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Apprenticeship Opportunities Open Students' Eyes

Over 100 high school students attend event at Pablo Center

Eau Claire, WI – Spencer Wagner, a student at the Chippewa Falls School District's Alternative School, has been thinking about college, but he had never been a big fan of lectures and having to learn things that seemed to him to have no practical value. On Tuesday, Nov. 12 at the Pablo Center at the Confluence, he may have found an alternative.

"I learned how easy it is to get an apprenticeship and be successful," Wagner said after spending the morning at an Apprenticeship Exploration Day hosted by Chippewa Valley Technical College and the Pablo Center.

Apprenticeships have been around for centuries, but in recent years have often been an overlooked way for people to obtain the training and experience they need to enter a skilled trade. With the Chippewa Valley experiencing a labor shortage in many occupations, driven by a skills gap, new efforts are underway to recruit people into apprenticeship programs.

At Apprenticeship Exploration Day, students from eight area high schools learned of what apprenticeships are and descriptions of programs in the electrician, plumbing & steamfitter and sheet metal trades. They also toured the inner workings of the Pablo Center, seeing the boiler room, heating, electrical and ventilation infrastructure built by people in skilled trades.

Wagner said the experience changed his outlook. "I kind of thought apprenticeships were low-end jobs or careers, but I learned how awesome it is, being paid to go to school."

School is only a small part of apprenticeships, in which 90 percent of learning takes place on the job, according to Jeff Sullivan, dean of apprenticeships, engineering, manufacturing and IT at CVTC. An apprenticeship starts with being hired for a job, with the apprentice paid while learning on the job. Additional classroom instruction is often taken through CVTC.

"We have 13 apprenticeship programs at CVTC, from data analytics to electrical power distribution," Sullivan said.

Wagner's initial misunderstanding of apprenticeships is not uncommon. Long Vang of the state Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards during an opening presentation told the students he knew little about apprenticeships when he was in school.

“When I went to high school, none of my teachers or counselors talked to me about apprenticeships,” Vang said, adding it was the same when he was in college. “When I found out about apprenticeships later, I realized what an opportunity I missed.”

Some of the students were already familiar with apprenticeships and locked in on securing one for themselves, mostly due to family influence.

“I’m in a youth apprenticeship program at Pelke Plumbing, our family business,” said Lucas Pelke of Durand. “I have an older brother who did it too and is now an indentured apprentice plumber with the business.”

Pelke envisioned he and his brother taking over the family business someday.

However, most students came to explore an option they had heard little about.

“I am currently in a metals class, and I’m exploring all my career options,” said Katie Feuker, a senior at Elmwood High School. “I wanted to see what an apprenticeship would be like. I really enjoy welding, but I know there is so much more out there.”

Feuker said she had always thought about a four-year college, because that’s what people in her family had done. “But there’s an increase in people taking the technical college and apprenticeship approach,” she said.

Others, like Wagner, felt drawn to the on-the-job nature of the learning, not relishing the idea of years of more classroom learning after high school.

“I don’t want to go to college for four years,” said Josh Willmarth, a senior at Lake Holcombe High School. “I’m more hands-on. I’m thinking military or an apprenticeship.”

With over 155 programs offered both online and on-campus, Chippewa Valley Technical College delivers superior, progressive technical education which improves the lives of students, meets the workforce needs of the region, and strengthens the community. CVTC programs are designed with input of business and industry to prepare graduates for today’s jobs, with 95 percent employed within six months of graduation and associate degree graduates earning an average annual salary of \$46,816.

Cutline:

Russell Boos, a journeyman steamfitter from Mondovi, shows a group of area high schools students a side of the Pablo Center that few people see. During Apprenticeship Exploration Day, Boos took them to rooms containing the inner electric, plumbing, heating and ventilation infrastructure and talked about the role of the skilled trades in building the center.

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