

Bill Heinrich: Welcome to The Hubcast. The co-sponsored podcast from MSU IT Services, and The Hub for Innovation and Learning and Technology. On today's podcast we're going to talk about My Spartan Story, an interactive web-based platform for students to document learning from their co-curricular experiences at MSU.

Bill Heinrich: I'm Bill Heinrich, the Director of Assessment in MSU's Hub, and I'm joined today on The Hubcast by Leslie Thompson, an Academic Advisor in the College of Natural Science for the Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Department, and Doctor Mark Becker, a faculty member in Psychology, and the Associate Chair and Director for Undergraduate Education for the Department of Psychology.

Bill Heinrich: Hello.

Leslie Thompson: Hello.

Mark Becker: Hello.

Bill Heinrich: Thanks for joining today. We're here to talk, like I said, about My Spartan Story. We know that students learn a lot from their MSU activities, like leading organizations, on and off campus internships, community service, their jobs on campus, undergraduate research, athletics, and some student clubs.

Bill Heinrich: We want to know more about these learning moments, so for the first time in MSU's history, we're putting these kinds of student stories into one place. In the My Spartan Story platform, students learning is first documented, and then validated by the MSU organizer.

Bill Heinrich: The platform then keeps track of a student's positions and learning moments along the way. In the My Spartan Story catalog, students can filter and search through listings, making it easy to find the next opportunity.

Bill Heinrich: And, when students are ready, they can create and publish an official Spartan experience record from this date. Students can share their record alongside their transcript as they apply for internships, or grad school, or just to reminisce about their first year of college.

Bill Heinrich: We want to focus on what this overall effort will do for faculty and advisors at MSU who work with students in co-curricular learning. Leslie, you've been a part of the planning and development for the last year or so.

Bill Heinrich: What kind of questions are you hearing from other advisors and from students as we get ready to launch?

Leslie Thompson: I think one of the main questions that has come up was, particularly with advisors, and how they communicate with the students, is, "How is this different than a resume? Why should they have this going along with their resume?"

Leslie Thompson: And, I think one of the things that we need to remember about the Spartan experience record is that it's not meant to replace the resume. Instead, it's something that can kind of partner with it, or be a tool to help the students actually build a better resume.

Leslie Thompson: They can track their experiences across their time on campus, and use it as something to refer to when they actually go to make the resume in their junior or senior year, as they're tailoring it towards that final job, or internship that they're going for.

Leslie Thompson: And, another big thing of value is the way that the Spartan Story can help the student make their connections of how they actually learned and grew within those experience, so tying the experience to some academic learning goals within the university will help a student unpack it in an interview, and actually talk to the person who is making decisions on whether or not to hire or accept them into a graduate program based on what they've done within these experiences.

Leslie Thompson: So, instead of just saying, "I was a Manager at Sparty's," they can talk about the leadership things they've done within that role.

Bill Heinrich: And, do you see that in your advising conversations? Where students are looking for ways to make sense of those kinds of interactions?

Leslie Thompson: I think so. One of the big things that I see is students don't realize the value of what they've done. They've been in a role, they think that just because they were working, so for example the Sparty's experience, they're applying to med school, they can't understand why med school would care that they stayed in a job position over four years, and moved up a ladder into a managerial role, because it's not related to medicine, but they don't realize the value in their leadership and how they stuck through that, and actually transformed their abilities within that role.

Bill Heinrich: Mark, your department supervises a lot of undergraduate research with undergraduate students. How does the platform benefit students and faculty?

Mark Becker: Well, we do have a lot of students involved in research, and starting from the faculty perspective, I think this will offer an opportunity for us to advertise potential opportunities in labs spaces, which could be beneficial for the student, but also beneficial for the faculty member to get that information about the opportunities they have out to students.

Mark Becker: It will also help faculty track the students who are in their labs, and be able to look back and see students who have been in labs for a year to three. Occasionally, we have students who have been there for three years, and by having something that tracks kind of the student's progression, and how they've developed more complex involvement in the lab over their time there, can be

beneficial when it comes to writing letters of recommendation, or things like that.

Mark Becker: And, as a tracking tool, it can also be nice for faculty when we have to do annual reports, or go up for a promotion and tenure, and they're trying to account for, "What have I been doing for my last couple years?"

Mark Becker: Having one spot where you have kind of a record with of all the students who have come through your lab, and what they've been involved with, can be a good one-stop shop to get that information.

Bill Heinrich: Where do students identify their goals in this process? Do they tell you, or do they write it down in the record? How is that going to work?

Mark Becker: We're still working on this process, right, but the process is designed to be relatively flexible. So, it can be driven by the professor, so if the professor has research where they have a particular need, they could post that need, students could look at that and see whether what's required in that position fulfills one of the student's needs, or student's goals.

Mark Becker: There's also an availability for students to kind of write their own descriptions in this system, where students could lay out their own goals. In reality, in the labs, how the student's responsibilities and the student's goals within that particular project get developed is really with a discussion with the faculty member and the student.

Bill Heinrich: Leslie, you've worked at MSU in a couple different areas over the years. Can you talk about how a record like this might help different departments use this kind of data, track students, look at how students are learning?

Leslie Thompson: Where this might be helpful within the departments is tracking student numbers, in terms of when faculty are looking to apply for grants that might be involved with the number of students they have within their labs, and within the department itself.

Leslie Thompson: And also, it's a better way to track a student that might be in a lab for one year in one facility, but then moved to another place on campus. It gives us a broader approach to tracking it, and takes it off of one spreadsheet in one person's computer, and creates one big resource for us.

Mark Becker: And, I can say as one of the leadership team of the Psychology Department, that type of tracking will actually be quite beneficial for us, because we know we have a lot of students involved in research, but we don't actually know how many because it is on each individual faculty member's spreadsheet.

Mark Becker: And, particularly now, the College of Social Science has put in an experiential learning credit. That is going to require us to be able to figure out who's actually

completed that requirement, and one of the ways students can is through research, and right now, we don't really know precisely how many people in our department are doing research, because a lot of them do it off the books.

Mark Becker: We're guessing we have somewhere between 100, 150 students at any point in time, but that really is a guess.

Bill Heinrich: So, it sounds like this record is going to great a moment of needed change, so we're moving records from the desktop's spreadsheet to a web-based, a cloud-based database in one form.

Bill Heinrich: What's that change process going to feel like for advisors, for faculty who are supervising, basically for educators who are offering experiences?

Mark Becker: I can tell you at first it's going to be tough, our faculty don't like change.

Bill Heinrich: Okay.

Mark Becker: But, I think the faculty are going to see some potential benefits of doing this. Things like being able to use the system to track how many undergraduate students they've been supervising in the lab, and pull up kind of a historical context of how many people have been in the lab year over year, where are they now.

Mark Becker: Taking that type of record, keeping off the individual faculty member, will be beneficial to the faculty member, and hopefully, that'll get them to buy into this system.

Mark Becker: And, again, from an administrative point of view, having all that information in one place is going to be really valuable.

Leslie Thompson: And, to add to that, the fact that a lot of these experiences can be easily replicated year to year, I think the learning curve will be steep in the beginning, but once it gets going, it's going to streamline a lot of work within the departments, within the faculty, and then the administrative staff as well; because a lot of these experiences, they don't change in great depth from year to year.

Leslie Thompson: Specially, if you think about employment within ... like a student-worker within an office, that type of situation, it's changing the person, you're not really changing the job description, and even within research, we're going to be able to replicate research within the lab, and make edits. It shouldn't be taxing once we get it going.

Bill Heinrich: Right, so the database is updatable, refreshable with new dates, but you don't have to change everything every time. That makes a lot of sense to help track positions with different students in them over time.

Mark Becker: Yeah, and that's really helpful. Many of our grand-funded project is often five or more years, so being able to set it up once and have different students come into that project will be helpful.

Bill Heinrich: Right. And, yeah, we're building a lot of flexibility into the system for these kinds of features, so as we roll them out right. I appreciate the comment that the learning curve will be steep, but ultimately beneficial.

Bill Heinrich: That leads me to the question ... You know, your department's going to have to change practice and policy, really, to help faculty see the the benefits, to help advisors see the benefits. What kind of moves, at that level, will need to take place to make sure that we can actually learn from these records?

Mark Becker: I don't think we really have to change policies to get people involved. The role is to roll it out with a couple large labs that are pretty active, and to the extent that if it's successful for those labs, I think kind of word of mouth, it'll quickly be adopted by the other members of the department, so a little bit of advertising within the department to faculty that this is working and working well I think will precipitate a change.

Leslie Thompson: I think on the advisors' side there will be some shifts in terms of how some of this data is routed, so when we're thinking about some of the internships and things that are done within MSU that might go on the Spartan experience record beyond the research component, there's going to be a need to have a point of contact for some of this, which will go further into the way that these experiences will be validated within the MSU system.

Leslie Thompson: So, there will be some conversations there that will need to be had across campus of who is that point of contact within kind of the different silos on campus.

Bill Heinrich: Leslie, you've been working a little bit with advisors and getting this project up to speed in the last few months. Can you talk a little bit about what advisors are saying about this project?

Leslie Thompson: I think one of the big pieces of feedback we've been getting is the value in that this is helping our students see what they're doing has meaning, and helping the student grow within their time at MSU, so that they're starting to look more introspective at, "What have I done, and what is the meaning behind it?"

Leslie Thompson: A lot of times you run into students that have the checklist mentality, "I have to get this experience, this experience," because they have an end goal of graduate school, or med school, or a vet, or all these different things they want to go beyond campus, and sometimes they don't have a moment to reflect.

Leslie Thompson: And, within the My Spartan Story platform, there will actually be a space where students can have reflection, and it becomes a really good tool for us to have our students understand why they're here, and create a sense of meaning.

Bill Heinrich: And, Mark, what kind of meaning ... Recruiting students for like graduate programs, because you're on both sides of this, what kind of integration in students' minds are you looking for?

Mark Becker: Well, typically, given that we're a pretty research-intensive unit, when we're looking at graduate students who apply to our program, we want to see that they've been involved in labs, they've been involved in research, and they haven't just been like a data collector. They actually have understood how research gets done.

Mark Becker: You're making a substantial investment in a student when you choose to take one on, and you want to know that they have an idea of what they're getting into. That they've experienced research deeply and thoroughly before they've committed to do that.

Mark Becker: Going back to the Spartan story here, having something for students coming out that shows that trajectory, so that when we're interviewing those students and asking them what their research experience has been like, they've got kind of a place to go back to, to kind of put it all together, so that they can tell a good story during those interviews.

Bill Heinrich: So, they're talking about methods courses, which are definitely credited, and credit-bearing, but they're also talking about lab experiences, which might not be credited.

Mark Becker: Yeah, I'll tell you, during our interviews, we can see the method course grade on the transcript, so we don't ask people about what they did in their methods course, we ask what they did in their labs.

Bill Heinrich: Your students also go and do other things on campus like they lead clubs, or they might be on a sports team. Those are all kinds of educational moments, as well, for students, where they're taking ideas from classrooms, and they're making sense of it in some other situation.

Bill Heinrich: Can you imagine how this record might also facilitate those kinds of learning moments?

Leslie Thompson: Absolutely. I think that one of the instances that most students don't realize the value in is the intramural, and the extracurricular things that they can be doing on campus. They think that being a member of a club is enough to put on their resume, but what really they need to talk about is when they were the head of the committee within that club that actually had an output, or something that had a little more impact within that club.

Leslie Thompson: Sometimes they think that just listing is enough, and then they get to the interview, or they get to go to their application process, and they just have this list of things they did, and they don't know how to talk about it. Again, I think we're going back to tying it to those learning goals, and what is the value of being a member of that club, or that sports team.

Mark Becker: And, I'd just like to add to that, from a faculty perspective, when students come and ask you to write letters of recommendation, you've seen a slice of their life. You've seen what they've done in your class, in your lab, and you've seen a little slice of your life, and we often ask them to send us a resume, or something so we get a better idea who that student is more full picture before we write letters of recommendation.

Mark Becker: But, I think this will be a more rich kind of capturing of what that student's done to prepare themselves for that position that we're writing letters for than you'd get from a simple resume, so I think it might be beneficial in terms of students being able to communicate to their faculty members who are writing letters kind of a fuller picture of what they've gotten out of their experience here.

Bill Heinrich: One additional layer that we're building into the platform is the Spartan experience record, which is a publishable, shareable record. It's signed by MSU's Registrar, so it's a valid record. We're also validating the experiences that will be offered to students, so we know that there's a degree of quality, that we can trust that learning is taking place in these labs, or in these internships, or in these leadership experiences.

Bill Heinrich: As that student publishes their Spartan experience record and shares it with graduate schools or potential employers, how do you see that fitting in to your conversations about learning in your labs, about learning from internships, and learning from experiences?

Leslie Thompson: I think one of the biggest things is that the student doesn't fully comprehend the breadth of what they're doing at MSU. They look at their grades, and they're concerned about getting to class on time, and everything that's going on, and this gives us an opportunity to say, "What else are you doing? What is the rest of your story, and how does that tie in?"

Leslie Thompson: Having something that is transcriptable, that will go off, when they print off their transcript to go off to these institutions, I think will get their attention, and get a little more of a buy-in, and why I should be tracking these things, as well, because one of the biggest things about this is the student has to be engaged.

Leslie Thompson: Yes, there will be stuff that will go in there. The research is going to go in there regardless of what they're doing, because the faculty is going to be promoting that, as well, but this is going to get their attention, that there is value in tracking these things, and then ...

Leslie Thompson: The other part of it is the students are very busy. The students that I see that are working, you know, 20 hours, 40 hours a week sometimes, on top of their course work, and being in the lab, they don't have time to track this stuff; and so, having an easy way that they can log in over all four years and keep track of it is huge because, I think even as professionals, we struggle to keep our CVs and resumes up to date.

Leslie Thompson: Every time you have to remember to put something new on there, and if you have a student who's moving into a new apartment every single year, and broke their laptop, or lost this or that, they're going to lose something along the way, and so I think the ability to get them engaged early, and realizing that they can use this, is going to allow them to track the whole story.

Mark Becker: And, I agree. I think, it might not seem like it, but four years is a long time, and if you're towards the end of your career, and trying to kind of capture what all you've done over the previous ... during your entire time here, I think it can be hard to pull up the events of three years ago, two years ago, and so having it all in one place where you can go back, and be like, "Oh, man. I don't even remember. That's right. That's how I started this, and look where it's taken me."

Mark Becker: I think it might actually help students not only appreciate how much they've grown while they were here, but also give them the ability to kind of put a narrative together about how they've done that, by being able to kind of backtrack through time through this record.

Leslie Thompson: It is a transformative time for these students. They start off on campus unsure of themselves, of where they are, sometimes they're in a new state, sometimes a new country, and those first few years they're learning so much, and to be able to go back, like you said, and say, "Look where I started, and look where I've gotten," I think it allows them, professionally, to promote themselves and show what they've become as a Spartan; but at the same time, I think it helps them look at that introspective growth that they've done.

Bill Heinrich: Yeah, and we're really excited about that particular layer, where students can learn a lot by looking back. We know that MSU is a costly investment from an educational standpoint, and it's probably not going to get cheaper, so one of the approaches is to look at how it becomes more valuable going forward. I'm glad that you're noticing those kinds of value propositions in this record into the future.

Bill Heinrich: Leslie, Mark, thanks again for your time today. Leslie from the College of Natural Science and Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, and Doctor Mark Becker, a faculty member in Psychology, and Associate Chair and Director of Undergraduate Education for the Department of Psychology.

Bill Heinrich: Your comments are really valuable. Thanks again for contributing to today's Hubcast.

Leslie Thompson: Thank you.

Mark Becker: Thanks for having us.