Career Connections Academy Inspires Area Students

Over 2,100 area students gathered at Moraine Park Technical College’s Fond du Lac campus on January 11 and 12 to experience the newest of Fond du Lac Works’ educational programs - Career Connections Academy. Knowing that it’s never too early to encourage students to think about what they might want to do after graduating from high school, this program specifically targeted seventh and eighth grade students, providing them with the opportunity to explore career pathways in a fun and interactive format.

The goal of this hands-on career expo was to teach students about high demand careers and provide insight into the opportunities available in the Fond du Lac area. Four different pathways were strategically showcased at the event: agriculture, healthcare, services, and manufacturing. These pathways were chosen because they are known to be major economic engines within Fond du Lac County and each offers a wide array of career options.

The program was uniquely designed to provide a different experience per grade level; seventh grade students learned about careers in agriculture and services while the eighth grade students learned about careers in healthcare and manufacturing. The idea behind this structure was the concept of ‘forced exposure’ for the students, providing them with insight into careers they may have never known existed or ever imagined liking. An eighth grade student participant elaborates on this point, the “Fair really opened my mind to the different careers available. Going into the fair I thought that I had my mind set on what I wanted to do. After the fair I now realized that I should expand my horizons and start looking at all careers instead of just what I think I want. I would love to do that experience again and again to learn about all career opportunities and find what I truly want to do.”

Nearly 50 different area business representatives and MPTC faculty members came together over the course of this two day program to teach students about careers, local businesses and the level of post-secondary education or training needed to do these jobs. As one presenter shared, “I thought it was a fresh, engaging way to show students about different career opportunities in the Fond du Lac and Fox Valley area! The every 20-minute waves of students was just enough time to actually teach them about our company, but was not too long to the point where they lost interest.” Students were given the opportunity to directly ask the presenters questions and learn firsthand through all of the different interactive experiences.

Additionally, the students watched virtual tour videos that showcased local businesses and the wide assortment of careers at each location. These videos taught students that within the world of healthcare, for example, one can be a phlebotomist, work in IT or be a maintenance mechanic. Or that within the realm of manufacturing, one can work in marketing, be a welder or work in human resources. The opportunities are endless. By highlighting these different roles, students learned that there are many career options available along with varying levels of post-secondary education or training needed for the different roles. By showcasing local businesses at the event, we were able to show students that there is a lot of opportunity right here in their own backyard. Another eighth grade student explains what this experience taught her, “For me and others this trip really expanded our knowledge of job opportunities in our community. As we went from room to room we had the opportunity to do some hands on experiments and learn a lot about the career requirements and job expectations. This opportunity was truly amazing and educational.”

The impact of this program is evident in the words of another student as she shares that the program was a “very hands on experience and gave me a clearer insight on what I want my future to look like. It definitely gave me a glimpse of all of the opportunities my future may hold.” This event undoubtedly provided area students with a valuable experience that will enable them to make more informed decisions later in life about their plans for post-secondary education and ultimately their career pathway. When asked about their favorite part of the experience, one presenter stated, “Sharing my profession with young minds and applying what they are learning today to tomorrow.”

Historically the structure of this program looked quite different than it did this year. Formerly the program targeted solely eighth grade students and was hosted in a traditional career expo format, providing students with the opportunity to roam from one exhibitor to the next freely. Realizing that a little more structure could add a lot of value for the student experience, a number of changes were introduced this year. Every presenter had their own classroom in which they not only presented to the students about their career, but each led a different interactive hands-on experience as to truly connect their words to their role in the workplace. The students rotated between classrooms with a group, chaperoned by a teacher and escorted by a MPTC staff member. Additionally, students had a workbook that they had to complete throughout the day to capture their experience and turn in as homework following the event.

Having piloted this new program structure with one school district in 2016, this year was the first full-scale launch of this program which has been designed to continue year over year. Students from six area school districts participated in the program including: Campbellsport, Fond du Lac, Lomira, North Fond du Lac, Oakfield and Ripon. Additionally, Faith Lutheran, Redeemer Lutheran and St. Mary Spring’s Academy also participated in the fun. This event was hosted in partnership with Moraine Park Technical College’s Fond du Lac campus. A special thanks to all of our program sponsors and the community partners that made this event a reality for the Fond du Lac community and area students.