

ACE works to attract new generation of construction workers

azbigmedia.com/ace-works-to-attract-new-generation-of-construction-workers

December 5, 2018



Above: During a major university hospital construction tour, students were able to to speak with workers and project managers. [Real Estate](#) | 6 Dec | [TaMeia Murphy](#)

Real estate demand and prices in Arizona have risen once again to their peak at the top of the housing market over a decade ago, according to Arizona Real Estate Notebook. While this may seem promising, some industry professionals worry as they struggle to find and retain laborers.

Arizona is suffering, in multiple industries, from a demand for labor in construction, engineering and architectural industries stemming from the Recession, but several Valley companies are working together to change this.

“We should’ve been working on this labor shortage about five to 10 years ago,” president, CEO and owner of DP Electric, Dan Puente said. “It’s unfortunate and it’s going to be tough.”

To Puente, perhaps the largest contributing factor causing detriment is that there seem to be so few newcomers entering the trades.

“The trades desperately need an influx of young folks,” Puente said. “A lot of high school kids are programmed that they go right into college and then from college they go get a job.”

It was projected that nearly 20 million students would attend universities starting this past fall 2018 semester, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that nearly 67 percent of high school graduates were enrolled in college as of October 2017.

Puente said he thinks if students considered trade and technical schools to be on the same caliber as four-year universities, the shortage could decrease exponentially. Technical and vocational colleges do not promise the same hefty price tag as universities and programs can sometimes be completed in half the time.

He said he believes the industry is not appealing to the youth due to unflattering perceptions about the job of a construction worker.

“I think they always kind of stereotype construction workers as guys who are tatted up and barely got out of high school. That’s not necessarily what parents want for their kids,” Puente said.

In addition to owning and operating DP Electric, Puente is chairman of the board at the Phoenix chapter of ACE Mentor Program. The ACE Mentor Program of America is a national, non-profit organization focused on educating kids, primarily high school aged, about the trades. ACE stands for Architecture, Construction and Engineering.

The program typically runs for most of the school year with weekly sessions during which kids participate in activities teaching them about different aspects of construction – placing more emphasis on design in the past – as well as visiting vocational schools and construction sites.

“I do think that ACE certainly has an influence into our students choosing to go down the apprenticeship path or into a trade as a result of being a part of the program,” said Erica Fisher, program committee chair on the board of the Phoenix affiliate. “We started out, with our program, a little more design heavy and we’ve made a conscious effort the last several years to integrate the trades.”

The local chapter works closely with three valley high schools: Metro Tech High School, East Valley Institute of Technology (EVIT), and Moon Valley High School. Fisher oversees these three sites by setting up the weekly sessions, securing guest speakers, and assigning mentors from local companies who will work closely with groups of students.

Fisher became involved with ACE through her job at SmithGroup, a Michigan based architectural and engineering firm with an office in Downtown Phoenix. She said SmithGroup emphasizes community service involvement for its employees and was promoting the ACE

Mentor program at the time she began working there. Fisher is beginning her ninth year at both SmithGroup and ACE, and her third as program chair on the board at ACE.

“You start off and the students are pretty timid. I think it can be overwhelming. We try to pair them up with mentors who give them consistent mentorship,” Fisher said. “You can see how much they mature and how comfortable they get talking to you.”

Students are given a design project which they present at the end of the year in a showcase. Fisher said how exciting and rewarding it feels watching students present their designs and appear enthusiastic about work in the trades.

Kurt Kindermann, a structural engineer at Meyer Borgman and Johnson and recruitment chair on the local board at ACE, said he shares similar feelings of pride about the work ACE does for students.

“The best thing we can pass along to young people is the passion to pursue a career choice, and then they can modify their direction down the road,” Kindermann said. “It’s important to start somewhere – wherever they have the ability to.”

Kindermann also said he believes more youth are coming to the trades largely because of this program and that he has seen many students graduate the program and go on to enter the industry.

“One of our students from the welding program last year at EVIT is now working for one of the companies involved with [mentoring for] the program,” he said.

ACE operates nationally with chapters in 37 states nationally, as well as in the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, according to an ACE fact sheet. It has 9,000 students involved across all its affiliates and sees three-fourths of them on to college programs or technical training programs for construction engineering or architecture.

ACE in Phoenix also wants to branch out and partner with more public high schools rather than solely focusing on technical institutions, Moon Valley being the first of this venture, according to Kindermann.

“We’re interested in doing it in other districts. We also know Chandler Unified High School District is interested in starting on,” he said. “There’s a lot of interest. We’re just trying to manage that and grow while making sure we do it well and have representation within our organization to continue the program.”

More than just filling the labor gaps, the organization seeks to help young students find meaningful opportunities for the future before the student must search for themselves.

“I’ve had students that I’ve mentored that have gone off to college and come back, and then we’ve been able to hire them for an internship or we’ve been able to hire them full time,” Fisher said.

The most influential thing ACE does for its students, according to Fisher, is allowing them to

make lifelong industry connections while still in high school.

“Our industry is so small so the connections they’re making now stick with them,” she said. “That’s why we see students a few years later doing an internship or moving around for different companies. To me, that is really invaluable.”

Puente said he feels that too many students enter colleges or universities to find out what career path they would like to take, all the while racking up debt. Mentoring programs like ACE aim to amend this problem so that students know the full extent of their options.

“They have to make this pretty daunting decision early in their life so the more information we can give them the better,” Fisher said.

She said she especially admires ACE for its ability to present young people with positive role models with whom they can identify.

“We have a fair amount of construction students who are female and a lot of industry leaders who are also female,” Fisher said. “For them to be able to see these women in the construction industry, it empowers them to say, ‘that could be me in 10 years.’”

According to Fisher and Kindermann, ACE will continue its work in the valley while hopefully reaching more schools, acquiring more mentors aligned with more companies, and widening the variety of experience and intelligence it offers.

“I think a lot of the students in these programs know, ‘maybe I’m interested in mechanical engineering,’ but they don’t know what that means or really even understand all those trades,” Fisher said. “The beauty of the program is that I think it opens [students] up to other opportunities that maybe they just weren’t aware of.”