

# Construction college takes aim at a looming shortage

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Travis Adams, a first-year student, is studying masonry skills at Northwest College of Construction.

With a potentially crippling shortage of skilled workers looming, four construction industry associations have pooled their training programs under a new banner, **Northwest College of Construction**.

The college formed last year and set up shop near Portland International Airport. It provides four-year apprenticeships as well as continuing education for current professionals.

By combining several once-independent training programs, the college aims to improve the quality of its training programs and to boost the number of workers choosing to become plumbers, brick masons, carpenters, pipe fitters, framers and more.

The need is great: For every 14 construction workers who retire, just one newcomer steps in. And it gets worse -- the average age of the work force is above 45.

"It's huge," said Tammy Bachofner, president of **Associated Builders and Contractors**, Pacific Northwest Contractors.

The association is one of the college's four sponsors, the others being the **Home Builders Association**, Northwest Utility Contractors Association and Associated General Contractors.

Unlike traditional four-year colleges, construction college students typically are apprentices employed in the field by a firm that either pays their tuition or reimburses them after grades come out. The students work full time, returning to the classroom about four hours a week for instruction and lab lessons.

The school can accommodate between 400 and 450 students per term and has about 22 instructors and 10 additional staffers.

Bachofner said consolidating the four separate training programs under a single banner reduces overhead and allows all to use a standardized curriculum. Together, she said, the program is stronger. As independent training programs, each organization was plagued by having to cancel classes when too few students registered.

That's less likely at the college, which draws from a larger base of students who often need the same training. Every discipline, for instance, covers basic safety and how to read construction documents.

The end result, the school says, is better training and more opportunities for students. And, in the future, that means more skilled workers graduating into the industry.

"There are good programs out there, but the pipeline is not big enough," said Dan Graham, president of the new school.

Graham called the college "visible evidence" that the industry is committed to heading off the pending labor shortage. As president, his first challenge is to get the fledgling nonprofit school to financial stability, then grow. He envisions construction colleges strung along Interstate 5, in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

The idea to form a construction college was hatched about five years ago. Once rivals, the founding sponsors set aside competitive instances and pooled their resources. They raised \$800,000 toward the purchase of the school's campus -- a

building once used to train pipe fitters -- then brought together students and instructors.

The college, accredited by the National Center for Construction Education and Research at the University of Florida, gives the straightforward no-frills appearance. The lobby is unadorned, offices are spare and classrooms simple. The labs, however, are equipped with the latest gear -- the kind students will find on their job sites.

The curriculum is strong and so too are the graduation requirements, at least, for those who go through the apprenticeship programs: Graduation requires 4,000 hours of on-the-job training. A full-time job, with two weeks of vacation a year, is about 2,000 hours per year.

Bachofner, of Associated Builders and Contractors, said her agency got behind the college in part because it appeals to prospective students who are interested in physical work, but might otherwise dismiss construction work as unskilled.

ABC previously contracted with community colleges to train construction workers, and the remote relationship with programs hurt. Classes were often canceled -- or combined -- when enrollment was too low.

Bachofner said she's especially excited by the college's expansive mission. Providing continuing education for people already in the industry is a great way to retain people and help them move up into management or even to form their own companies.

"We're trying to hit all levels," she said.