Williamson College Adds IT Minor & IT Certificate to Business Program

FRANKLIN, Tenn. (April 5, 2013) – Franklin, Tenn.-based Williamson College will offer an information technology minor in its business degree program beginning this July. The college also will have a certificate program available for students who already have a bachelor's degree and are interested in enhancing their skills in managing IT projects.

The minor and certificate both consist of eight introductory courses in information technology, systems development, data, requirements analysis, databases and programming, as well as a course in business initiatives and one in project leadership.

The concept for an eight-course IT track came out of a strategic planning process last January. Williamson College President Ed Smith subsequently began talking with business leaders to get their input and to make sure the minor would meet business needs. As a result, the college had business expertise guide the formation of the minor right from the start.

"During our leadership's planning time, we discussed how Williamson College could help address the enormous demand in Middle Tennessee, as well as nationally, for business program graduates to be proficient in overseeing IT projects as part of their management responsibilities," Smith said.

Board Chairman Jim O'Donnell, retired executive vice president of ConAgra, a Fortune 100 company, participated in the January planning session and believes the IT minor and certificate address an important trend in the marketplace.

"Information technology is in virtually every business, and Williamson College students will greatly benefit from knowledge of its foundational components. While technology is constantly changing, the basic principles of how to use it strategically to gather, organize and utilize data—and make appropriate business decisions based on this data—will always be essential to organizations," O'Donnell said.

"The program we have designed will not turn business students into IT technicians; rather, it will focus on helping them have a big-picture view of IT so that they will have the skills needed to give overall direction to IT projects," Smith explained.

Because many of Williamson College's students are already in the workforce, he indicated they have an appreciation for how technology can help them do their jobs better.

"In Middle Tennessee, there are over 800 IT jobs available on any given day, and experts say that the demand for technology sector jobs will grow four to one over those in other industries," said Liza Massey, president/CEO of Nashville Technology Council.

"The reason Williamson College's approach is good is because technology jobs require expertise beyond technology; they also require business skills such as communication, collaboration, planning and budgeting."

Pat Camm, a principal and co-owner of Alltech Inc., which provides IT professionals to businesses on a contract or permanent basis, agrees with Massey's assessment, calling the demand in Nashville for IT "huge." Camm serves on Williamson College's advisory committee and believes the college is tapping into a significant need in the marketplace.

"The concept for this program is to make business people more tech savvy. If managers don't have a good high-level understanding of what's involved and can be accomplished with IT, it takes away from their leadership ability because they can't think outside the box," Camm said.

This IT knowledge gap among many managers can bring about situations where technologists are segmented from end users, and communication problems arise that adversely affect organizations.

"Our classes will focus on helping business students understand the background of IT and its terminology so that they can better facilitate the creation, enhancement and use of business systems," noted Kris Mason, Oracle Architect for American HomePatient and one of Williamson College's IT instructors.

"Courses will be straightforward and go through different aspects of IT; there won't be anything so deep as to be intimidating, and concepts will be couched in business terms as much as possible. Our goal is to create an environment when students can learn how to learn and be effective communicators."

Mason stressed that students will gain an understanding of IT principles "so that they get comfortable with the words coming out of an IT person's mouth," as well as learn how to be good listeners, ask probing questions and grasp the ramifications of IT projects on business.

John M Plunkett, vice president of information technology at VGT, Inc., in Franklin, knows first-hand the challenges and benefits of an IT program like Williamson College is launching. In 1984 he and two business associates started an information systems program for the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies.

Today the school has approximately 60-70 students enrolled in its IT management program during the fall or spring semester. It offers a bachelor of science degree in professional studies with a major in IT management and a certificate in IT management.

"We were not training programmers but developing IT leaders, people who would manage programs," Plunkett said. "Everywhere you go today, information systems are part of how business runs. There's a great shortage of people who do this work, yet it's important to be comfortable and proficient in getting IT work done; otherwise, it's difficult to compete."

Smith believes that providing practical technical management skills will enable future business leaders to better compete and stay abreast of IT trends, which will benefit students and the business community alike.

Nashville Technology Council's Massey agrees. "The people who go through Williamson College's IT program will be well rounded and know how to manage technical staff, which is very valuable in today's world," she said.

"Every person needs some technology-related education to survive and thrive in the future," she added.

Founded in 1998, Williamson College is a non-profit organization that serves students of all ages, including non-traditional ones who are already in the workforce. Classes are usually held one day a week and one class at a time with nine start times during the year. Williamson College is guided by an eleven-member board of trustees. For more information, visitwww.williamsoncc.edu or contact Susan Mays at 615-550-3161.