

# At apprenticeship, you're hired!

## In innovative program, students learn a trade and get paid during schooling

JOE MARUSAK

**LOWESVILLE** - While other students water-ski the summer away, Matthew Huss works metal at Blum Inc. in East Lincoln.

Beau Brinkley runs a drill press and lathe at Ameritech Die & Mold in Mooresville.

The two rising high school seniors are getting a shot this summer at a four-year program in which companies pay them \$8 an hour *and* their way through college.

If the students make it into the Apprenticeship 2000 program, they're guaranteed a highly skilled trade that can earn them \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year, Ameritech President Steve Rottman said. They earn a manufacturing technology degree from Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte and apprenticeship certification from the N.C. Department of Labor. They get paid their hourly wage even while they're in class.

Why?

"These guys are like an investment in the future," Ralf Atzor, Blum's vice president of engineering, told me on a tour of the plant Friday at N.C. 16 and Old Plank Road.

Blum and Daetwyler in Huntersville formed the program in 1995, after facing a shortage of skilled technicians. Blum had two job openings at the time, one for an accountant, one for a machinist. The Austria-based cabinetry-parts maker got 100 applications for the accounting job and three for machinist.

I wrote about the program three years after it launched and am happy to report, today, it's as strong as ever.

Blum, Ameritech, Daetwyler and several other manufacturers have netted dozens of workers through the program, which has won state and industry awards for finding, training and retaining students. The companies turn them into skilled tool and die makers, engineers and machine, electronic and service technicians, among other trades.

At Blum, for instance, at least 30 students have completed the program over the years, and 18 are in various stages of it now.

Students attend high school half a day and get on-the-job experience the other half. After they graduate high school, they work the next three years full-time for the sponsoring company and attend CPCC. They are paid for a 40-hour work week, so they get free college and a paycheck.

Company officials visit dozens of high schools, hold open houses with students and parents and select students who perform well on a battery of tests.

Artie Prevette started in the program at Ameritech in 2001. "It seems like a hundred years ago," he said, referring to how much he's learned.

Prevette is 22 now and designing three-dimensional parts of molds. Ameritech spends thousands of hours creating steel molds of air bag covers, hubcaps and other parts of foreign and domestic cars.

It's clear to Rottman why the training program is so vital: Having a highly skilled work force has helped the company double sales since 2001.

"We compete worldwide," he said. "We have to do it faster and more efficiently."

## **Apprenticeship 2000**

To be accepted, students must have a 2.5 grade point average or higher and must have completed algebra and geometry. They also must have taken technical drafting and a computer applications class.

For more details, contact your high school guidance counselor, visit [www.apprenticeship2000.com](http://www.apprenticeship2000.com) or call 704-664-0801, 704-736-2700, 704-827-1345, 828-465-4000 or 704-875-1200.

---

*Joe Marusak: (704) 351-2037; [jmarusak@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jmarusak@charlotteobserver.com)*