surgical techniques he has taught other doctors, including those in Third World countries, to help them care for and perform reconstructive surgery on burn victims.

The Whitman Alumni Association is prouder still of Tobin. It has awarded him its highest honor, the Alumnus of Merit Award for 2008, for achieving distinction in his chosen field.

Tobin, co-founder of the Louisville-Vietnam Burn Project and leader of many international medical missions, realized on one of those missions that the benefits stopped when the trip was over. “We worked dawn to dusk every day we were there and operated on 200 children, but then it was over, and we came home. And no more children could be helped.”

He didn’t stop organizing medical missions, but he didn’t go back there either. “We began training physicians and health professionals wherever we went in the techniques we were using. We left them with the obligation they would pass them on,” he said. His desire to do something bigger than he had initially imagined, somewhat sustainable, was born at Whitman.

A Twin Falls, Idaho, native, Tobin was drawn to the college by word-of-mouth and its “very strong expression of the liberal arts philosophy.” Medicine was one of a few possible career options when he arrived. By commencement, he knew it was his future. “A lot of that was a positive experience in the sciences,” he said. “(The late biology professor) Arthur Rempeled was a towering figure.” The other side of medicine, the ethical side, was deeply influenced by “another towering figure,” George Ball, Weyerhaeuser professor of biblical literature, emeritus.

“It was also that experience of having one’s horizon expanded,” Tobin said. “I realized there was so much more out there than I had seen. That experience has guided me ever after. I am always looking for what’s beyond the horizon.” So far, the horizon is limitless. Tobin’s initial interest in surgery quickly zeroed in on plastic surgery, a field that was exploding when he got his medical degree at University of California, San Francisco, in 1969. “The opportunities to work on the frontier of knowledge and expand that frontier were enormous in plastic surgery,” he said.

The exception was composite tissue transplant (hands, face, etc.) research, which had been dashed by immunosuppression issues in an unsophisticated hand transplant attempt in the 1980s. It was “the instinct that came from the very experience and looking at the limits not as barriers, but challenges,” Tobin said, that pushed him to research the technical aspects of transplants of the face, jaws and other parts of the body in spite of the immunology barrier. “I imagined holding for the day when we’d understand enough immunology to do a transplant, but frankly I didn’t know if it would happen in my lifetime,” he said.

“When we did our first hand transplant (nearly 10 years ago), we still didn’t know if our laboratory work would bear out in human beings. At some point, you can’t tell until you do the surgery.” Their patient was an emergency medical technician instructor who in an “irresponsible moment” had lost his hands to fireworks.

One of the primary considerations in choosing a composite tissue transplant patient is the ethical side of the equation, Tobin said. The ideal candidate is a person who will live a productive life and is committed to a lifetime of medication and follow-up medical care. The hand transplant by a team of French surgeons several weeks before the Louisville transplant was successful, remission maintains, Tobin said, because in the French team’s haste to be the first they did not screen the patient carefully enough.

Likewise, face transplants should be performed only for the most severe disfigurements such as war injuries, “the kind of injuries we’re seeing now in Iraq,” he said.

In recent years, Tobin has organized teams of surgeons to travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan to treat burn and amputation patients. The U.S. government prohibited both trips because it could not guarantee the team’s safety. Two years ago Tobin missed his 40th Whitman reunion while preparing for the Afghanistan trip. In December 2007, the trip to Rawalpindi, Pakistan, was halted two weeks before departure. Later that same month, Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhattu was assassinated directly in front of the burn unit where the team would have worked, Tobin said. “I can’t in good conscience take a team into that situation.”

Still, the mission goes forward. After

**Astronaut receives young alumni award**

As a youngster growing up in Colorado Springs, Colo., NASA astronaut Dottie Metcalf-Lindenburger ’97 “really did dream about space.” Having her own dreams helped. Planetariums fascinated her. Museum and planetariums captured her. And Whitman helped her truly understand science.

“The chance to do research as an undergraduate … opened up more questions. You realize that you’re this tiny drop in a field of research, which is what science is all about. That experience gave me a lot of confidence,” said Metcalf-Lindenburger, the 2008 recipient of the Pete Reid Award for Young Alumni.

The award, named in honor of Pete Reid ‘49, is given by the Whitman College Alumni Association to a graduate whose enthusiasm is demonstrated toward his or her career, community or Whitman College. Recipients must be graduates of the school within the past 15 years.

“It was very special to have attended Whitman, and it’s very special to be honored,” said Metcalf-Lindenburger.

“To all the students at the college, I would only say: Be passionate about whatever you study. That passion, along with the knowledge you gain, will carry over into your job, and you will have success.”

Dottie Metcalf-Lindenburger, a geology major at Whitman, joined the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) after teaching earth science and astronomy for five years at Hudson’s Bay High School in Vancouver, Wash. She applied for the astronaut-educator position at NASA at the same time that she started looking into graduate schools with programs in planetary and atmospheric sciences.

In May 2004 Metcalf-Lindenburger was selected by the space administration as a mission specialist. Less than two years later, she completed astronaut candidate training, an intensive program that qualified her for space-flight assignments.

The requirements of an astronaut remold Metcalf-Lindenburger of the rigors of her learning experience at Whitman. “You balance a lot of different things,” she said. “I’m learning Russian at the same time that I’m trying to learn the space shuttle vehicle, the international space station vehicle and its systems, the vehicle we’re creating to return to the moon. You have to juggle a lot of things.”

“In the office part of her work at NASA, Metcalf-Lindenburger monitors systems and technology for the International Space Station. Away from the desk, she flies in T-38 jets. “Being able to switch roles and feel comfortable doing it was something that Whitman prepared me for,” she said. “So much of my experience was the building of character.”

“Did the life of the mind at Whitman influence my thinking about the world? Definitely. It opened me up to the universe.”

— Keith Rother

**Continued from Page 6**

The first attempt, Afghani doctors were brought to the United States to study the surgeons’ techniques, and Pakistani doctors will be, too, he said.

Tobin gives a great deal of credit to Whitman for his accomplishments: the patients on whom he has performed transplants and reconstructive surgeries in the United States and Third World countries, the children he has cared for who were brought to the university from overseas, the doctors from around the world he has trained and mentored. “The Whitman experience opened my eyes,” he said. “It’s kind of like getting a Hubble telescope when you have been

**Continued on Page 7**

The Whitman College Alumni Association 2008 awards also honor Dr. Hal Hunt ’55 (Gordon Scribner Award for Service) and Kevin Pogue (Faculty Award for Service to the Alumni Association). The July 2008 Whitman Magazine will feature their stories.

**Be passionate about whatever you study. That passion, along with the knowledge you gain, will carry over into your job, and you will have success.”** — Dottie Metcalf-Lindenburger ’97

NASA astronaut comforted doing it was something that Whitman prepared me for,” she said. “So much of my experience was the building of character.”

“Did the life of the mind at Whitman influence my thinking about the world? Definitely. It opened me up to the universe.”

— Keith Rother

Dr. Gordon Tobin met his wife, Elizabeth, when she was teaching him microbiology at medical school. They live in Lovellville, Ky., and have two grown children.