WHERE THE JOBS ARE:

ARIZONA PIPE TRADES HELPS TRAIN FUTURE WELDERS

They get to work with fire and cutting-edge technology, they earn more money per hour than other tradespeople and they’re plucked by employers first from the available applicant pool because nearly every construction job demands their skills. They’re welders. But still, a shortage persists.

“This specialized skill — welding — is something we are constantly training and certifying our apprentices and journeyman for,” said Phil McNulty, business manager for local trade group Arizona Pipe Trades. “We’ve built partnerships with other educational institutions to increase these efforts.”

To address the welder shortage, Arizona Pipe Trades began a partnership last April with vocational schools throughout the state, including the East Valley Institute of Technology and Northern Arizona Vocational Institute of Technology.

“It’s exactly what we want to see,” said Janice Parker, EVIT’s director of partnership development. EVIT relies on industry expertise to keep the program relevant to industry needs, so students graduate with skills that employers demand. “The training programs are driven by the industry.” Parker added.

Industry experts help EVIT by serving on curriculum advisory boards and providing hands-on training and sometimes equipment.

Pipe Trades Business Representative Aaron Butler, who sits on the school’s welding advisory board, has worked in the industry for nearly 20 years. He talks with hiring contractors daily and tracks the latest developments. Butler shares that in-the-trenches knowledge with the school’s directors.

“They’ve been a huge help in donating materials that we could not afford on our public school budget,” said Parker about Arizona Pipe Trades. Last year for example, the trade organization donated 200 feet of six-inch pipe and its representatives taught a welding class. More classes are scheduled for this school year.

LEARNING CAREER SKILLS DURING HIGH SCHOOL

During the two-year program, students spend half of each day attending traditional classes on their home school campus and the other half of each day learning skills at EVIT or NAVIT. Some students earn college credit.

STUDENTS GRAVITATE TO WELDING

The welding program ranks as one of EVIT’s most popular, and Parker said that she anticipates the partnership with the Arizona Pipe Trades to draw additional growth.

“Our (welding) programs are so full that we’ve had to bring somebody back from retirement” to teach, she said. “Sometimes we have to turn people away.”

One student, a woman Butler calls his “success story,” graduated high school on a Saturday, and four days later started work at Solana, a solar plant. During the two-year program, she learned about welding, the students from this program are high caliber, said Butler — just what he’s looking for. Once graduates officially enter the trade group as apprentices, they already have two years of welding experience. That’s two more years than a typical apprentice has.

“These are the type of kids who know they enjoy working with their hands. They know what it feels like — the joy of building something and standing back and looking at it when they’ve done,” said Butler.

Students who enter the apprenticeship from the vocational program also earn $16 an hour — $4 more dollars than a typical apprentice. Apprentices finish their training during a five-year program while earning money and working on Arizona’s largest most exciting job sites. At the end of five years, apprentices may become journeymen, who earn an even higher hourly rate. Supervisory positions are possible and many tradespeople eventually start their own businesses.

The Arizona Pipe Trades doesn’t employ the vocational program graduates. Instead, the organization works with contractors who rely on the Arizona Pipe Trades’ pool of certified and experienced tradespeople to complete jobs.

STUDENTS ALREADY DEMONSTRATE APITUDE

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Students who have already proven their interest and aptitude, which is why the Arizona Pipe Trades allow them to bypass the traditional application process.

Working in the pipe trades and learning the craft can be difficult. However, the industry offers good wages and ample job opportunities. Welders make on average $20 an hour, according to the Arizona Office of Employment and Population Statistics.

Welders can also expect an industry growth rate of 15 percent through 2020, slightly higher than average, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Sure the work is challenging, but those wanting to learn the art of welding and embrace the challenge of working hard every day will find a well-paying career with comprehensive benefits and endless growth opportunities.

HELPING ARIZONA’S YOUTH

Arizona Pipe Trades’ commitment to creating economic opportunity expands beyond helping to train next-generation professionals.

Business Representative Mel Ingwaldson’s volunteer work on the Yavapai/Wickford Investment Board’s Youth Council helps disadvantaged young people stay on track. The workforce board relies on industry leaders to make it effective, and Ingwaldson represents labor.

The Youth Council helps people aged 16 to 25 who face at least two barriers to employment: a low-income family and a second, such as lack of a high school diploma.

“To the youth side, it gets really sad, but then you help them and it’s gratifying,” said Ingwaldson.

Each participant has an assigned case manager who tracks the young person for one year or as he or she stays on a personalized plan that may include finishing high school, entering college, or finding and keeping a job.

Ingwaldson offers his industry experience if a person happens to be interested in the pipe trades, but his biggest reward is giving back.

“Community service — that’s one of my biggest rewards of being on the board,” said Ingwaldson.