Workforce Learning Summit Innovation/Best Practice

Isothermal Community College

Workforce Enhancement through Targeted Outreach to Schools

In an effort to enhance the workforce of Rutherford and Polk counties, Isothermal is using a comprehensive approach to proactively engage students in the public schools, the early high schools, the charter and private schools, and homeschooled. The college is accomplishing this through a series of thoughtful, planned interactive events that bring students to the campus on multiple occasions starting as early as elementary school for events that could last an afternoon or a week. The feedback received from educators, workforce and non-profit partners, and students indicates these activities are impacting the area’s labor pool in many positive ways.

DETAILS

For more than a decade, Isothermal Community College has trained thousands of displaced workers as the service area’s many textile and traditional manufacturing jobs have been lost. Those workers have come to Isothermal seeking new skills for new jobs. Many have gained degrees here and continued at four-year institutions. Many found employment after learning proficiency in a new trade through one of the college’s many short-term certification programs. A mounting concern, however, has been that the pool of qualified workers in the trades and other areas is drying up as the number of displaced workers diminishes. Compounding that concern is the fact that many of the recent high school graduates who, for whatever reason, don’t consider themselves “college material” are facing the reality that the jobs of today require many skills beyond what they have gained so far.

To address the reality that college and some form of specific skills training or certification is critical in building an effective workforce, Isothermal has worked with various partners to actively engage school-aged students. These efforts bring students to Isothermal facilities to show them myriad ways to get excited about their futures with the central theme that college success is an attainable necessity. Discussion of soft skills and teamwork is a priority. These events, activities and programs primarily include the College and Career 101 Conference, the Isothermal Science & Technology Expo, the New Century Scholars Program, JumpStart, Careers In Construction Day, Health Sciences Symposium and Career Exploration Camp.

For the purpose of this best practice exercise, we focus on the College and Career 101 Conference. The idea was developed by a planning team with staff from Isothermal, Rutherford County Schools and the Robert and Janice McNair Educational Foundation, which has the mission of increasing college attendance and success among RCS students. Two tracks were developed: one for college-bound seniors; another for career-bound seniors. The college-bound group learned about advising, financial aid, student success skills for navigating the college experience and advice from students who are finishing their first year in college. Students who plan to enter the workforce or the military learned about job seeking skills, finances and short-term (less than two-year) training opportunities. Examples of those included CRC Work Keys, BLET, EMT, Nurse Aid, Massage Therapy, Medical Coding and Billing, Fire and Rescue, and Machining.
The career-track students heard from a panel of human resources professionals from local employers including Timken, Valley Fine Foods and Google about what they expect from someone whom they might hire. A retired HR professional provided one-on-one practice interviews with the students, giving them valuable and frank feedback.

“The conference provided these students an opportunity to explore careers that are in demand in our community and for which specific training is available at Isothermal,” said Renee Collins, Rutherford County Schools’ director of Secondary Education. “As our students interacted with ICC instructors, ICC students, and local business leaders, their eyes were opened to promising possibilities for their futures.” Monica Lee, director of the McNair Foundation, says that “providing this conference in collaboration with Rutherford County Schools and Isothermal Community College maximized the impact for our students’ career and college readiness which translates to increased success for their future.” The workforce partners involved in the conference agreed it was a success. “The conference was very worthwhile for us,” said Scott Webber, human resources administrator for Valley Fine Foods in Forest City. “The students we were able to speak with are our future workforce. We were able to share what kinds of skills and attributes we look for in an employee. We were able to tell them specifically about what kinds of jobs opportunities we have available at Valley Fine Foods. You never know, I hope we hire some of those students one day.”

We believe it is important to host students on our campus at events like College and Career 101 in order to build memories that spark passions. This is an approach that goes far beyond participation in a college fair and leaving a few brochures in a guidance office.

Implementation began in July 2011.

**Partner Type(s):**
- Business/Industry (direct involvement)
- Public Schools
- Nonprofit organization(s)

**Impact/Outcomes**
Isothermal’s headcount of high school students in curriculum programs has increased from 485 in Fall 2009 to 744 in Fall 2013, a jump of 53.4 percent. During this same period, the college’s total headcount has dropped from 2,618 to 2,369, a decrease of approximately 9.5 percent. The number of first-year enrollees who are identified as recent high school graduates (approx. 300) has remained relatively static during that period, which is one of the factors the College and Career 101 Conference is designed to address. Data will be collected on that as registration for Fall 2014 continues.

**Funding Sources**
The funding sources for each of these outreach efforts vary. Funding sources include in-kind support from the college and its school partners along with sponsorships and grant support.

**REFLECTIONS**

**Innovation or Best Practice**
The practice of actively engaging our school-aged students with events like College and Career 101 Conference is a best practice because it enhances both college attendance and the quality of recent graduates entering our workforce.
Lessons Learned
One lesson learned is the importance of delivering information directly from industry partners and from college students. We have found that the information from these individuals is more likely to get the attention of high school students. Also, delivering this information at a time when most high school students are thinking about their transition to college or the workforce. The timing of this conference was designed to occur in the spring of the senior year. At this point most high school students have applied for college and are considering their employment options. The information shared is more relevant at this point in their lives than it might be during their junior year. Another important lesson is the need for this program to be incorporated into a larger partnership with the public school system; specifically a partnership that focuses on talking with students about college early and often. Our focus begins in the middle school years and includes meaningful experiences throughout their middle school and high school experience. Our goal is to build a connection and a relationship with these students before they enter college.

Scalability
A college that wanted to try a specific strategy like the College and Career 101 Conference could start with a smaller group, i.e., one high school or one track of students. A college might also choose to focus the agenda of a conference on one particular area of the college like computer technology or engineering.

RESOURCES

Workforce Learning Summit Presenters
Dr. Kim Gold, Vice President of Academic and Student Services and Institutional Assessment, Isothermal Community College
Mr. Mike Gavin, Director of Marketing and Community Relations, Isothermal Community College

Links
College and Career 101

Isothermal Science and Technology Expo

Careers in Construction Day
http://www.thedigitalcourier.com/news/education/x1866988554/Learning-the-trade

New Century Scholars

Discover Your Rhythm

For further information
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