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Mentor Program Developing Future Construction Trades Workforce

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As the workforce of the architecture, construction and engineering industries ages and shrinks with each passing year, those responsible for developing and recruiting workers are making their programming greener to match the next generation's priorities.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Students in an ACE Mentor Program in Waterbury get some hands-on heavy equipment training under the watchful eye of Dave D'Ostilio, pictured at right rear, of Operating Engineers Local 478 in Meriden.

The ACE Mentor Program in Connecticut will partner with the U.S. Green Building Council in the fall to offer its 150-250 yearly high school participants a chance to earn their LEED professional certification.

“It is great the students are requesting that,” said Maria Loitz, president of ACE Mentor Program of Connecticut. “The students keep looking for ways to make their projects greener.”

Industries are making greater attempts to reach out to the future employees at an early age, typically while they are still in high school. By making contact before they graduate, workforce development groups break down negative perceptions, demystify career possibilities, and find and encourage talented people through competitions and scholarships.

“Career aspirations start at a young age,” said Jenny Slade, spokeswoman for the National Center for Women & Information Technology. “The younger you can reach the

developing workforce, the better chance you have of turning them into future employees.”

The huge workforce gap in the architecture, construction and engineering industries — which comprise ACE — is widening with the recession. The construction industry alone anticipates a 2 million employee shortage by 2016 as five workers reach retirement age for every one employee entering the industry.

With the recession over the past two years, more people have been laid off or retired early from the ACE industries, and since jobs aren’t readily available, potential architects and engineers are choosing different courses of study at colleges and universities, said Pamela Mullender, president and CEO of the national ACE Mentor Program.

“We know there will be jobs once this slowdown passes,” Mullender said. “We use the ACE Mentor Program to get them excited about jobs in the industry.”

Started in 1995 in New York City, ACE first expanded into Connecticut in 1998 with a Stamford location, which then became the headquarters of the organization when it went national in 2002. Today, it serves more than 12,000 high school students in 36 states, including five Connecticut chapters in Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, Bridgeport/Stratford and Stamford.

The 501(c)3 organization is supported by companies in the three industries and runs day-to-day operations with volunteers in those professions. Hartford-based United Technologies Corp. is a major national sponsor.

Local chapters, which meet 15 times per school year, bring area professionals to talk with the students about the ACE industries and how to achieve various positions. In addition, students teams are drawn together to develop mock projects encompassing the components of architecture, engineering and construction.

“It offers an opportunity for kids in high school to be exposed to an industry that they might not hear that much about,” said John Scheib, chairman of the ACE Hartford chapter. “This offers an opportunity to see an end goal.”

The Hartford chapter registered 60 students this past school year, and 45 completed the program. Both are record highs in the chapter’s nine years.

According to the national program’s own study of its effectiveness released June 17, ACE participants graduate at a higher rate and go onto college than non-ACE participants. They also create a more even ethnic and gender mix in the architectural and engineering studies.

“We are encouraging both the young women and the minorities,” said Verzem Poveromo, coordinator of the ACE Waterbury chapter. “Diversity is a big issue in the industry.”

The information technology industry also suffers from a lack of diversity, particularly with women. The National Center for Women & Information Technology has found that engaging girls at a young age keeps them interested in core subjects such as math and grows their confidence in needed skill sets.

NCWIT still must fight off negative perceptions about information technology employees and does so by having school-age girls talk with people in IT's fields.

"There is still the perception of computer scientists as people who work alone in a dark room somewhere," Slade said. "That is particularly harmful among girls and women."

The negative perceptions in the construction industry start with the notion that it is manual labor for less educated people. This image problem has led the industry to undertake initiatives to get young people to enter trades such as electrical or plumbing, or simply realize the complexity of a modern building, said William Cianci, executive director of the Construction Institute, based out of the University of Hartford.

"People aren't going into it," Cianci said. "It doesn't have the cache of other industries. It isn't sexy."

To keep talented young people in on ACE career tracts, the organization hands out national, state and local scholarships to graduates. More than \$9 million in scholarships have been given out nationally.

This school year, Connecticut ACE gave out \$20,000 in scholarships, giving the organization a total of \$325,000 since 1998. Five students from the Hartford chapter received local scholarships, and one received a state scholarship.