



FOCUS GROUPS

Grand Rapids

Itasca Community College

March 23, 2018

Let's first talk about the reasons you decided to attend Itasca.

- I like to work hands-on and be actually doing something, not just sitting behind a desk or writing stuff. This is a good opportunity where all it takes is two years and I can be working right away and doing what I want to do. I always took technical classes in high school. I took auto mechanics. I took welding. I took basic electricity and all that kind of stuff. I knew I wanted to be doing something with my hands when I was working. The counselors said, "Here is a new program that's right up your alley."
- My counselor directed me here for the engineering program and then after a year I looked at what else they had. I started out in the engineering program here at ICC and, it was pretty difficult. I probably didn't have the best experience and I thought, well, I kind of like the field of engineering and relating it to manufacturing and working in facilities and stuff, and I also like the hands-on approach, so I figure I'll look and see what else ICC has to offer for curriculum.
- We heard of a place today that has 150 employee positions and it has 20

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or 30 openings right this second.

- My decision was kind of different because of my age, but I used to work in the mines, and we got laid off. The government offered a program to pay for our schooling if we went back to school. I wasn't a big fan of school work when I was in school and after not being in it for 20 years, I wanted more of a hands-on course; this just seemed like the thing that would be able to keep me interested.

What's different about this program at Itasca?

- It started a couple years ago, and morphed from having two very specific programs, one based in pulp and paper and one based in power generation. We pulled industry folks from all over northern Minnesota together to help develop this program and what they wanted. Manufacturers are the ones who actually designed what the program was about. This whole program is not based on industry specifics, those in the program are learning how to operate a process on the simulated software that we have here. They're learning about different pumps and valves. They are more hands-on. The second-year students now are working on a project for Minnesota Power's Rapids Energy Center, so they're doing a project based in industry. They get that hands-on experience of going out and looking at what the costs are to actually purchase the equipment and see how much it costs to install and then they'll present that to the industry to see if that's something they might want to do. The program is a two-year program but they can ultimately finish all of their core curriculum within a year and a half.

How many people are in the program?

- The second-year students started off with 18 and now there are two left. The rest of them are working. The other group started with eight, now there are five left. A couple were younger kids and dropped out. Didn't really understand. Weren't quite ready.
- One of them was a PSEO (post-secondary enrollment option) student who just was not ready for college. Minnesota Power is still consolidating from when they shut down the location up on the north shore. They will be hiring again coming soon, it's just that they're still consolidating and rearranging their structure and stuff like that. To get students from this area to come into a program like this is difficult if they want to stay in this area. If they want to go outside the 100 miles to Bemidji or to Duluth or whatever, Superior, there are tons of opportunities.

- We had students from the PowerGen program, which is very similar. There's a lot of overlapping core competencies between that program and this program. We've had people from down south calling up here asking for students in the past.

There are so many job opportunities in technical fields, and soon to be many more. Why aren't more students headed in this direction?

- I just don't think they really know about the program or what you can do once you graduate from it. They don't understand that you can go get a job right away and you can make good money. And I just don't think they know about it.
- I'm not really sure why, either. I couldn't really pinpoint it.

Do some parents still think there is a stigma related to two-year degrees?

- I think it might be that. I also just think it might be the media, the way it is in general now too, favoring four-year degrees over two-year degrees. I think it's the media more than anything. I don't think parents are really the issue. Personally, from what I've experienced, it's the media.

Do you have friends, any of you, that should be in this program or in a program like this, that aren't, for whatever reason?

- I can think of two off the top of my head already. I've tried to sway them this direction, but studying and them are oil and water. They're completely separate and I tell them, it's really going to benefit you in the end.
- Right now the high schools in the area are trying to find ways to get students into CTE type courses. Three of the high schools have a grant right now from IRRRB to develop those career pathways and see how it can work. It's kind of like STEP (Secondary Technical Education Program) down at Anoka. We're trying to figure out career pathways and figure out, okay, who can offer what and how can scheduling work, then they'll branch off to the other seven schools. Through one of those grants, we're working on a marketing campaign to Facebook and Twitter and different types of networking avenues for students, brochures are sent out to high schools and stuff like that. So, we're working on a marketing campaign for the program to try to get that out there and students interested. Do more with less.
- You speak to all these manufacturers, is there one that's always five days

a week type of manufacturing? No. So, most manufacturing you work four days and then have four days off or whatever. You work different types of shifts, so that you have more time to actually play.

That’s one of the challenges that they talk a lot about, because the face of work has changed so much. What do you think when you hear manufacturers or educators talk about soft skills—like alarm clock issues?

- My attitude is, “If you’re not 15 minutes early, you’re late.” Just go to work every day, and for me, the longer the hours the better. I realize all the young kids don’t want to work as many hours.
- I don’t see any problem with that, really. I’ve missed an extended period of days this semester, mainly because I was sick and stuff.
- They don’t seem to be bothered by it. They don’t really seem bothered because, at least from my experience, other kids that have that attitude, don’t really care to show up, even if they miss a certain amount of days. I tell them about it and it doesn’t seem to impact them, doesn’t bother them.
- Industry has changed so much that back in the day, it used to be that you got a job and you stuck with it for 30 some years because at the end of it you had a pension. Now that everything is divvied up into 401K accounts, it doesn’t phase, and correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think it phases people as much because they think, “Okay, they’re not going to take my retirement. I’m not really going to lose anything if after five years I pick up and leave.” Industry, I know it’s expensive and all that stuff, but in a way, that’s where the trend started to change. The fact is I’m not stuck here, per se, because I can pick up and leave and my 401K follows me wherever I go.

What about the attachment to iPhones in the classroom or on the manufacturing floor?

- From our standpoint, they’re useful tools and we can use them a lot, but I completely understand why the industry doesn’t want them. I can see people hiding out on their phone and just not paying attention to their job.
- People play with their phone. It’s a distraction.
- It’s a distraction.
- Maybe if you have your lunch break, you can have your phone back,

for a half hour, hour, whatever you get for your lunch break and then give it back. I don't know, just so that they can use it for a little bit so they don't feel so far away from it, you know what I mean? So, you can still check and make sure nothing's going on and then go right back to work.

- Yeah, I think break times are probably a reasonable time to use it, but as soon as you punch back in off your break, I don't think you need it then. Once you're on your break, I have no problem with it, but out on the floor, no.

How difficult is the curriculum here? Are students prepared for it when they get out of high school?

- Probably like a six out of ten. Six or seven.
- I came right out of high school, so it was really easy for me to jump right back in. I already had my math skills and my reading skills. I knew how to work computers, but I can see where the older guys come in and they haven't been here for 20 years and it's a lot harder for them to remember how to use the computer if they haven't been using one a lot. I used to use mine every day in high school. Now they have iPads there. You're always on technology and you're always using your math skills and stuff like that.
- I knew I would be on a computer. I knew we would have to use it a lot more when we were in college, so I actually came in before the class started and took a summer computer class to help myself. Math was kind of just like he said. I had trouble remembering. I really haven't had to use much math over the past 20 years, and when I did it I'd do it in my head, I didn't write down equations. Then when you get to college, they kind of expect you to do it a certain way, when you're writing out your work and stuff.
- That's another nice thing with your phones. If you don't remember an equation for figuring something out, you can look it up in three seconds. You can figure out the whole equation. There's usually calculator support right online where you can just type in your numbers and you got the right answer right there.
- Or just ask Siri.
- Yup.

How many see yourself working for a company, or maybe going out on your own?

- I'm leaning more towards working for a company. I want to do the power industry or something along those lines.
- Yeah, I think the same thing for me. Yup.
- I enjoy working for people.

What will be the impact when they open the mines?

- Definitely boost the economy, that's for sure.
- A lot more jobs. People moving back.
- No offense to the city folks, but I think there's a lot of people that look to this area to come and live because it is a slower pace. It is a beautiful area. There are good paying jobs. One of the students that was in the program that left not too long ago, got a job in the mine and starting, he was \$24, \$25 an hour. And within a couple of years, you're making over \$30 an hour.
- With good benefits some of the mines up here are offering ... talk about showing up. Each quarter is like \$2,000 a quarter if you show up on time for your scheduled work and if you don't call in sick, you get a bonus. On top of that, there's another \$8,000 you could make in just a year, just for showing up to do what you're supposed to do in the first place.
- One company is looking at changing their scheduling because the mines are so generous as far as long days, but then you're off so many days.
- Minnesota Power does that too. I think every four weeks they get a week off. It's crazy, whereas Blandin is two days, two nights, four off. Two days, two nights, four off. They're all different but again, I don't understand.
- People don't understand what is actually in a manufacturing facility, how technical it is. People, younger generations, like to use computers and technology. They don't realize how technologically advanced the industries are.

Are young people, high school students, motivated by money? Or is it too soon?

- Yes and no. The money is definitely a good benefit and the benefits that you get from the job are great. For me, I just want to do something with my hands. Making good money and only having a two-year degree, you can't beat it. Why not?
- Less debt.
- I know some people that are going to Mankato State and they're going for four years and they're \$70,000 in debt and when they get out they're only making \$30,000 a year starting, so it's going to take them a long time to pay off.
- It's harder for somebody with a four-year degree to find a job in their profession than it is for somebody with a two-year degree.

What's the one single piece of advice you can give manufacturers when it comes to finding the employees they need?

- One thing that would definitely help is more internships. It is very difficult to find internships for people in operator-type positions.
- Liability issues. Out on the floors and stuff like that. They don't do it.
- COMPANY, 20 some years ago, used to have student workers but now they don't. COMPANY used to have summer internships but now they've cut back a lot, so it's definitely cut down. But back to scholarships, internships and jobs.
- Apprenticeships used to be up here, there used to be more... It wasn't based on the operators per se, it was more in the lines of pipefitters, millwrights, electricians, things in that order.
- I'd basically say just advertise it. Show them actually what they'll be doing and show them that it's not that bad of a job. And show them that you can do well in life if you stick with it.

How much more valuable would it be, like Blaze, if you went? You're finished now and you get your job, you went back to Grand Rapids High School versus some old guy in manufacturing. Is that going to speak better to students, do you think?

- When I look at the industry, I figured it would be a bunch of old guys. But then when I started to get into it, more people my age are starting to move up into those positions. It would have definitely helped a lot, too, if I would have known in high school, “Hey, it’s not that bad.” If somebody my age would’ve come talked to me and said, “Hey, try it out.” I would have looked into it more. I still found it and I’m glad that I found it. It might help a lot if you had younger kids talking to them.
- I agree on the advertising part. Probably a younger person coming in to speak to high school students, advertising online, social media, stuff like that. That really draws the attention of the younger generation.
- Probably aim it at the kids that are enrolled in those, the tech classes. But I mean a lot of schools don’t really have classes like that so that’s going to be pretty difficult because that’s where I got pushed into this, into going this way. I started working in the tech wing and then I realized, “Hey, this is what I want to do.” I didn’t really like doing homework a lot and all that kind of stuff, but I liked being in tech wing working on cars. Doing anything with my hands.
- They helped push me in the right direction. That’s where I found out there are a lot of jobs. When I came here I was just going to do my two-year generals and then figure out where I was going to end up, because I didn’t really care too much about college, I guess. I wasn’t big into books and studying and all that. And when I found this, I was like, “Let’s go. Might as well.”
- And that’s the thing I like about it, too. We don’t have to take a bunch of classes that ... If I were going to go do my two-year generals, you have to take all these classes where you don’t really know where you’re going to end up using them until you move on. But here, they set you up perfectly and we have economics and chemistry, physics, all that kind of stuff. I would have looked at that at first and I’d have been like, “What am I going to do with physics? Or what am I going to do with chemistry?” And then after taking this program, working side by side with it, you actually see how you need it.
- That’s the best part about it. They show you why you’re going to be using it and what it’s used for instead of just, “Write down this equation, save it in your brain because you’re going to use it on a test.” No, you’re going to be using it here and this is what you’re going to do with it.