

# Objects in Motion

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# Objects in Motion Justin Bergeman Keeps on Keepin' On



Justin Bergeman - Photos by John DeVilbiss

The art of billiards is the ability to imagine, focus, anticipate and predict the force of one object upon another.

This axiom did not come from reading a manual about playing pool; it came from hanging out with Justin Bergeman, director of professional career and technical education (PCTE) at Utah State University Eastern Blanding, who just so happens to also be a billiards instructor in his spare time. It is a hobby that informs his life and teaching.

He is one who loves forward motion. Maybe it's the 17 years of driving trucks and heavy equipment before he went to college. He can't seem to stop moving now. "Some people say I don't have an 'off' switch," he says. And nothing pleases him more than to set into motion his own students and see the impact their lives can have on others, especially family and friends. A little nudge here, a little push there, is often all that it takes.

"Something I like to talk to students about is their influence on others, how people view them and the hope they create for others," he says. "There is a social responsibility there."

And he considers it his responsibility to make them want to be there in the first place, to provide practical training that leads to real jobs and rewarding careers.

"I think it's important that our students can expect to get something out of their education," he says. "They don't want to be cheated by not getting enough from their classes."

To help ensure that, he often steps back and assesses the situation. Where are the opportunities? Where are the gaps? This penchant for kicking the tires before getting behind the wheel was likely a quality they recognized early on when they hired Bergeman shortly after graduating from CEU in 2007. He started in Blanding as an instructor of trucking and heavy equipment. Six years later, he was named director of the multi-faceted technical education program.

Bergeman falls under USU's School of Applied Sciences, Technology and Education within the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences. While technical and professional education is not new to USU, programs in this field had been in decline until the merger of CEU with USU in 2010.

Joe Peterson, USU Eastern chancellor, says the technical and professional offerings that have long been a staple of former CEU, is helping the university, with its statewide reach, to expand those offerings, particularly to the benefit of rural economies. He says workforce projections show a demand for workers with some technical expertise, some post-secondary career training and technical skills, but not necessarily a baccalaureate.

"That's where the demand for jobs are, and the university is looking to USU Eastern with its nearly 80 years of experience in career and technical education to help lead the way," he says.

It was important enough to the chancellor and rest of the university to hire and house on the Price campus Gary Straquadine, vice provost and ASTE associate department head. He says his mandate is to grow these programs statewide, and its forward-thinking people like Bergeman who are helping to make this happen.

"He's so malleable," Straquadine says. "He hasn't been constrained by the Ph.D."

In addition to Bergeman's adaptability, he also shows a knack for keeping his eye on the ball; lots of balls. For the past eight years he has carefully tracked all potential trucking and heavy equipment students, something now he and his colleagues will also be doing for their building construction students. The careful tracking has paid off in terms of increased enrollment for the program. And once students are enrolled, they continue to track them, monitoring their completion and employment rates.

"I want just enough information so I can see what's going on," Bergeman says. "I want to see if things are being followed up."

So when a prospective student called him earlier in the month and expressed interest in the trucking program, a new file was created. Bergeman not only wants to make sure that this potential student gets a follow-up call, but also wants to make sure the referral agency that sent the student his way is kept in the loop. Maintaining a good relationship with agencies is essential.

And doing what it takes to help find financial help for students is equally important to him. His first big success in this area came in 2008 when he applied and received \$250,000 over a two-year period from the Navajo Department of Workforce Services. It was vital funding that not only helped to enroll 32 Native Americans from the Navajo tribe, it also engendered trust in Blanding's trucking and heavy equipment program. In the years since, hundreds of Navajo students have gone through the program with, at times, more than 90 percent graduating and finding jobs. Currently they are at 88 percent.

Students like Clint Bitsue, a Navajo from Teec Nos Pos, Arizona. Bitsue was one of 17 USU Eastern Blanding students who earned a trucking certificate in December and 13 others who graduated with heavy equipment certification. Within weeks Bitsue was hired by Swift Trucking and today is driving big rigs on cross-country hauls. Ninety percent of the 30 completers were Native American students. Blanding holds graduation ceremonies three times a year for its trucking and heavy equipment students.

These impressive placement rates are the result of a number of things, foremost of which are students who graduate fully prepared to go to work. But being qualified to do the job in such a comprehensive industry comes with its own set of qualifiers: the more complex

the job, the more skills it requires. The Blanding campus program lays a strong foundation for students starting out. Like with anything else, the more training students obtain, the more confident and competent they are as drivers.

It is why offering courses that boost skills are important to Bergeman. These are add-on credentials for things like first-aid and CPR, OSHA safety training, air-brake adjustment and inspection, fire extinguisher use and use of respirators. With these little extras, his students more often find themselves at the head of the employment line than not.

They also come out ahead in money. For example, if one of the brakes a long-haul truck is found to be out of adjustment, the driver can't make that adjustment himself unless he's certified. If this happens out on the road, it means having to wait until someone certified comes and makes that adjustment, all at a tremendous cost of time and money to the driver and his company. "During times like that, it's a good thing to have," he says.

And it is good for the campus because it draws more people to these classes. It is the business side of Bergeman in play here, particularly marketing strategies. He earned a bachelor's degree in business from USU's Huntsman School of Business in 2012. He expects to complete a master's degree in career and technical education at USU's School of Applied Sciences, Technology and Education in 2017. It is no surprise then that he runs his program like a business.

Straight off, after becoming director, he started looking around and began asking "where's my growth going to be?" He focused on declining enrollments and turned to his database to help him find solutions. "I knew if I didn't find answers to those problems, we soon wouldn't have students in our classes," he says. "If the system is broken and we don't fix it, we won't get people here. If we don't help them, they don't get here."

He applied the same principles he used to build the trucking and heavy equipment program to the construction side, starting with finding the right individuals to be a part of his team - an essential first step, he says.

A year ago, the construction program was languishing with about seven students and three houses previously built that were still on the market. Today enrollment in this program has tripled. He says his team did this first by beefing up the program to make it more comprehensive, and then hiring instructor Roy Yoakam,

who had worked in housing construction. They sold the three houses, got out of debt and began work on a new house.

They also changed the construction period from a one-year to a two-year rotation to allow for more teaching and learning time. They expanded their recruitment reach into New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, with special emphasis on adult learners. They met with referral agents to ensure them the houses they built would be industry-standard homes based on industry needs and the students they sent them would, in turn, be well-qualified once graduating.

"It was vital that we talked to agencies on and off the reservation, otherwise they wouldn't support us," he says. "We talk about our success stories, we show the quality of services we provide and how we care about our students. We build our relationships based on our successes."

It's a bottom line approach that resonates with agencies, students and administrators.

And just as important as getting the students trained, is making sure that they are hireable by having skills the industry actually needs and wants. That means paying attention to the blind spots. Listening up, for example, when construction bosses complain that nobody wants to swing a hammer anymore, that everyone wants to be managers.

"We don't need more construction managers," they tell Bergeman. "We need workers. We need people with skills who can be productive."

So does that mean he's re-thinking the school's associate of applied science degree that is designed to prepare students for construction management positions? Yes, it does, but not in a limited way. For him he sees this as an opportunity to make the program more comprehensive. After all, it's no fun to play pool with just one ball. He's all about taking a comprehensive approach in everything he does, so long as the balls on the table find their pockets as efficiently as possible. And what better field than construction to do this?

"I can see adding things to our building program with opportunities to double and triple what we have now," he says. "It's something we can help with because building construction branches out in so many different areas."

Students currently have the option of earning a building construction-core certificate of completion by taking 10 courses ranging from building code

and safety to exterior finishing, plus four to five credits in approved electives, for a total of 23 credits. To enhance that, students may earn a one-year certificate, along with the 23 credits, by fulfilling 10 credits of general education requirements, including English, math and a choice of other classes ranging from business to communications.

These are considered stackable-core competencies that students can build upon to make them more valuable to potential employers. From here a student can go on to earn an associate of applied science degree for construction management positions, small business ownership and general contracting. The stack can be arranged and piled on in any way a student desires.

So when Bergeman hears from industry that they want more workers than managers, he looks at what kind of workers that are needed. One such area with promise is in the field of facility maintenance.

"As far as I know, no other school offers a facility maintenance," he says. "I see a gap that we can fill. We can be the niche and we can expand on that niche."

He hopes to have an associate degree with a facilities maintenance emphasis up and running by fall. There are other ideas that he and his colleagues have been mulling over, like paving the way for a bachelor's degree path for Blanding students in these programs. One opportunity leads to another, like one ball striking the next.

"Just this morning, I was telling students 'now that USU has an applied associate's degree, you can plug in your one-year certificates in building construction or heavy equipment,'" he says.

He likens it to an educational freeway with both on and off ramps. That means students can earn their one-year certificates and immediately go to work. But the option remains open for them to also return to school and pick up where they left off. So if they want to go on and earn an associate's degree, their earned certificates will apply toward that degree.

"That's been the focus of the stacking credentials we've been working on these past couple of years," he says. "It leaves options open for our students and, honestly, I have students who are getting excited about it: 'You mean I can get an applied associate's degree in construction?' 'Yah, you can.'"

Bergeman gets it because he's been there, from driving trucks, to pushing real estate. He can swing a hammer but he can also run an Excel spreadsheet. He wears that

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rare combination of blue and white collar where academics blends with technology, where “professional career” combines with “technical education.” It’s a wide swath but one intended to help students succeed, no excuses. Because “excuses cause no results,” he likes to tell his students. “Reasons cause results.”

Keeping your eye on the ball also helps so long as you have an idea of what pocket you want it in. It means focusing, looking ahead and anticipating how the force of one decision influences another. So if you happen upon Bergeman when he is in such deep thought, don’t think he’s daydreaming, he is just cueing up.

~ *John DeVilbiss*