Youth Apprenticeship expands horizons

BY DONNA SCHULZ • FOR THE WAUSAU DAILY HERALD • JANUARY 14, 2011

More than 180 high school juniors and seniors are making a difference quietly in communities throughout north-central Wisconsin. They've made the commitment, supported by their parents, teachers and business leaders from more than 123 local employers, to participate in Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship Program.

The Youth Apprenticeship Program is a rigorous one- or two-year statewide program that combines academic and technical instruction with mentored, paid, on-the-job learning. YAs work a minimum of 450 hours at their worksites each year of their program while taking related high school or college classes. After meeting the competencies associated with their apprenticeship program, they receive a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency from the Department of Workforce Development that is recognized by colleges and businesses across the country.

It's quite a commitment for all parties involved, so why do they do it?

Students benefit from a real-world connection between education and employment. Learning from skilled professionals increases their career awareness and improves future employability, whether they're going on to school or moving directly into the workforce.

"Being a YA has really opened my eyes. I would not know the things I do now if it were not for my job at the bank. Banking is not just about products and customer service; it teaches you something beyond that. The things I have learned through YA have greatly affected how I think and who I am today," said Dao Chang, a senior at Wausau East High School.

Employers have the opportunity to shape the quality of their local workforce, benefiting the entire community, and they get direct access to a pipeline of skilled workers to help grow their business. Brickner's Park City in Merrill has participated in the YA program for 15 years. This year the car dealer hired two apprentices.

"In just three months, these young men have acquired the skills necessary to become an asset to my dealership," said Jim Brickner, vice president of Park City. "It's much less expensive to grow your employee base from a program such as this, and it's very rewarding to see these young men and women become successful."

Three of Brickner's current full-time employees were hired as YAs and have a combined 40 years experience working for the dealership.

Parents understand that an apprenticeship will help make their child's transition into the adult world a much smoother ride, regardless of whether college or work is on the horizon, and teachers are thrilled to see students succeed, to watch as they realize that all those years in the classroom did have a purpose, that there is something to the idea that learning lasts a lifetime.

The YA program covers a broad spectrum of areas from agriculture to welding (see sidebar). Employers interested in hiring a YA can contact their local high school or e-mail me at schulzd@ntc.edu.

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YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP FROM A TO Z

Accounting
Architecture
Auto collision
Auto technician
Banking
Crops
Drafting and design
Engineering
Finance
Floral
Graphic arts
Greenhouse
Health information management
Hospitality
Insurance
Landscaping
Large animal/herd
Lodging
Logistics/supply chain
Manufacturing
Mechanical design
Network systems
Nursing assistant
Pharmacy technician
Printing
Programming and software development
Restaurant
Small animal/vet assistant
Travel and tourism
Veterinary assistant
Web and digital communications
Welding