



Cisco Systems Engineer and Academy Instructor, Michigan

Instructor Impact Story: Lansing Community College

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For a career path, Nicole Johnson always knew that she wanted to be in information and communications technology (ICT). And like many other high-energy people, she wanted to take part in meaningful projects outside the workplace. She imagined teaching ICT. Through many curious twists and turns, Nicole found herself with both a career and a meaningful extracurricular activity in the same period of time.

Nicole’s career choice was not much of a surprise to anyone who knows her. Growing up in Plano, Texas, Nicole was always

interested in math and science, and she was particularly adept at problem solving. At the University of North Texas, Nicole picked her major as soon as she enrolled, and graduated with a degree in Business Computer Information Systems.

When she finished her undergraduate degree, Nicole began working on her master’s degree in ICT, to gain a deeper understanding of how technology affects business and society.

“For me, technology is about more than working with bits and bytes. I wanted to understand the business applications of

technology. My great interest has always been working creatively with technology to solve customer business problems.”

While she was finishing up her master’s degree, Nicole discovered the Cisco Associate Systems Engineer (ASE) training program. She spent one year in the intensive ASE program in Raleigh, North Carolina, learning about technology, business applications, collaboration, and the Cisco corporate culture, including the emphasis on giving back to the community. There were 25 participants that year, and only five were women. Nicole was not uncomfortable in the minority. In college, she earned money as a radio disc jockey. “I’ve never been intimidated by traditionally male-



dominated arenas. I always wanted to encourage women to participate and succeed in any type of career they wanted.”

After becoming a Cisco systems engineer, Nicole joined the Cisco sales team in Grand Rapids, Michigan, working with higher education customers. Nicole again felt the pull towards teaching, even as she continued to advance within Cisco, earning five Cisco professional certifications in one year.

Nicole’s reputation in the field led to a request from nearby Davenport University to teach a computer security course. Through the staff at Davenport, she learned about the Cisco Networking Academy courses at Lansing Community College, and wanted to become eligible to teach those.

“I was excited about the opportunity to become a certified Cisco instructor. In this area where so many jobs have been lost in the economy, I was looking forward to helping people retrain for new careers.”

Still working full-time as a Cisco systems engineer, she enrolled in CCNA® (Cisco Certified Networking Associate) Exploration 1

and 2 courses, and earned her CCAI (Cisco Certified Associate Instructor) certification. Nicole now teaches part-time at the Cisco Networking Academy at Lansing Community College.

“I love the fact that my students find it motivating to have a professional Cisco engineer for an instructor. They are hungry for information about real-world projects and solutions. They want to know what’s new and what’s relevant with customers today. At the same time, I know that being an instructor has also made me a better engineer. I understand the needs of education on an even deeper level now. When I work with my higher education customers, I bring better insights into their requirements and our technology solutions.”

Nicole is proud of being in a position to motivate adult learners who have come back to school for retraining, especially women who are looking at technology as a possible career path.

“I want to make sure everyone understands that the networking field needs all kinds of people. I make time for women students who need extra encouragement. I explain the challenges they

may face, and encourage them to persevere, because I believe passionately that a technology career will provide more job security and satisfaction than they ever imagined.”

Nicole is also proud that the Cisco Networking Academy is continuing to expand its workforce development role in Michigan. Last year, President Obama announced the Workforce Retraining Initiative, offering job training for high-demand healthcare IT and broadband careers, based on Cisco Networking Academy curricula, at colleges across Michigan. Davenport University offers a Cisco certification fast-track program with an enhanced healthcare focus.

“It’s tremendously exciting to play a role in helping people change their lives. I love to see the look in my students’ eyes when they master a tough concept. It’s so satisfying to know that I’m preparing them to be competitive in the workforce. And I’m grateful that I don’t have to wait for a time in the future to mentor people through teaching. I can do an engineering job I love, and also be a teacher through the Cisco Networking Academy.”