



CLOSING THE SKILLS GAP

Business, school officials praise dual enrollment academy



Submitted photo

Students from the tool and die/CNC cohort of Waukesha County Technical College's Dual Enrollment Academy work on the college's equipment earlier this year.

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WAUKESHA — Four years after Waukesha County Technical College and area high schools first forged a partnership in hopes of closing the skills gap, education and business officials are praising the college's Dual Enrollment Academy as they continue inching toward that goal.

In 2013, WCTC launched the academy — which allows students in their senior year of high school to earn college credit in high-demand industries — with input from area employers on their workforce needs.

During that year, program cohorts included tool and

die/CNC, welding/fabrication and IT networking. They have since been expanded and altered based on industry feedback and student interest.

This is how it works: students in their senior year spend most of their school day at WCTC, earning college credit, and the remaining portion at their high school, where they complete the rest of their high school coursework. By the end of the year, they will receive both a high school diploma and a WCTC certificate or technical diploma.

Many decide to continue their technical education the following year, while some enter the workforce right away

Business partnership

Metal-Era, Inc. is in its third year of partnering with the program and Chief Operating Officer Nick Mallinger said it's benefited from the new influx of labor.

The Waukesha manufacturer has brought on 10 Dual Enrollment Academy students over the past two years, all of whom have decided to attend Milwaukee School of Engineering, WCTC or other local colleges while they continue to work for the company.

"When comparing their skill sets to the other 20 new employees we have hired on our production floor, it is unmatched," Mallinger said. "The work ethic and craftsmanship of each individual

allows us to move them around and know they will be successful in each area."

School and business officials stress that the program is not for everyone. It's designed for students who are already interested in pursuing a career in their program options.

"It's not an exploration type of thing," said Amy Lange, the Waukesha School District's career and technical education coordinator at a Curriculum & Instruction Committee meeting this week. "We're really looking for students who will be successful and looking for students who are passionate about a career in these fields."

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Students also must be in good academic standing, with a minimum 2.0 high school GPA.

Mallinger said the program does a good job at bracing students and parents for the challenge before they sign up.

"Each student is well aware of the structure that will be needed and they are prepared to meet the demand," he said. "It is not easy being a 17-year-old balancing WCTC, high school and a job workload. Based on the students we have worked with directly, each one of them has succeeded on all three levels."

Expanding programs

This year, the program options will include cohorts in welding/fabrication, tool and die/CNC, printing and publishing, IT computer support specialist, automated systems technician/robotics, and hospitality management.

Participation is up from 52 students last year to 56 students, representing 15 school districts. It's steadily increased every year since its launch.

Dual Enrolment Academy Coordinator Sandra Maylen said officials are continually analyzing the outcomes of each cohort, including how many students continue their education after the program and how many are finding jobs.

More than three-fourths of students from last year's tool and die program, for example, enrolled in WCTC this year, taking an average of about 11 credits, Maylen said. The same is true of the welding program.

And when it comes to finding work, she said, there are more than enough jobs for any student seeking one.

"Anybody who wants a job can be placed," she said. "Not everyone chooses to be placed, but the placement rate was in the 65 to 75 percent rate last year for those two programs."

Maylen said the academy has focused on building partnerships with businesses who encourage continued education through flexible scheduling and tuition reimbursement.

Even with the incentives available to prospective workers, businesses and school officials say the gap between skilled labor and available jobs remains wide.

"We have more opportunities than we have students," Maylen said.

But, Mallinger said, the program is helping close the gap.

"It is difficult these days to find qualified labor as we continue to grow," he said. "This program has allowed us to invest in good kids that want to be in the manufacturing field. They not only want to work with Metal-Era, Inc or other companies in the area, they want a career in manufacturing. This program has eliminated a lot of the issues we have seen finding qualified labor that want to be a part of something special."

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