

Apostle of Technology: Dr. Jorge Pérez

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS, KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY, KENNESAW, GEORGIA



From the President on down, nearly every faculty member and administrator at Kennesaw State University, the third largest university in Georgia, knows Jorge Pérez, though he is neither the most senior, nor famous of the school's 1,200 professors.

The reason that so many know this Associate Professor of Information Systems is that he is their computer guru – as KSU's leading expert on, and advocate of, technology literacy. In another high-visibility role, the Cuban-born Dr. Pérez is also a rising leader in the university's campus-wide diversity initiative.

“Jorge Pérez is a lifesaver.”

An early alumnus and active participant in The PhD Project, he has developed the two KSU spots into an uncommon position of stature and recognition for a professor of his age.

Concerned that undergraduates in all majors had highly uneven and often-deficient computer skills, Dr. Pérez decided a few years ago to act. At that point, there was no course anywhere in the university on basic computer literacy – not even in his own department. Having already earned a reputation on campus as its unofficial, “go-to” one man tech help desk, he was a natural.

Collaborating with a colleague, he developed and launched the school's first tech literacy course, aimed at students in all disciplines. To build campus awareness of the new offering, the two professors sent a memo to every faculty member on campus, asking them to spread the word to their students.

The response was overwhelming – from the faculty members themselves.

“They said they wanted to take it too,” Dr. Pérez recalls.

That inspired a second new course – a hands-on computer literacy workshop for professors. It launched in 2007, and faculty from all departments now clamor to get into one of the monthly sessions.

Faculty members from The PhD Project are often eager to explore cross-discipline solutions and approaches like this, notes Bernie Milano, The PhD Project President and president of the KPMG Foundation, the founder, administrator, and principal funder of The PhD Project. “Many of the professors we have attracted have had extensive careers in business where they were accustomed to working across lines in teams, and they carry that spirit of open-minded collaboration with them to academe,” he said.

Life-Saver

Joan Thomas was one of the faculty members fortunate to land a spot in Dr. Pérez's last workshop of the 2008 academic year. Though she occupies a spot far down on the academic pecking order – she is an occasional adjunct in the communications department – she signed up eagerly and was accepted.

She is there, she says, “because Jorge Pérez is a life-saver.”

“I was a new adjunct, trying to customize the university's standard software for tracking and weighting grades, and it wasn't working,” she

recalls. She remembered having met the helpful IS professor at her orientation, and his offer to help her if she ever had a problem. “So I went to his office and he spent 90 minutes of his time with me until the problem was fixed,” she says.



Dr. Jorge Pérez

When the opportunity arose to take his seminar and learn more, she grabbed it.

Aimed at faculty who have access to technology but use it sparingly or uncomfortably, the class teaches the basics of computing: from hardware to productivity software to the Internet. It is all pretty much Personal Computing 101, for faculty eager to develop their technology skills.

“It's the difference between knowing how to fix something yourself and having to call tech support”

But the onetime systems analyst and IT consultant has more in mind than teaching faculty members how to send an email. His ultimate vision: to open up the exciting possibilities of technology-enabled classroom instruction to a wider group of professors.

“They won't start learning how to do that until they are comfortable with the basics,” Dr. Pérez says.

In the upside-down world of rapid technology change, many professors hesitate to use technology

in the classroom, out of concern they may not be as up to speed on the latest applications as their students. These professors see themselves, Dr. Pérez's teaching collaborator-colleague Meg Murray explains, as "digital immigrants teaching digital natives."

“Now I can be a better help to my students.”

But in reality, she and Dr. Pérez have learned, undergraduates' technology sophistication varies widely – some young people are as inexperienced with it as their professors. By instilling the fundamentals, Drs. Murray and Pérez have seen, they unleash a new confidence in these professors.

In the class attended by Ms. Thomas, Dr. Pérez runs the group energetically and irreverently through a whirlwind tour of operating systems, the basics of Internet security, rebooting a frozen computer, and changing Windows settings – among more newfangled fare such as subscribing to an RSS feed.

"It's the difference between knowing how to fix something yourself and having to call tech support," says an exuberant Bob Huebsch, who teaches writing to undergraduates, afterwards. "This will stop me from throwing away all those disks that come with a new computer."

Another participant, Carol Pope, who works with disabled students, says, "Now I can be a better help to my students."

Dewi Wilson, a librarian, adds, "Students have questions about all this stuff and it helps to at least know what they're talking about. The danger is that if they think we don't know what they are talking about, we become irrelevant to them no matter how learned we are. We need to remain flexible."

“His interest in technology is more in what it can do for you than in just how it works.”

From Fitness to Faculty

A self-described fitness fanatic, Dr. Pérez was first drawn to teaching while moonlighting as a group fitness instructor in his undergraduate days. The experience helped "light the fire to teach," he says, and gave him the confidence to stand in front of a classroom.

But he almost didn't make it all the way through to his doctorate – until The PhD Project provided the opportunity to get himself back on track.

After completing his doctoral coursework, Dr. Pérez left Florida State University to teach in another state while he completed his dissertation. The teaching thrived but the dissertation lagged. He had fallen into the ABD (all but dissertation) trap that befalls many doctoral students who leave before completing their dissertation.

But this was the first year of The PhD Project Information Systems Doctoral Students Association, and Dr. Pérez attended its inaugural meeting. There, he unexpectedly encountered his dissertation chair from Florida State. That, and the excited buzz surrounding his fellow doctoral students from around the nation, renewed the spark. He spent several hours talking with his once-and-future mentor, and made a momentous decision: to leave his teaching job and return to Tallahassee to concentrate on completing his doctorate. "Had it not been for that meeting," he says, "I might never have pulled the goal back within reach."

Researcher

At Kennesaw State, many are glad that he did. Jorge Pérez is part computer guru, part Mr. Fixit, and part technology evangelist. But beyond the value he spreads by teaching core skills lies a deeper significance: Dr. Pérez's research revolves around computer literacy. His first-hand experiences teaching skills inspires and guides his



Dr. Jorge Pérez Ph.D.

- BA in English, MBA and PhD in Management Information Systems, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL
- Teaching experience: Florida State University, North Carolina A&T State University, Florida A&M University, Kennesaw State University
- Industry experience: systems analyst, web developer and IT consultant, Associate Director of the Center for Hispanic Studies and CETL Faculty Fellow for E-learning at Kennesaw State University
- Published research topics: IT literacy, IS curriculum, information security, diffusion of innovations and organizational learning.

research, and vice-versa. It is a complete loop of gathering, analyzing, disseminating, and applying knowledge.

“Jorge is dynamic,” says his colleague Dr. Murray. “His interest in technology is more in what it can do for you than in just how it works.”

“He has generated a lot of respect among the faculty,” says Dr. G. William Hill, director of the faculty training center where Dr. Pérez teaches his courses – and himself a psychology professor. “He is approachable and interested in them, which is critical.”

In another side to Dr. Pérez’s cross-discipline interests, he has recently been named Associate Director of the university’s Center for Hispanic Studies. “If I can make it a little better for Hispanics on this campus, I’ll have done a good thing,” he says.

His objectives in that position are to increase outreach to the surrounding Atlanta community, attract more funding for diversity initiatives, and conduct research into the Hispanic community and – of course – computer literacy.



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