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# Apprenticeships: High costs yield high value

By **Caitlin Coakley**

CHARLOTTE — Local companies are risking a lot of time and money to give students a solid start on their careers.

It's a serious effort, which showed on the face of Edward Deans one evening this week, as he held a 4-inch-long metal piece up to the light. His brow furrowed as he examined the slot he had filed in the center. Unsatisfied, he put the piece back into the table-mounted clamp and resumed filing.

"It's a puzzle project," said Karl Golinski, 21, the fourth-year apprentice overseeing the students' work. "They have to file out slots to make the pieces fit together."

At the Ameritech Die and Mold shop, three students — Deans, 16, from North Iredell High School, Brandon Acebo, 16, from Mooresville High School, and JC Stutts, 18, from Mooresville High School — were trying out for the Apprenticeship 2000 program.

Founded in 1996, it is one of 125 apprenticeship programs in Charlotte and the surrounding counties. Apprenticeship 2000 coordinators recruit juniors from 18 high schools to train at six partner companies, including Ameritech, The Timken Company, and the program's founders, Daetwyler Custom Machine and Fabrication and Blum, Inc.

The program is one way Peter Daetwyler, founder of the company, wanted to contribute to the community, said John Friguglietti, the apprenticeship coordinator for Daetwyler.

Students begin by attending open houses and orientation sessions in the late afternoons and evenings for four days, during which they tackle written tests and hands-on projects to test their ability. At the end of the four days, if they're still interested, they choose the company at which they wish to work and take a placement test at Central Piedmont Community College. The companies then choose which applicants to take on as interns.

In six summer weeks, the interns work three eight-hour days in the shop and spend two days at CPCC taking such classes as general engineering, drafting or machine technology, whatever curriculum corresponds with their hands-on work.

At the end of the summer, the students may enter the apprenticeship program. During their senior year, they spend half their day at school and half their day at their companies. After graduation, they spend three years taking classes at CPCC and working.

From internship to graduation, the apprentices are paid for their time invested — even when they're in class — and their mentor company pays for their education. When they graduate from the program, they are guaranteed a job at their mentor companies, and receive Journeyman's Certificates from the North Carolina Department of Labor. For their time at CPCC, the graduates receive their associate's degree.

"Where else can they get hands-on training, their Journeyman's Certificate, and a free college education, and not even have to turn around and look for a job after they graduate?" Friguglietti said.

Although the students are offered a job upon graduation from the program, they don't have to accept it. The North Carolina Journeyman's Certificate is valid anywhere in the country.

The open house, orientation process and summer internship offer students an opportunity to try the work before officially entering the program, but even once an apprentice, they're not made to sign a contract or otherwise commit to finish out the whole four years.

"At any time, they can say, 'This isn't for me,' and sometimes they do," Friguglietti said. "I've seen students get to their third year and leave, after we've invested our time and our money in them. But that's their choice."

Of the 13 students who entered the program in 2005, nine graduated last year. Usually, about a fifth of the apprentices do not complete the program, according to Mike Wunsch, a vice president at Daetwyler. When a student does drop out, the company loses the money it paid for the student's tuition and labor, costs that add up to between \$120,000 and \$140,000 from internship to graduation per student.

Like most apprenticeships, the Apprenticeship 2000 program is paid for entirely by the companies, with no federal or state assistance. While the program has survived the recession, last year was tighter than previous years. Rather than hiring 16 apprentices, the program took only seven. The companies are still discussing how many apprentices they will be able to take on this year.

"We wish that we could take them all, but it costs us a lot of money, and it's all out of our pockets," Friguglietti said.

Despite the cost and the risk, Mark Rotman, Ameritech apprenticeship coordinator, said the payoff is an employee that has been specially trained within their company. Of Ameritech's 21 employees, eight are either apprentices or graduates of the apprenticeship program.

"With our employees, it's easier to train them in what we do here, specifically," he said.

Golinski, who will be graduating in August and taking a job as a manual machinist, is thrilled with both the pay and the free education.

"They pay for everything, even the books," he said. "Right now I live at home, but I could afford to live on my own if I wanted to. And I was able to buy a new truck."

Before Ameritech joined Apprenticeship 2000, the company, which produces plastic injection molds, was having trouble recruiting high school students, according to company president Steve Rotman.

"It was hard for us, as a smaller company, to compete with larger companies in getting the schools to send us qualified students," Steve Rotman said. "Our equipment is the same ... that they ship all over the United States, but it's the people that make the difference."

After four years in the apprenticeship program, the students know the Daetwyler facility better than he does, Friguglietti said.

"If you come to (the Daetwyler facility)," he said, "one of my kids will be the one giving you the tour, because they know it that well."