

Pittsburgh PARTNERSHIP Prepares Apprentices

EVER SINCE OPENING IN 2000, THE BUILDING HOUSING THE IBEW-NECA apprenticeship training program in Pittsburgh has attracted visitors from all over who want to see what an innovative construction training facility looks like. (In fact, some drywall and ceiling tiles were purposely left off to show exactly how the structure was built.) However, it's what the industry partners did next—making their Associate Degree program in Electrical Construction Technology mandatory for all apprentices—that's been catching attention lately.

Concurrently with opening the new building, the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC) operated by IBEW Local Union 5 and the Western Pennsylvania Chapter of NECA formed an alliance with the Community College of Allegheny County to provide the degree program. College faculty teach the academic courses in the same facility where near-

ly 40 industry instructors, two of them full-time, teach about 495 electrical apprentices and about 1000 journeymen who are adding advanced training and certification to their skills.

The electrical instructors are committed to continuing education for themselves as well. Nearly all of them have graduated from the National Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee's National Training Institute, where they have undergone certification training so they can continue offering accredited courses.

Combining an emphasis on academics with skill training for the industry came naturally to Robert Gieder. He began life as a professional educator and spent 20 years in the electrical trade before becoming training director for the Pittsburgh partnership in 1993. But even he admits that making completion of the degree program mandatory was a hard sell initially. "There was a learning curve our applicants had to climb," he says, acknowledging that some applicants questioned the concept of taking English 101 at an electrical apprenticeship training center.

Now, the instructors and the students have the process down pat. Apprentices in the degree program go to school during one entire day of the work week and then work the other four. During the classroom day, 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. is electrical training time. After a break, they'll take their academic course—history or math or psychology or English. Most



To Excel

apprentices involved in the program do very well—Gieder estimates there's no more than two failures per semester—and it's become a major selling point with customers, too.

"Our program is turning out well-rounded, academically sound citizens," points out Gieder. "From a marketing standpoint, it helps our customers see why choosing IBEW-NECA is better. And our wider community is learning that as well. Many of our contractors will bring their customers and potential customers to our facility. They're all amazed at how we run things here. It's been quite successful."

"Our young people who emerge with an Associate Degree have much better opportunities down the road," says Chalovich, quickly noting that they're not all young people but some who've come to train for second careers. "It prepares them to excel at their electrical jobs. Today's work is not simply mechanical. Our electricians have to be able to speak to the architect, to the engineers, to the owners of the building or the company. With a well-rounded education that includes academics, they each become better sales people for the entire industry."

The close partnership with the academic community has allowed not only a blossoming of good will in their service area; it has also engendered an international exchange program that

is currently under development at the time of this writing. Through their affiliation with the Community College, the Pittsburgh area JATC, along with locals in Chicago and Ohio, has been awarded nearly \$250,000 in grant money to initiate

an accredited international exchange program with the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark.

"It's a three-year program offered through FIPSE, the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education," explains Gieder. "We'll probably begin in 2005 with two apprentices and one instructor, and we'll first send them to Birmingham, England, and they'll send us the same to learn in our program. We hope to expand from there to work with 10 or so individuals."

"There could be some joint ventures with people in other countries that these workers would be prepared for," says Chalovich. "But I think the primary benefit of this exchange program is the expansion of the horizons for the young people who participate. They'll get the opportunity to learn first-hand how different the construction industry is in different parts of the world—voltages, blueprints—everything. It's an exceptional opportunity for them."

"I think it's essential that we increase the educational level of our workers," Gieder adds. "An Associate Degree can do nothing but benefit us in the future—if for nothing else, because it re-connects us with the academic world. They will see us as fellow educators and be more willing to sit down with us as peers and partner with us in important ways." ■

