TECAID Team Representative Interview: The University of Oklahoma

The following interview was conducted by Diane Matt (original TECAID PI, WEPAN Executive Director) and Zahed Siddique (The University of Oklahoma, TECAID Team representative) at the 2017 Women in Engineering ProActive Network's (WEPAN's) Change Leader Forum.

Interview with Zahed Siddique (The University of Oklahoma)

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Diane: So, Zahed, I've been thinking a lot about how the workshops went and how the different teams were in those workshops and the course of the project. And one of the things I think is note-worthy about your team is the role of leadership. And we know – we've talked earlier today about the role of leadership in this project. And when I think about your team, I think it stands out as a team that had really good leadership from your chair. And I wonder if you could tell us how that leadership emerged? Did it start out that way? Did it evolve that way? And then in what way did that style of leadership contribute to the success of your project? And then did the rest of you – you know, you've taken an important leadership role going forward. How did that come to happen?

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Zahed: Okay. So for the OU Team, when we had our initial meetings even before the workshop and all of that, our project was different, right? So after the first workshop when we came back, and actually doing the workshop, we started talking about, you know, kind of the risk and all of that. And one of the main things that Cengiz, Dr. Altan brought up as the director is let's try to have things that can be under our control. So, very measured ways so we can show success. Once we can show success, then it's much easier to build momentum. [00:02:00] So it was a very, like you said, very conscious decision from Cengiz as the Department Head saying, "Let's not try to rattle too many things. We'll do it." You know, it's a long process. It's not a sprint, it's a long walk. So we'll do it small things at a time. And then after we went back, what we said – we trusted each other. So that was the other thing for all the group members so each of us picked up saying, "Okay, this is what I would like to do." And it was underneath the big project, three of four smaller projects that each one did and was leading it. [00:02:46] And then of course when we met, every other week and things like that, we'll give updates. But the update was, "This is where we are." And everybody will ask, "Okay, do you need help? And if you don't need help, you keep doing what you're doing." So the leadership was initially figuring out the risk and saying, "Overall, this is the way going forward" and then each one of us taking a small leadership role. Did that?

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Diane: Yeah, so what – in my dream world, and I think about TECAID and I think about the success that you've had, and then I think about, "Okay, how might these teams build on that success? You know, what might they do next? Would you use the same process in the next"– I mean, diversity inclusion and equity is a thing that's going to take lots of work over time. So there's always another opportunity to take. So as you think about those, are you pursuing the same leadership strategy or using a different strategy now?

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Zahed: So it is – it has evolved a little bit. But not too much since the TECAID – you know, the actual core TECAID ended, what we are looking into is how do you keep on continuing doing this? So we are looking into from one of the core members who will lead the effort, not really as a leader, but to oversee and make sure things doesn't fall through. So it'll be a different type of leadership, just to oversee and make sure you know, this deadline is coming, this deadline is going, just to make sure, you know everybody do their job. [00:04:39] So moving forward, the leadership will change a little bit. And the person will hopefully get service credit for it. Now, we'll probably keep on continuing at least for a little bit on the same pace with the same projects. And then if we try to come up with some other projects, we'll decide at that point depending on how extensive that is. But at this point, I believe in the department, we do have majority of the faculty member who understand the importance of it. So it is much easier to try to implement something because we know that there are people who will go in and help.

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Diane: Sure, you have a base.

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Zahed: We have a base now.

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Diane: Nice, nice.

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Zahed: And that base pretty much started small. And then like I said before when we did the student training, we invited the faculty. We did not make it a requirement. We said.

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Diane: I think that is so smart.

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Zahed: And more than half of the faculty members came in and have just attended voluntarily. And that tells you, they would like to…

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Diane: Yeah, they're interested.

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Zahed: They're interested.

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Diane: Now, are you able to continue that student training? Is that something that is going to be cemented in your culture do you think?

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Zahed: Yes, so it is part of our curriculum now. So we have made it part of the senior design. And we have actually added course fees so that when we hire somebody from outside, we don't have to worry about the funding. It is supported yearly. And since it's part of the courses, we have to do it. So we implemented it that way.

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Diane: When you do that work, when you do that training with your students, what do you notice about how their interactions with each other change?

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Zahed: So we do it at the beginning of the semester. And it is a design course, it's a group project. So they can apply whatever they're learning right away. So what we –

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Diane: This is a little bit like a mini-TECAID, right?

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Zahed: It is a mini TECAID. And all that, it's not just a lecture type of thing. It's a workshop where there are hands-on activities. So they stand face-to-face and understand that if you don't respond when somebody else is talking, how do you feel? You know, how do you give a feedback? How do you resolve conflict? If somebody is late, there might be other reasons behind it. Can you place yourself in that person's position? And then of course we go through a case study at the end. Now what we have found out is we do the surveys on how the students liked it, not right away. We waited the whole semester to see what they retained. And when we see that, we see the student's commenting, saying, "Yes, it was very helpful especially during the group meetings" when we had, you know, minority students and there were tensions, it was much easier to talk to because we know this will not harm us. It is an environment where it has to be addressed. And the quicker we address it, the better. And we move along.

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Diane: So whose idea was it to survey them about that course at the end instead of you know right after it happened?

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Zahed: It was an accident.

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Diane: It was an accident? A fortuitous accident.

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Zahed: It was a good accident. So for the first time when we did it, because of some of the other things, the survey got delayed. So we did it at the end. And we found out that was – that worked out better than if we had the survey done right after the workshop.

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Diane: Yes, so it sounds like what happened is the coursework that they took is not very aligned with mechanical engineering. I mean it's completely different. But that over time, they gained an appreciation for how it contributed to their success in their major field.

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Zahed: So when we did the training, and it was an external person, so we met several times before she did the training. And one of the thing we talked about a lot is, how do we frame the training? So we framed the training based on if it's a senior student, what are they going to look for? Something that they need for their job. So we framed the

whole training as, 'this is a skill that you need. You're going to go out and work, it's a global environment. Companies are looking for diversity. And people who can work in a diverse environment.' Can you address these issues without making [] comments? Can you be a person who can work in an inclusive environment, or make the environment more inclusive? So we've made it as a competency that the students need. So we sold it that way. So even if the content wasn't, they did not feel that the content was diversity and inclusion. It was, but it was packaged in a different way.

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Diane: Right, right. And do you feel like most of those students sort of bought it?

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Zahed: Yes, I think most of the students bought it. And it made sense to them. So when we even looked at the surveys and things like that, they said, "Yeah, this is a skill that we need." And even when they weren't in the team, they say, "Yeah, this helped, working in the team and made it a better environment."

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Diane: So I know there have been some changes both on your team and both with the consultant that you worked with to offer that training. Have you identified another consultant to take that role?

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Zahed: Yes, so second year, so before the first – she left, she actually suggested the second person who was on campus.

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Diane: Oh good.

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Zahed: It was actually her adviser. But her adviser said, you know, "My graduate student will be much better at this time wise." And she was fabulous.

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Diane: Good. So you found people on campus that could do this for you.

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Zahed: We found this – yes.

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Diane: Were you surprised when you found?

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Zahed: We were surprised, yes, that how well she took it from where it was left. And made it her own. And the students pretty much got the same thing out even though the training was a little bit different content-wise. And we are talking with her again this year so we can do it this year also.

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Diane: Well thank you for all your leadership. Thank you for your successes. Thank you for your persistence. We're all very pleased about what you've achieved.

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Zahed: Oh, thank you very much for doing this. It was very helpful.

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Diane: Great!