

IWCC students, community benefit from Council Bluffs construction program

Posted: Monday, April 7, 2014 11:00 am | Updated: 2:08 pm, Wed Apr 9, 2014.

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Drake Campbell walked onto a vacant lot on Avenue B for the first time last August. The Iowa Western Community College freshman was among a group of first-year students who had a vision for the lot.



Iowa Western Community College Construction Technology Instructor Rob Klepfer, center, works with Allen Murray, right, while Dusty Winchester, far left, inspects cabinets and drawers with fellow students at a project house March 27.

Instead of a dirt patch, they saw a three-bedroom home with ceramic tiles in the kitchen and bathrooms. A pair of tall windows would overlook the front yard and street. A small patio would be the place to hang out in the backyard.

And Campbell and his classmates would be the ones making that vision a reality.

Through a partnership with NeighborWorks and the city of Council Bluffs, students in Iowa Western's construction technology program get the chance to work firsthand in building a pair of houses each academic year.

The homes go to lower-income residents, with NeighborWorks Home Solutions often helping people buy their first house. Vacant homes on blighted, city-owned lots then get new owners who will live in and maintain them – revitalizing neighborhoods while also adding a couple thousand dollars back onto the city tax rolls.



Electrical contractor Daryl Kirsch, left, speaks with an Iowa Western Community College construction technology class while student Zach Kahle puts the finishing touches on a ceiling fan the class installed March 27.

stock and neighborhoods,” he said. “By fixing it up, it’ll make a difference if someone wants to relocate here. They’ll know they’ve got a good place to live. You can only make one first impression.”



From left, students Thomas Vesper, Joe Sampson and Zach Kahle load hardware into a truck after finishing class at an Iowa Western Community College Construction Technology Project site March 27.

“It’s good to see we’re bettering a community,” Campbell said.

Community officials, students and the nonprofit all see the cooperation as a win-win-win.

Though both NeighborWorks and Iowa Western had individual programs dating back to 1970 and 1997, respectively, the pair have been working together on homes for three years – and already have a site picked out for next year’s project.

City officials use the program as a way “to essentially get private investments in neighborhoods we see disinvestment in historically,” said Don Gross, director of community development.

And when that happens, Council Bluffs can be proud of its housing options – which can help

the city grow and attract new residents, said Joe Kueper, president of NeighborWorks.

“When people come to invest in a new business, they’re going to look at the housing

With an infill program that’s already built more than 200 new homes in older neighborhoods around Council Bluffs, the partnership among the three entities helps bring more money into city coffers for services such as fire protection and snow removal that the vacant, blighted lots get for free while shifting costs onto other taxpayers.

“We are replacing a blighting influence with a negative effect with two good homes that have

values above the surrounding properties,” Gross said.

One of the traits that gives these new houses their high values is the handiwork of Iowa Western students.



Electrical contractor Daryl Kirsch, center, speaks to a construction technology class about hard-wired smoke detector code requirements at an Iowa Western Community College Construction Technology Program site March 27. Kirsch runs Kirsch Electric Inc. and is also on the program advisory board.

A sales pamphlet for an under-construction home at 827 Fourth Ave. tells potential buyers of energy-efficient appliances, a tankless water heater and ceramic tiles – “typically upgrades or custom features in most new homes.”

“These are sought-after, quality homes,” Kueper said.

While Iowa Western students don’t perform all the construction of the new houses, they do much their work under supervision of trained professionals. Last week, one group of students learned to install cabinets in the kitchen as another set worked on wiring upstairs.

And in a field where some students learn by practicing framing or other skills in a controlled environment, the program allows students to learn firsthand – a huge benefit when they get into the job market.

“We’ve had contact with with employers in the area that prefer these students to some with a four-year degree because of the hands-on experience,” said David Hazlewood, the chair for the construction technology program at Iowa Western. “The hands-on is priceless.”

That real-world experience is what draws many of the students into the class.

Campbell, for instance, wants to start his own remodeling business – and he got his chance to practice on the new construction his first semester of college.

The same goes for sophomore Heather Smack. Though she plans to focus on architecture, possibly pursuing a degree at a four-year college, she said she “wanted to learn the ropes” before graduating.

And she has. She said the hands-on practice she’s getting at the Fourth Avenue home will be immeasurably beneficial in the professional world.

“Through high school, you sit through class and stare at books and don’t understand how it all goes together,” Smack said. “Here, you see it all come together.”

Kueper said 90 percent of students in the Iowa Western program ultimately get jobs in their desired fields, and he attributes that to employers’ high opinions of the students’ finished product.

With that, Hazlewood added, comes the flexibility graduates have once they enter the working world.

“When they leave here, their portfolio is diverse,” he said. “They can go into any facet of construction.”

So what happens when the house is built, sold and occupied?

For one, Kueper and Gross agree that it gives the neighborhood new life. Owner-occupants tend to take more pride in a home they own as opposed to one they rent.

Accordingly, that helps increase outsiders’ perceptions of the city. For instance, Kueper said, a first-time visitor to Council Bluffs who sees Bayliss Park may drive around the surrounding area. Though there are several stately houses preserved in their 19th-century charm, others have seen better days.

“We want them to see three, four, five blocks worth of good houses,” he said. “That goes to the growing reputation of Council Bluffs. This is a great city.”

And for the students?

When finished, the two-semester construction project provides them with a sense of accomplishment they may have had difficulty imagining in August when they first visited that vacant lot and had a vision.

“It’s an amazing feeling,” Campbell said. “You have a sense of pride that’s unmeasurable. You can stand in it and say, ‘I helped build this.’”