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Connecting the dots

Career program shows students opportunities after high school

By BETHANY TABB
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Kelly Neal knows his students only pay so much attention to his words.

He reminds his pre-engineering students every day that they need an education and marketable skills to get a good career. He tells them that the opportunities are out there if they push themselves.



But when those words are coming from a potential employer, they carry a little more weight.

Neal, a New Castle Area Career Programs instructor, counts on his connections to industries to make a bigger impact. Since last year, a nonprofit initiative has helped him do that.

NCACP is part of a program called Dream It Do It that connects courses like pre-engineering to real-life employers. Soni Jones, student services coordinator, thinks that connection will spark an even greater interest for students.

Ultimately, the goal is to boost enrollment in the already growing career center. And for Neal, it makes students take what he's teaching them seriously.

"It helps me reinforce the things that I'm teaching," he said. "It's not just what Mr. Neal says. It has a tangible thing that can be used."

Conexus Indiana, a nonprofit initiative, gave the career programs a \$3,000 annual grant for Dream It Do It. The program hands out the money to help promote careers in advanced manufacturing and logistics.

They use the cash to market their advanced manufacturing and other career programs and to help pay for student projects.

Jones and Neal also get to attend training sessions with other career programs officials once a semester. They meet with industry representatives who tell them what they're looking for in their employees, what kind of training they want them to have and what job opportunities are available.

Neal uses the information to help mold what he teaches in class. He also tries to drill the words of the employers into his students to help motivate them.

He wants his students to realize that there are job opportunities after high school and college if they get the training and education that employers want.

Today's manufacturing world is more automated, and it requires a different skill set than what it did in the past, Neal said. Those skills are directly related to the design projects his students do in robotics and even building race cars.

The goal is to show students how what they're learning relates to industry. And Neal believes the best way to do that is to let his students hear it directly from people in those industries.

In addition to bringing back information from industry meetings, he brought in representatives from Draper in Spiceland and from Purdue University to talk to his students. They told his classes that they want employees with qualities beyond manufacturing skills. They want candidates who show up on time every day and care about what they're doing.

"That's something that students need to hear," he said. "Yes, a job is a job, but there needs to be a different level of what they put into it. It's not just showing up and clocking in. It's putting in effort, trying to learn and better yourself."

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