STEM education key to state producing good jobs

by **SCOTT MEACHAM**
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Jeff Weber, CEO of zone·tv, was in the first graduating class of the Management Information Systems (MIS) program at the University of Oklahoma College of Business. Now, as CEO of zone·tv, Jeff is tapping into his Oklahoma and MIS roots to build the data science and analytics division of zone·tv here.

Jeff is quick to say that he was no Bill Gates building his own personal computers at Norman High School. He did happen to take a computer class in high school and loved it, but he didn't make the connection then between computers and careers.

"In my freshman year at OU, I was a bit of a lost soul who eventually stumbled into a good thing," he said. "I had a math and science interest and thought I wanted to be an engineer, I was wrong. Eventually I talked to Dr. Leon Price, who founded the MIS program and is a longtime mentor of mine, and it just fit. It wasn't this thoughtful and preordained plan on my part, but I knew then that it was going to be a foundation for my career."

His first job was in the data center at Southwestern Bell in Oklahoma City. This was the era of water-cooled mainframe computers, before the internet and personal computers, when the power and versatility of today's mobile products were dreams in labs.

But things were changing. Jeff's career at Southwestern Bell and then AT&T kept pace with the exciting developments in the information technology industry — from helping develop the internet business at Southwestern Bell, to leading the initial corporate strategy effort that resulted in the deployment and ultimate success of U-verse at AT&T, eventually becoming President of content and advertising at AT&T.

Jeff's career holds a very strong message for every parent, educator, and young person today: STEM, STEM, STEM. (That's the acronym for science, technology, engineering, and math.)

STEM-related jobs are growing faster than the rest of the economy. These positions pay more than other jobs with the same qualifications. What may not be as well understood is the variety of jobs that stem from STEM (look how Jeff went from computers to content) and, that while STEM workers do tend to be highly educated, about one-third do not have a bachelor's or higher degree, according to Pew Research.
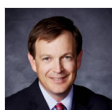
But what is required for all STEM careers is raising the interest of our young people in science and math — and that interest needs to be stimulated early so that when the right mentoring and opportunity comes along it clicks, as it did with Jeff Weber.

How do we as individuals and as a state step-up STEM? There are a thousand ways — grade school science fairs and robotics clubs, mentoring and encouragement at every level, and supporting the excellent resident and remote curriculum of the Oklahoma School of Science and Math.

And then, as students reach high school and beyond, Oklahoma opportunities in varied and exciting careers in STEM-related fields, like those offered by zone·tv and other advanced technology startups, make STEM aspirations and careers possible. With mentoring, and an emphasis on much more inclusiveness in the workplace, those opportunities can open up to everyone.

"Zone·tv is doing some very cool things — things that aren't being done anywhere else," Jeff told me. "I am so supportive of information systems as a basis for a career that can take you anywhere. The MIS program at OU is really strong. When you combine well-trained talent with the Oklahoma work ethic, it's fantastic for employers like zone·tv, who can create world-class technology, as well as the state who gets to keep great talent in high-paying jobs."

Scott Meacham is president and CEO of i2E Inc., a nonprofit corporation that mentors many of the state's technology-based startup companies. i2E receives state support from the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology and is an integral part of Oklahoma's Innovation Model. Contact Meacham at i2E_Comments@i2E.org.

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