

Michael Smith on quality job training and taking on the labor shortage



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When proponents try to attract young people to construction careers by flaunting well-paying jobs without college-loan debt, they're doing it wrong. And builders who contend that the skilled labor shortage is the subcontractors' problem simply haven't yet seen how the dearth of skilled workers threatens the future growth of their companies, Michael Smith says.

Smith was part of a workforce development training group that started the project-based learning nonprofit Colorado Construction Institute in 2012, before partnering with regional builder Oakwood Homes and rebranding last year as the Colorado Homebuilding Academy. The Academy has enrolled more than 350 students in programs that offer classroom and online instruction, hands-on experience, and jobsite internships. More than 80 percent of its graduates are employed in construction, and the school intends to train more than 1,000 students this year.

Q Who is enrolling in the academy?

A We have all kinds of students. We have programming for youth, for example, where we partner with high schools and contextualize learning

that the [students] have already had. Maybe it's a math class, maybe a tech career class, but usually it's a situation where the faculty doesn't have the skill set to teach our content.

So we've created and provide instructional content that we use during the one day a week we are there. Then we give that to the teachers because we don't need to be there to teach how to calculate perimeter in math class, and we'll say, "Here are some plans. Use this set of exercises to translate perimeter, volume, and area into an estimating sheet." So we're putting some reason into why you are doing it. Then we'll come in and help the students build a section of the wall in the plans that they're learning.

We're trying to find two levels of people. The first might be somebody going through the exercises using the math skills they're learning in school. They may be working on a 2,400-square-foot space that's getting carpet and determining the cost of the carpeting. They might think figuring all this out is kind of neat, so we come in and talk about how what they are doing translates into construction applications—everything from the guy delivering the carpet, to installing the carpet, ordering the carpet, estimating it, and engineering it. So you could have jobs from the delivery guy to the structural engineer.

There's a second level we're looking for when we come in and teach proper safety, proper tool use, and all the prerequisites that come into building the wall section that the students were estimating in class. Now we're finding the students who say, "I don't really

like looking at plans and doing the estimating, but I enjoy the building part." Well, those are people who may be interested in coming into a trade position through us. We're currently doing that with six high schools in four districts.

Q What is available for those students who want to work in construction?

A What's next is a construction apprenticeship that is not designed for high volume; it's designed for high impact, high quality. Students come to our training facility for X number of days per week. That number increases as they progress through the training program and culminates with three days of work training with us and then an internship with a trade partner for one day a week. After that the training with us goes to two days a week, and the internship goes up two days. Over the course of two semesters, students end up with slightly over 250 credit hours of instruction in a training facility and 128 hours of internship. I don't know of any trade partner who wouldn't take this type of person in a heartbeat because they're already more skilled and trained than half of their workforce.

Q Who pays for the training?

A Every one of our schools has skin in the game. We do have workforce development grants. We work with local training organizations, and we get county money with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

For the complete interview with Michael Smith, see probuilder.com/msmith.