

Hiram College launches 'Tech and Trek'

By Briana Barker / Staff Writer

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Geared up with new hiking boots and shiny new iPads, Hiram College students are kicking off the new school year with a new "Tech and Trek" initiative.

Made possible by a \$2.1 million grant from Dean Scarborough and his wife, Janice Bini, the program aims to merge traditional classroom learning with 21st century mobile technology, but all the while promoting mindfulness and proper use of technology, according to Dr. Lori Varlotta, Hiram College president.

Varlotta said she contacted Scarborough, a 1977 Hiram grad and former CEO of Avery Dennison, upon his reengagement with the college as a member of the Board of Trustees a little more than a year ago. She said he expressed interest in assisting with moving the university forward with technology improvements. Varlotta said she, Scarborough and a group of faculty members visited Lynn University in Florida, where three or four years ago the college had rolled out a similar mobile program to Hiram's Tech and Trek.

"I think Dean Scarborough was impressed with what he saw and like many of us thought we could do an equally interesting and perhaps even more unique rollout at Hiram," Varlotta said.

Scarborough said he and his wife are both excited about the initiative and what it can do for the liberal arts programs and challenge the way students learn.

"We hope this will help prepare students to learn for a lifetime as opposed to technical learning," Scarborough said. "Students today will have multiple careers in their lifetime and adaptability is critical."

He added the Tech and Trek initiative was established to help modernize and navigate today's learning. Bini agreed, saying she would like students to look at the devices with the outlook of "How is it going to enhance my learning today?" not "How is this going to make my day easier?"

The program kicked off Sunday as students filled the Kennedy Center at Hiram College to receive an iPad Pro, Apple Pen and a pair Vasque hiking boots before engaging in other activities such as stations set up for students to "bling" their machines, learn about the Tech and Trek experience, discuss mindfulness and generate ideas.

"We believe that Hiram College is positioned better than any other college in the country to be the place where mobile technology meets mindful technology," Varlotta said. "We want our technology to be used in a very mobile environment – outside in field research, as students explore our beautiful historic community, when they travel – so we see our high impact experiential activities as the trek component of the undergraduate journey."

Hiking boots and tablets may not seem an obvious combination to most people but Varlotta said the tools compliment each other to teach students not only with but about technology. She said not only will students use the iPads for class work and projects, but part of the plan is to teach students to when to put down the tablets. Teachers will have "DD" times, which means "Devices Down," and have students meet in different areas without the tablets or even their cell phones.

"We are not working from a platform where more technology is better," Varlotta said. "We are working from a platform that mindful technology is what sets Hiram students and graduates apart from any other students in the country. We are teaching them when to use it, how to use it, to what extent, what are the cultural norms, what are the clinical norms ... that's the piece that seems to be missing in some of the other mobile programs."

She said she feels with all the technology such as cell phones and other devices time without technology is getting lost.

“Something as simple as an ice cream social or a conversation with a faculty member for half an hour where we just say this is about the here and now,” she said. “It’s really important to have an activity that mobilizes lots of folks without technology.”

Varlotta said it’s with this in mind that administrators are discussing not increasing the wi-fi capacity in the dining hall to compel students to talk with one another.

Bini said she supports the “trek” part of the initiative and feels it’s an important part.

“My hope is that all kids will take charge of the technology and not let it dictate learning but open their curiosity,” Bini said.

The Vasque hiking boots were made possible by partial corporate gift from Red Wing Shoes plus private donor support to supply students with a sturdy pair of boots for their treks, whether they are on campus, at the field station or studying abroad.

Hiram sophomore William Pinney said students will all be on equal footing when it comes to technology.

“It’s really nice for people who can’t get computers but to be able to get an iPad like everyone else,” Pinney said adding the program will also make classroom discussions easier.

There was a requirement for students to have laptops for classed but it is no longer in place, according to Varlotta.

“It was very problematic students of different financial means were sometimes able to bring in really great computers and laptops that had the bells and whistles necessary for course study and frankly some students had very antiquated machines that could not easily pull up websites and links because they are so slow,” Varlotta said. “Now, everybody’s starting off on an equal supply field, everyone’s electronic supplies are the same and it’s really nice.”

Students will also use the devices during classes for testing, class discussions and individual work. Part of the Scarborough-Bini gift funded the placement Apple TVs and large screens in 30 of the campus' classrooms. Programs will enable instructors to see what students are doing on their devices through a classroom management system. There will be no shopping online or scrolling through social media as instructors will see it. Professors will be able to view student's work in text bubbles and may opt to project their work onto the screen. Varlotta said this technology is a game-changer for student identity.

"It's a perfect way to get more introverted students engaged in classroom discussions," she said. "Students who may not raise their hand and say 'call on me' can be recognized and be very much a part of the discussion."

Freshman Mikayla Baldwin said she thinks Tech and Trek is "cool" because she didn't have 1:1 chromebooks like so many high schools do.

Some kinks in the program are still being ironed out, such as how to recall the iPads, as students graduate or exit the university. Varlotta said this is the first year for the program and no fee has been established due to the grant being received, but she said beginning Fall 2018 there will be a technology fee in place. She said if a student wishes to keep his/her iPad beyond upon exit, they may be able to purchase them at a cost to be determined. Varlotta added any information students store will be on the cloud technology so even if they turn the device in, they will still be able to access their portfolios and information well-beyond graduation.

Senior Cheyanna ball, a creative writing major, said she doesn't think the iPad will enhance anything for her at this point.

"I hope it won't affect anything other than I will be using it to type on," Ball said. "I'm not really into Apple products, I am not an artsy person, but I am really excited about my new boots."

Ball said she feels the program could be used well but felt things could have been explained to students better such as being able to keep the devices upon graduation. She also expressed concern over the technology of the tablets being outdated in a “couple of years” and the college having to purchase all new ones again.