

Wisconsin Bridges Case Study

PRODUCTION MIG WELDING BRIDGE

Chippewa Valley Technical College

Before the economic downturn that took hold in 2008, many firms in and around Neillsville, Wisconsin, were expanding their manufacturing capacities and seeking to employ individuals with MIG production welding skills – the most common type of welding used in manufacturing and production processes. Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) has an outreach/satellite campus in Neillsville and stepped in to meet employer demand and provide targeted employment training for low-income and/or displaced workers.

Previously, training in production MIG welding was only available to students in single-credit night courses or as part of the full-time Welding diploma program. CVTC's Production MIG Welding certificate includes three credits of contextualized basic skills instruction and three technical skills courses: Production MIG Welding, Blueprint Reading and Fabrication, and Math for Welders. CVTC is the first institution in the region to offer certification in a particular welding process in just 16 weeks using a team-teaching framework. Should students seek additional training, the nine credits of the certificate apply directly to CVTC's Welding diploma program.

The first Production MIG Welding cohort was piloted at the Neillsville outreach campus in Spring 2009. Twelve students enrolled and successfully completed the program. Pre- and post-course testing results indicated that most students markedly improved their reading and math comprehension levels. Results for the Fall 2009 cohort were similar, with 11 of 12 students successfully earning their Production MIG Welding certificate. Two students have gone on to pursue further education at CVTC in the HVAC and Machine/Tool programs, while three students entered the college's Welding diploma program.

CVTC's Production MIG Welding Certificate benefitted from a high degree of employer involvement in its creation and implementation. Regional employers provided input to guide course content and core competencies to be covered by the curriculum. Area employers were very supportive of the program's integrated Adult Basic Education (ABE) component. The inclusion of ABE was one factor that differentiated this effort from other welding instruction in the region. OEM Fabricators, Inc., donated materials to outfit the lab for instruction and provided the company's head welder as a substitute teacher and presenter for the course. OEM's representative conducted mock job interviews with the students to expose them to hiring procedures and practices; his presence allowed students to see how their training would have practical applications beyond the classroom.

The pilot of the welding certificate program coincided with recession-induced plant closings and layoffs in the Neillsville area. None of the 23 students who have completed the program have secured gainful employment in their desired field, though many continue to work in jobs they held prior to instruction. Participating employers hope to start hiring qualified applicants as the economy improves. As of March 2010, OEM Fabricators, Inc., is in the process of calling back laid-off employees and screening new applicants. There are also indications that new industry, and hence new job opportunities, may come soon to Neillsville.

CVTC is one of several institutions taking a novel approach to training in the field of welding. For example, Moraine Park, Milwaukee Area, Waukesha County, and Gateway Technical Colleges are collaborating to produce a multi-district welding bridge program, using an integrated ABE/ELL (English Language Learning) and occupational team-teaching model that leads to a certificate that will apply directly to other programs at each participating college. Northeast Wisconsin Technical College has developed an English Language Learning/ Welding certificate program to equip learners with the basic skills necessary to secure an entry-level job and pursue additional training and educational opportunities.



“Students in [these] courses stay engaged and make faster progress than those in traditional courses because related information is contextualized and, as a result, more transparently applicable to their goals.”

Tim Stanton, ABE Instructor and Project Coordinator, Chippewa Valley Technical College

“We are drawing from a pool of displaced workers, low-income and low-skill. These students, while initially hesitant about returning to school – reading, testing, taking notes – quickly buy into the added academic support that team teaching affords them. They gain confidence in their ability to succeed in college courses.”

Amanda Hediger, ABE Instructor, Chippewa Valley Technical College