

Wyoming High School Students in Transition: One Success Story



“What am I going to do after graduation?”

“How can I help my family?”

“I don’t know if I want to go to college!”

Questions such as these are a daily chorus for students, teachers, counselors, and employers. In the words of the man who learned about dirty jobs, “we – in America – have made ‘work’ a dirty word. We have heard that success is in the corner office, but we have unintentionally belittled the ones who have the skills needed to build that very office (Mike Rowe).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are seven million jobs available and waiting. However, they are what Mr. Rowe calls “shovel-ready,” but we no longer encourage shovel-work. “We have this misguided notion that a career in the skilled trades shouldn’t be desired.” There seems to be this notion that blue collar workers are merely the “grunts” of industry. Yet, the skills and knowledge needed for fabricating, maintaining, and repairing are essential for smooth-running machinery, whether a car, a home, or a community.

For Wyoming, the construction sector plays a fundamental role in the economic wellbeing of Wyoming, but current construction workforce training in the state is limited. This lack of training forces Wyoming construction companies to recruit workers from adjacent states at a high cost. Good as these employees may be, they have no vested interest in Wyoming, other than as a paycheck.

When an industry sector adds a 50-percent job gain during the first quarter of a year, stakeholders need to sit up and pay attention. In response to this need for training, the Civil and Architectural Engineering and Construction Management (CAECM) Department at the University of Wyoming has done just that – sat up, paid attention, and developed a four year Construction Management (CM) degree program that will teach and graduate young men and women to become the next generation of construction industry leaders in the state of Wyoming.

According to Francois Jacobs, an associate professor in the CAECM department who steers both the CM and workforce training programs, has garnered financial support from the state through the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services (DWS) to also develop and deliver similar training to the thousands of already employed construction workers in the state who cannot commit to a traditional training platform because they need to simultaneously earn a living.

While this is a practical response to the immediate need, one other solution to the future construction skill and labor shortage in Wyoming is to encourage more vocational and career technical education at the high school level. This does not mean turn away from a university degree per se, but that career technical education needs to be promoted as a viable and respectable option for a career.

The *Association for Career and Technical Education* states that 95% of students concentrating on career and technical education (CTE) graduate high school (that’s 10% higher than the overall U. S. graduation rate), individuals with associate degrees in the CTE fields earn \$10,000.00 more per year than associate degrees in

other fields, and 89 % of employers in these fields face talent shortages with 60% reporting a high or very high impact on productivity (<https://www.acteonline.org/>).

With this data in mind, we now must consider the statistics that indicate a high school student's preparedness to meet the challenges of basic science, math, and reading skills – all fundamental skills required to support technical trades. If it is true that 40% of Wyoming high school graduates must take remedial courses in these areas at the community college and, if it is true that there is a lack of skill and/or motivation to learn these skills, then – perhaps – we should be looking at the wider perspective of what education and its practices are. If one cannot practically apply theory, the theory isn't of much use.

The University of Wyoming's CAECM department has decided to allow a high school student, Mr. Beckett Robinson, a freshman at Rawlins High School in Rawlins, Wyoming to enroll in its workforce training module series this past spring to learn more about the fastest growing industry in Wyoming.

Although the workforce training program was initially established for industry professionals, when Beckett heard of the opportunity he quickly took it up. This opportunity came by way of the Carbon County Higher Education Center in Rawlins. An outreach facility that is a part of the Western Wyoming Community College in Rock Springs, Wyoming, this partnership is providing a way for students like Beckett to find out what they're good at and what motivates them to keep moving.

Beckett states that, "I've always enjoyed working with my hands, but this course helped me to realize that I have opportunities to earn a living that way." When asked what the most interesting part of the course was (even if he didn't like it), he responded, "that was learning about blueprints and finding out that there are differences."

He even went so far as to talk to some construction workers who told him that being able to read blueprints is a very important skill. What he didn't like about it was the amount of math that is required to develop and execute blueprints. Perhaps he will be more diligent in his future math classes?

When asked what he is most proud of, he stated that, "earning two certificates of completion from the CAECM department that can be added to my skills portfolio for future employment."

He developed a sense of confidence during this time and believes that every high school student should take up an opportunity to gain practical experience, to learn what is possible, and to discover oneself.

While he knew that the University of Wyoming is a good school, he did not realize what kinds of future work prospects it offers.

Now, let's find him a scholarship!