



DEVELOPING CAREER PATHWAYS THAT WORK:

A Conversation with Chris Ohshita



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ogether, two high-desert institutions have developed a solution to a problem many career and technical education (CTE) programs and administrators are facing: how to encourage and sustain young people's interest in CTE

fields. In Victorville, California, and for Chris Ohshita, director and department chair of the Victor Valley College (VVC) Aviation maintenance technology program, the answer is a career pathway that works.

Ohshita holds a master of science in aeronautics from Florida's Embry-Riddle University, as well as Aviation Maintenance Professional (AMP) and Inspection Authorization (IA) certifications sponsored by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). He came to VVC "just shy of five years ago" with a vision, and he's seen that vision become reality with the support of a cooperative partnership between VVC and the neighboring aircraft industry services provider, ComAv Integrated Solutions.

"We built a relationship with the school over time," said Donald Dombrowski, director of quality assurance/chief inspector at ComAv. "As our company continues to grow, and the school starts to grow, we have progressed together. We put together [the aviation pathways] program to, not only, recruit the graduates from the school but also to help the school attract more students."

Techniques Managing Editor Lia Milgram sat down with Ohshita recently to discuss the genesis of his pathways program; how its implementation has affected student enrollment, retention and the workforce; and where he hopes it'll go from here.

Lia Milgram: When you came to Victor Valley College, what did you hope to accomplish?

Chris Ohshita: I wanted to create a pathways program for high school students to explore aviation, and to see if this is a career that they might enjoy. So we started meeting with high schools

very early on and in the process and we talked about what would be feasible: "How would this work?"

Victor Valley College already had a very loose agreement with Excelsior Charter School to train some of their students on a part-time basis. So they would meet at our school four days a week from 1–3 p.m. and they would take AMP classes.

One of the things we found is that a lot of the high school students weren't sure if aviation was what they wanted to pursue. And so we thought, "What if we create a survey course?" The survey course would be an introduction to aviation maintenance. And other aspects of aviation, too, but the primary focus was to be aviation maintenance.

We developed the survey course and we met with various high schools in our region to explain what the course was about. It would be a four-unit college credit course for high school students, which would allow them to explore [aviation] for a semester, and to see if it would be a good fit for them, without having to make the two-year commitment to a full-blown, technical career training program like ours.

LM: How have you found the program to be successful?

CO: We've been doing this for about a year and a half now, and it seems to be successful. We have run four academies through, 75–100 students, and so far — out of that 100, we've probably lost only about 15 students — half of them have already graduated and are moving on into aviation careers. They're being hired by our local employers in the high desert. The program has proven very successful.

We have three partner high schools right now: Excelsior Charter School and Victor Valley High School, both in Victorville, CA, and then we have the high school students from the Snowline Joint Unified School District. It's growing; we're hoping to get more high schools involved, but we wanted to start with the three and work out all the bugs.

LM: What efforts have you undertaken, particularly, to get and keep students interested in aviation pathways?

CO: We have what's called a bridge counseling program. A college counselor goes out to the high schools and introduces various program. What we have to offer them is an interactive tour. We bring in high school students throughout the year and we give them a 20-minute training session, how to use the various hand tools, and then we put them to work. We show them and say, "This is a regular day at this kind of school. This is what you're going to be doing."

The hands-on part of it really, really resonates with the students. They say, "Wow! This is cool! I didn't realize math could be applied in this way." You know, because they have to use mathematics to lay out some of the rivet patterns.

We tell them that it's a two-year, FAA-approved program, and that they have to complete so many training hours before they can become licensed and certified. And at the end they'll ask, "Where do I sign up?" The hands-on part is what really keeps them motivated. They're really excited by that, and we are usually able to capture the senior classes at these high schools.

We set it up in such a way that we get them right around the end of May and June, right when they're about to graduate, so we're able to transition them right out of high school and into our summer program. It's seamless. And I think that's one of the more successful aspects of our recruiting. It doesn't allow them to wander around and get lost in the mix. We have created a structure, a pathway for them to follow.

LM: What kinds of things are they doing after leaving the program?

CO: Most of the students in our program get hired by three major companies in our area: ComAv, Northrop Grumman and General Atomics. ComAv is located right next door to us, and they recruit our students while they're still in the program. They bring them on as junior mechanics or interns, if you will, and they allow them

to grow with the company. So that, again, is easing the transition between school and the workforce. Students have a part-time, or sometimes even a full-time job with ComAv while they're going to school. They're directly linked with industry there. What they're talking about in the classroom is what they're doing at work. That keeps them motivated as far as, "This is actually useful." They can see the link there.

After they graduate our program, a lot of students stay with ComAv to build their experience and skill set. A lot of our students are going on to General Atomics working on unmanned vehicle platforms. And they also move on to Northrop Grumman, the manufacturing giant that makes military applications, jets: They're hiring a lot of people. Some even go on to finish or advance their degrees. A couple of our students have scholarships with NASA, where they're working on a higher degree in physics and aeronautical engineering.

For the most part, our students go out and start working in the industry.

LM: How did the partnership with Victor Valley College and ComAv come about?

CO: Initially it was an informal visit from their human resources representative; they said, "We're looking for five or six people. Can you recommend some good folks?" And we said, "Sure!" We sent them 10 or 15 names, and those students really worked out well for ComAv's needs.

Now we have this great working relationship, and it all started as neighbors just helping each other out. In recent years, ComAv was able to secure a number of different contracts with various airlines and it created a workflow shortage. And from that workflow shortage, a huge demand for passionate, qualified students-turned-employees. Ever since then we've been chipping away and giving them our best. And, in turn, they're hiring our students right out of the program, even while they're still in school. It's really been a unique and cool opportunity for our students and our program.

LM: What do you hope for the future of the program? What are your goals? What are your plans?

CO: Our vision is to create an aviation center. That would be the ideal state. It wouldn't just be aircraft maintenance; the program would include pilot training, advanced composites, avionics, air traffic control: an all-around aviation center. I'd like to see our program create a bachelor's degree offering in a junior college setting. I think that's the next step. I want to see our program grow, and grow, and grow. I think we have the demand and the unique opportunity in our local area to support that. Baby steps.

We are working to develop an advanced composites program to meet the needs of the industry here; there is a strong demand for composites technicians, and there is really no school in our immediate area that provides that training. From there, I think the next step is to create an avionics program. And then into pilot training. Then I think we'll have enough diversity that we could probably start a degree program. California is toying with the idea of using two-year junior colleges to issue four-year bachelor's degrees in disciplines that are nontraditional, like aviation maintenance. So I think that's where we're headed. I hope to see this done in the next five to 10 years. That's the big vision. And I think we're going to get there.

LM: What community outreach efforts are ongoing?

CO: The biggest outreach program we do is with the high schools. We offer our interactive tours lasting a day or half a day. On the community level, we work all of the air shows. Apple Valley. Big Bear. These communities have big air shows and we go to those. We go to community job fairs to recruit there. We try to help out where we can.

We really want to let people know that we're out here, and we want to help you devise a career in aviation. That's the message we're trying to push and it seems to be working. ■