

Work-based Learning

By Betsy Xanthis

Orange-Ulster (OU) BOCES Career & Technical Education Center, located in Goshen, New York, is proud of its long-standing practice of providing students opportunities for real-world learning by partnering with an ever-evolving spectrum of local businesses and industries in the mid-Hudson region. Hundreds of local businesses have opened their doors for CTE students to participate in work-based learning (WBL) since the inception of the program in the late 80's. More than 500 students are placed each year in businesses such as Toyota, Holiday Inn and Comfort Inn, as well as the State University of New York (SUNY) Orange, the Orange County Sheriff's Office, and Elant, Inc., a health care provider. Additionally, myriad smaller businesses in the area have signed on to help train the next generation's workforce.

In order to graduate, all CTE students are required to participate in classroom theory, clinical rotations, classroom labs and shadowing experiences; however, the students chosen for work-based learning experiences further enrich their education by working in actual business settings. Students are chosen for WBL opportunities based on criteria such as attendance, grades, teacher recommendation and skill level within their curriculum.

Looking Into the Future

The application of relevant and competitive preparation for college and careers through CTE is currently in the forefront of educational discussions nationwide. The focus of effective CTE should include work-based educational programs, where students apply classroom training in real-world settings. Working outside the classroom immerses students in hands-on, project-based work experiences that align with industry trends and standards. The result is a meaningful connection between concept and application that students take with them into postsecondary education or the workforce.

Work-based learning can provide a direct and often lucrative path into a trade right out of high school, and can also significantly enhance post-graduate preparation for entry into such fields as health sciences, engineering and technology. Students become fully engaged in learning when they understand that the learning will result in a tangible outcome.

Our Program

The success of OU BOCES CTE's WBL program stems from a 25-year tradition of nurturing meaningful connections and collaborations with business and industry through a CTE Advisory Board, made up of local business people, and Career Craft Consultant Committees. Each committee is made up of business and industry partners, specific to a career cluster, who meet at least twice a year to inform CTE educators on new career pathways, current industry trends and the latest technologies, as well as assess outdated practices and equipment.

For example, on the Automotive Committee's recommendation, the CTE Collision Repair Technology program revamped its system to accommodate today's prevailing practice of using water-based paint for auto body repair. Also, the Engineering Career Craft Consultant Committee encouraged the CAD program to incorporate a three-dimensional printer into the classroom so that students could brainstorm, create and then print their prototypes—just as they would do in the workplace. The Advisory Board and Career Craft Consultant Committees enable CTE students to build meaningful networks and capitalize on local resources and expertise.

Networking the Key

The OU BOCES CTE division cultivates its relationships almost daily with industry partners in the region. OU BOCES Work-based Learning Coordinator Patricia Trask-Huggins stated, "I'm passionate about the Work-based Learning program;

it is my priority 24-7. Wherever I go, every day, I'm looking for locations and opportunities for student placement. I keep business cards handy, and whenever I visit a business, doctor's office, hair salon, etc., I introduce myself and give them my information. I also peruse ads in the newspaper and listen to the radio for additional placement opportunities."

Trask-Huggins believes that two important components of successful work-based learning experiences are face-to-face networking and keeping an open mind. She stated, "I constantly interface with participating businesses to nurture the relationships I have already established, and I'm always working to find new locations for student placement."

She continued, "Of course, a first impression has a big impact on my pursuing a possible location, and feedback from locals who know the business, or even a search on the internet, gives me valuable background information in terms of whether a business is acceptable. I can tell almost immediately if a business is suitable, and my initial encounter is essential to determining whether I will pursue a company for work-based learning."

Student opinion also plays a role in choosing a location. "Often, the suggestions for work-based learning placements come from the students themselves, who may already be working part-time in the field they are pursuing," she said.

In her experience, another extremely important component for the success of the program is a strong commitment from the administration, teachers and students. A "culture of cooperation" within the school is paramount, she said. "It's equally important for teachers not only to buy in to the idea of their students going out into the workplace, but also to network in their communities."

Student input is critical to the success of the program, as well. They need to communicate to their peers that participating in a work-based opportunity is a great experience—one that is positive and meaningful, she noted. This supportive

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The Key to Connecting Students to the World of Work

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Building a Work-based Learning Program

1. Establish a location. Constantly look for potential work sites. Peruse the newspaper or listen to the radio for ideas. Ask your students for ideas. They often have a location in mind or are already working at a particular location part-time.
 2. Formulate a training plan for each student. This plan should include student and employer demographics, a site schedule, specific objectives, and criteria for student evaluation.
 3. Develop a skills checklist with student/program objectives.
- This list should be based on the curriculum and national standards and include an employability profile of soft and hard skills students should become proficient in.
4. Conduct safety training before placement. This training ensures that students learn to become part of a culture where safe and healthy work habits are second nature.
 5. Evaluate the WBL experience. Talk to students and employers to determine what worked and what did not.

environment leads to a “cycle of success,” where students are engaged and learning is relevant, and the feedback in school and the business community is positive. “When all that happens, the program flourishes,” she emphasized.

Development of Soft Skills

Once a location is established, a training plan for the student is formulated, including demographics from the student and the workplace, a site schedule, specific objectives and a checklist of hard and soft skills a student should be working on, as well as criteria for student evaluation. The checklist of skills is based on the particular curriculum and national standards. Each program has an employability profile of skills students should become proficient in, as well as essential soft skills, including personality traits and work ethic. Trask-Huggins adapted the New York State checklist, which focuses on soft skills. She stated, “The teachers and I observe students’ inherent personality traits, such as communication skills, language, positive demeanor, work ethic, dependability, conscientiousness and personal habits, as prerequisites for working in a professional

work environment. A young person’s soft skills, particularly when working in organizations that deal in face-to-face customer service, are also modeled from the adult mentors in the workplace, so the environment of the workplace is also taken into account before placing a student.”

Trask-Huggins stated that soft skills are a crucial complement to the ‘hard’ skills that a student learns in school and on the job. “In fact, in many of today’s organizations, the soft skills that an employee brings to the job may be more important than occupational skills.”

The central premise for placing CTE students in the workplace is to establish a direct connection between school and work, explore career pathways from a realistic perspective, participate in authentic job-related tasks, cultivate professional contacts, improve post-graduate employment opportunities and motivate students to appreciate the value of postsecondary education in order to realize their professional goals. “CTE, enhanced by work-based learning, enables students to get a jump-start on their careers by teaching them specific skills necessary for specialized fields,” she said.

Comments from students working within the scope of the Cosmetology program sum it up best: “Work-based learning enhanced my experience because I was actually working in the environment I want to be part of in my future,” said Ally G.

According to Ashley B., another student in the program, “Work-based learning is fun, and if a student is given the chance, she should do it. It helps with my communication skills and makes the idea of working out in the real world easier.”

Safety First

One of the priorities of the OU BOCES CTE Work-based Learning program is teaching the participants about safety in the workplace *before* they are placed. The training ensures that students learn to become part of a culture where safe and healthy work habits are second nature. And not only are the students trained in safety protocols and procedures, but the work site is also evaluated for safe practices prior to student placement. In the 2013–2014 school year, Trask-Huggins provided general health and safety instruction to more than 600 students using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth@Work: Talking Safety curriculum (www.cdc.gov/niosh/talkingsafety/).

Bright Futures

Jodie Yankanin, OU BOCES CTE director, is wholly invested in the work-based learning opportunities provided for the students. “Students learn how to apply what they are learning in the classroom through relevant work-based learning opportunities in their own communities. These experiences prepare them to be contributing members of society as they transition into the world of work and post-secondary education. Work-based learning not only benefits students, but also the businesses where these students work and the communities they live in,” she said.

Bryan Gingold, parts and service director at a local car dealership, is a long-time supporter of OU BOCES CTE Center’s WBL program. “It’s been a pleasure having the students come to our facility to work with the staff. We’ve watched them grow as students,

and some have returned after college to become part of our team. The program is a great stepping stone to help students leap into their career.” Employers who provide real-world learning opportunities for students reap the benefits of a knowledgeable and motivated potential future workforce.

Students often bring enthusiasm and a fresh perspective on current practices in work-based settings. For example, 19 of the school’s engineering students were invited by Belmay, Inc., a fragrance manufacturer in Chester, New York, to submit their concepts and designs for developing efficiency in barcode implementation, automated weight control, plant layout and factory software automation. The students were divided into four teams, and using their creativity, knowledge and skills developed prototypes that they presented to a panel of Belmay’s corporate management. The panel selected one of the designs and implemented it. The students undertook a meaningful challenge that required not

only their technical skills as future engineers, but also their presentation skills in pitching their concepts to management.

Making the Case for Work-based Learning

A healthy economy is built with a skilled workforce. A strong knowledge base that encompasses not only the hard skills learned in the classroom, but also real-world work experience, is essential for the success of the next generation of workers. Work-based learning enables students to hone technical and creative skills, as well as develop a strong work ethic, flexibility, reliability and resourcefulness. It is a powerful educational tool that connects rigorous academics with realistic work experiences to make sure students recognize the relevance of their high school education to their futures, both in college and the workplace. Thus, implementing and sustaining a viable work-based learning program

requires that everyone—CTE administrators, teachers, students and advisory board members—stay open-minded and aware of any potential opportunity for students to work in real-world settings.

A work-based learning program requires collaboration, networking and keeping open lines of communication between schools and the members of the business community. It means CTE staff and students are the ambassadors who reach out personally and pave the way to make the ties stronger. Young people being educated in the 21st century deserve no less than to be fully prepared for tomorrow’s job market, and CTE, coupled with work-based learning opportunities, gives them a head-start for their entry into competitive, marketable and satisfying career pathways. **Tech**

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