

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

MEANS OPPORTUNITY:
INFLUENCING INSTRUCTION AT
OCCUPATIONAL COLLEGES

By Timothy Mosterdyke

Harvard's 2011 "Pathways to Prosperity" report states: "College for All" might be the mantra, but the hard reality is that fewer than one in three young people ever achieve the dream."¹ It is becoming increasingly evident that some type of postsecondary training and credentialing is necessary in today's job market, according to the report. As a means of providing one such option in the Pacific Northwest, the Northwest College of Construction (NWCOC) in Portland, Oregon, will be expanding its program offerings to include a Residential Carpentry Certification program in fall 2014 to complement the registered apprenticeship programs, safety, and construction management programs already in place.

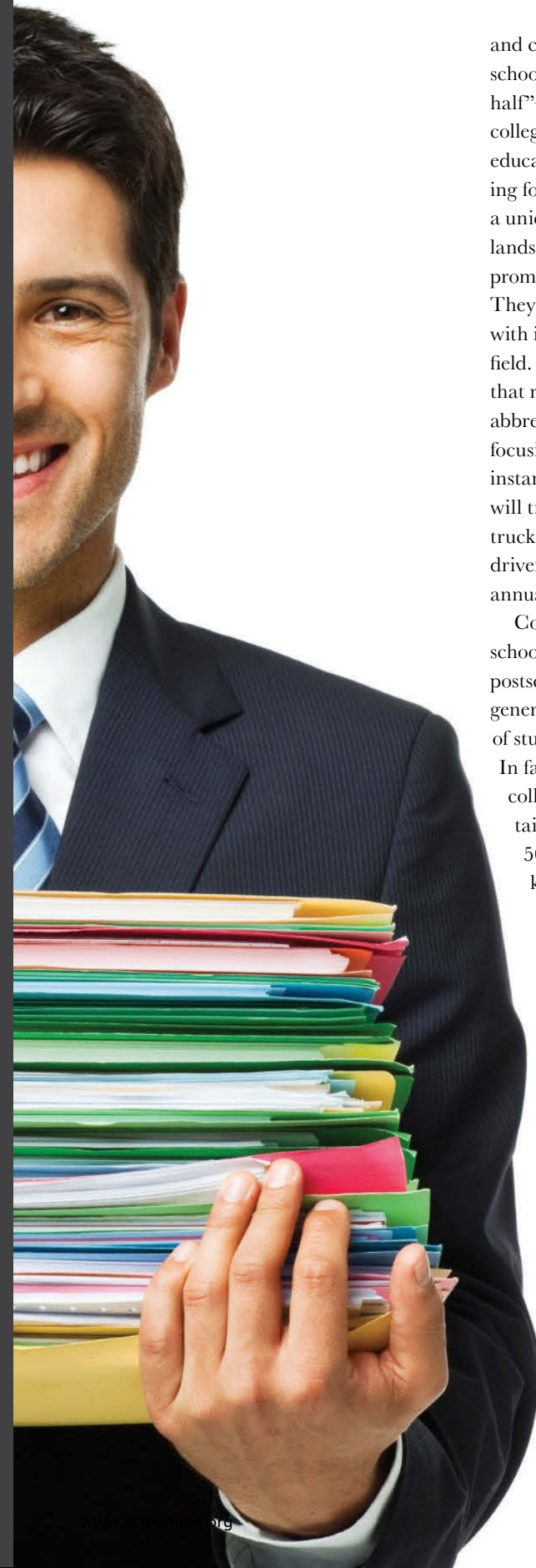
The balance of this article highlights the key to the school's success, its instructors and the framework we have designed to assist them in being successful in the classroom.

An Overview

Occupational colleges and apprenticeship programs offer postsecondary training



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and credentialing alternatives for high school students known as “the forgotten half”—those not pursuing the traditional college route, but still needing further education.^{2,3} These institutions, including formal apprenticeship programs, fill a unique niche in America’s educational landscape today and are gaining more prominence, legitimacy and respect. They offer focused occupational training with instructors who are veterans in the field. These schools have class schedules that respect adult students’ lifestyle needs, abbreviating time for completion by focusing on the essentials of a trade. For instance, the typical truck driving school will train a student in four weeks to be a truck driver, complete with commercial driver’s license (CDL), with an anticipated annual salary of \$49,000 per year.

Completion rates at these trade schools are remarkably higher than other postsecondary institutions, and students generally become employed in the field of study, often with help from the school. In fact, here in Oregon, licensed career colleges are required by law to maintain a 50 percent completion rate and a 50 percent placement rate in order to keep their licenses. Many schools are eligible for federal financial aid, as well. They are an excellent option for fulfilling the need for further postsecondary credentialing, often having better occupational opportunities upon completion.

And who teaches these students? Many industry experts and practitioners—whether recent college graduates, seasoned adults returning to the workforce or those with college degrees not finding work in their field of study—find themselves filling this role, with altruistic motives but usually having no formal training as to how to teach adults. While they are confident in their abilities in their trade, they are in need of training as

educators. By developing professional development programs tailored to the school’s culture and that of the industry it serves, schools have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to “train the trainer” while simultaneously achieving institutional and program goals, and building instructor confidence in the classroom.

Employers Measure Effectiveness

Occupational colleges and trade schools fulfill the role of “human resource development” for employers by providing specialized workforce training. These school-industry alliances are often cemented by industry representatives taking active roles in the schools, serving on advisory boards and committees.

At NWCOC, we view our employers as the final judge of instructional effectiveness because they see the results we produce. Along with students and staff, they play a role in our annual program evaluation process in order to determine instructional effectiveness as one of the components within a program.

Employer Mandate

In our interactions with employers we have found that they expect students to learn the trade, but they also want employees who “think outside the box.” Consequently, we have devised the following guiding principles in our program evaluation process:

1. We are training future industry leaders.
2. Employers prefer out-of-the-box thinkers, capable of self-direction and creative problem-solving.
3. Creative problem-solving is a natural phenomenon that is enhanced relative to the quality of a given curriculum and the effectiveness of instruction.
4. Effective training practices in the classroom are the responsibility of the college to promote and ensure.



▲ The instructors from the fall 2013 All-Instructor Meeting.

Creative Thinking

At NWCOC, we believe that creative thinking and worker confidence are directly tied to student training and experience. Therefore, the more effective the method of instruction, the more they comprehend. The more they comprehend about their trade—including all the technical skills and abilities needed in that trade—the more confidence they will have on the job and the better employees they will make. Consequently, we focus much of our energy on useful teaching techniques and methods for the classroom.

Effective Professional Development

Since most occupational college instructors look to the school that employs them for direction and training as an instructor, it is important that professional development seminars provided by the school model effective instruction in their presentation, as well as their content. If we expect instructors to start class on time, then professional development ought to start on time. If visual aids are viewed as useful teaching tools in the classroom, then their

use ought to be introduced and employed during teacher training. If group work is a teaching technique to be encouraged, then it should be incorporated into professional development training sessions.

In our construction management programs that have a workshop format and condensed training time, we send out “pre-homework” assignments to students that must be completed prior to their coming to class. This process maximizes the time spent preparing students for class discussion. Therefore, prior to scheduled professional development, we send out pre-homework assignments to instructors that are relevant to topics slated for discussion in professional development. These techniques are well-received by instructors—as long as they are provided ample time to complete—and lead to effective professional development sessions.

It is also helpful to develop institutional objectives for professional development. Institutional objectives are those promoted by the institution, *i.e.* the promotion and modeling of leadership skills within

each class or the use of teaching methods to promote self-directed learning.

A recent NWCOC institutional objective was stated earlier: to expand teachers’ awareness of more teaching methods and techniques to improve instructor effectiveness, leading to improved student comprehension in the classroom and more tools for creative thinking on the job. In his research on successful companies, Simon Sinek has discovered they have one thing in common: They all know “why” they do what they do, versus simply knowing “what” and “how” they do what they do.⁴ Likewise, taking the time to develop institutional objectives helps answer the question, “Why are we conducting this professional development workshop?” Developing these institutional objectives is a means of influencing the school’s culture.

Topics in Professional Development

We require our instructors to submit a syllabus for each class, as well as a lesson plan and presentation plan twice per year. Therefore, one of our initial three-hour instructor orientation workshops provides training on syllabus, lesson plan and presentation plan development (complete with electronic templates of these documents), instruction on grading-system design and an introduction to teaching methods for adults.

Other topics for professional development have included:

- Teaching tools and methods
- Knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) in the classroom
- Gender differences in learning
- Problem-based learning
- Nonverbal communication
- Adult motivation

During each training session, we reinforce our mantra: “Trainee learning begins with instructor preparation.” In fact, the Harvard Assessment Project (a survey encompassing 1,600 student interviews and 65 faculty interviews at

25 colleges and universities), as well as other leading-authority⁵ surveys of college students, identified instructor preparation as the determining factor in their approval ratings. We reinforce this concept every chance we get.

Instructor Evaluation Process

As indicated earlier, employers are the final judges of instructor and program effectiveness. That said, it is an administrative responsibility to evaluate instructors and develop a means and system for doing so.

At NWCOC, we try not to intrude in the classroom too often. We view the instructor's syllabus and lesson plan as his "business plan" for the term. Twice per term a certified master trainer, typically the instructor's supervisor, sits in on a class to observe and evaluate instructor performance. The following questions are samples of what we look at:

- Is the instructor appropriately dressed?
- Did class start on time?
- How many instruction methods and techniques were used during the class?
- Are students interactive with the instructor?
- Is the environment safe for learning?

Note: With regard to various methods and techniques being used during the class, we are able to expect more from instructors as we provide more training in these methods and techniques during professional development sessions. The jury is still out as to whether professional development actually results in improved outcomes for learners,⁶ but formal, in-class observations are one way we are able to encourage professional development's use in the classroom.

Copies of the master trainer's observations are given to instructors at the end of their class, providing them with immediate feedback. Observations, or portions there-

of, that may be deemed unsatisfactory are reviewed by administrators. Whenever possible, suggestions for improvement are documented on the observation for the instructor to review upon completion of the class. The next day, a follow-up phone call is made to the instructor to discuss the observation and clarify any suggestions offered.

Observations are also an excellent resource for identifying general areas where improvements may be made among *all* staff; and a professional development workshop may be designed to offer training in the area identified. For example, perhaps there is a lack of visual aids being offered by many instructors. A workshop may be developed around the identification and effective use of visual aids in the classroom, or a specific workshop offering training in the development and use of PowerPoint. In-class observations help administrators keep their fingers on the pulse of the operation and identify areas for improvement.

Instructor Performance Reviews

Annual performance reviews are an opportunity for both instructors and administrators to focus on instructor performance, as well as review some of the institutional objectives mentioned earlier and any progress that is being made to this end. The observation sheets, employer program evaluations, student surveys and office staff feedback are all used to evaluate instructor performance. As director of education at NWCOC, if there is a negative review of an instructor's performance, I take it as a reflection of *my* performance and that I have not provided the instructor the resources he needs. These reviews help me determine areas I can improve—whether during the orientation process or the creation of further professional development trainings.

Wrap-Up

Occupational colleges, trade schools and apprenticeship programs play a unique

part in the American educational landscape of today. Hopefully, with a commitment toward continual improvement in both administration and instruction in these institutions, they will continue to grow and provide employers with the well-qualified employees they need, and equip students with the competence and confidence necessary to obtain jobs in high-wage, high-demand fields. **I**

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ENDNOTES

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Explore More

Information about adult learners and the theory of andragogy and its application may be found in the February 2011 *Techniques* article, "Adult Learners: Considerations for Education and Training."

For an article that is influencing standards for both instructors and institutions, see "From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," by Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, first published in the November/December 1995 edition of *Change* magazine. It may be downloaded at www.ius.edu/ilte/pdf/barrtagg.pdf

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