Darrell M. Hull, Ph.D.

On following your instincts: “We, based on our penchants, unique cognitive abilities, and personalities, tend to find our way into environments where we fit well. Stick with it. You may have just tripped over yourself and fallen into the program that will develop the skills you naturally possess.”

–Darrell M. Hull, Ph.D., June 22, 2009

Darrell M. Hull’s success in higher education may have come about partially by accident. He holds four degrees in very different areas of study: an associate in applied science in laser technology, a bachelor’s in business, a master’s in business administration, and a Ph.D. in educational psychology. How did he start on this path? By messing up the first try.

“I was a struggling student,” Darrell recalls. “I wasn’t interested in pursuing higher education. I discovered I liked working more than going to school, so I ended up blowing my GPA (at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcus, now called Texas State University) while working at a psychiatric hospital.” Returning to his hometown of Waco, Texas, and moving back in with Mom and Dad yielded one response: “You’ve got to have a job.” So Darrell went to work for Engineering Technology Institute (ETI), which focused on professional development courses for physicists and engineers in lasers and optics. But Darrell’s employer decided that if he was going to be working with people who use laser and optics equipment, he needed more education. He had to go back to school.

At Texas State Technical College (TSTC), Darrell enrolled in the laser electro-optics technology (LEOT) program. “I began to discover that I can learn this stuff and perform well,” he says. “TSTC was the first place I was able to perform well in an academic setting. I began to realize the importance of higher education and what it could offer.” Within three months of completing his associate degree, Darrell was offered a job at one of the largest optics manufacturers in the nation: Texas Instruments (TI). He started in quality control, testing samples of prisms and lenses that had been created from bulk optical material. What Darrell didn’t know was that as soon as he was given security clearance, TI planned to put him to work on secret military optics applications. As Darrell puts it, “We were responsible for damage testing
the optical coatings on the components in the forward looking infrared (FLIR) systems for aircraft. One part of the job was testing the coatings until they failed. I got to go to work and blow stuff up!”

Eventually, TI’s military contracts waned and Darrell saw an opportunity to get a bachelor’s degree in physics. Darrell had worked with physicists, and he thought they were “pretty cool people.” Darrell’s counselor told him he could plunge right into engineering calculus without taking any other math, but it didn’t work out. “I did my dead-level best and ended up making a D in the calculus course,” he says. “It turns out I did not have the trigonometry background I needed. So I switched to business.” Business seemed to come naturally to Darrell—he finished with A and B grades in all his classes.

A crossroads presented itself once Darrell received his bachelor’s degree. He could continue to work directly with optics, or he could return to ETI, educating those who work with lasers, photonics, and optics. “I opted to come back to Waco,” he says. “I was very fortunate: one of the benefits of working for ETI is that the company paid for me to get my MBA at Baylor University.” While working on his third degree, Darrell helped to develop laser safety standards for photonics educators. After completing his master’s, he helped to develop skill standards in optics and photonics and was involved in activities that led to the creation of OP-TEC, the National Center for Optics and Photonics Education.

Darrell’s penchant for education led him to pursue a doctorate in educational psychology. “I think of myself as a psychometrician,” he explains. “I deal with statistics, research methods, and psychometrics, which is measurement of educational and psychological traits. My job now is to teach doctoral students at the University of North Texas how to develop research designs and how to analyze them with statistics.” Darrell’s research interest lies in the development of young adults’ personalities and abilities in career choices. He is conducting a study to determine just how much students’ abilities and personality traits influence their choices in pursuing technical versus nontechnical degrees.

Each of Darrell’s four degrees was earned while working full time—a fact he hopes will make pursuing higher education less daunting for those who come after him. From struggling student to doctoral professor, Darrell’s career is a reminder that it is always possible to forge your own path, even if it takes some sharp turns along the way.

Darrell M. Hull received his Ph.D. in educational psychology from Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He also holds a master’s degree in business administration from Baylor, a bachelor’s degree in business administration from the University of Texas in Dallas, and an associate in applied science degree in laser electro-optics technology from Texas State Technical College in Waco. In his spare time, he enjoys 30–70 mile bicycle rides and competing as a category 3 bicycle racer in Texas.