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Stephanie Veto / Staff Photographer

Ryan Kessler, junior, wet sands the back bumper of a Toyota during his collision and repair class at Middle Bucks Institute of Technology in Warwick Township on Friday.

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Posted: Sunday, May 18, 2014 4:00 pm | Updated: 6:27 am, Tue May 20, 2014.

By Kyle Bagenstose Staff Writer

At first glance, it could pass as a modern college campus.

Design students clicking away with noses buried into top-of-the-line Apple computers, and future engineers using a 3-D printer to mold a crown for a dental patient.

But these aren't sights found in the labs at Drexel University, or the studios of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. They're in the classrooms of Bucks County's career and technical schools, which have undergone a transformation over the past decade.

"We aren't your grandfather's technical school anymore," said Erin-Caitlin Rinker, Organizational Advancement Coordinator at the Middle Bucks Institute of Technology in Warwick. "We're no longer 'Vo-Tech.' We call ourselves Career and Technical Education, and people go, 'huh?'" But that shows you how far we've come."

Middle Bucks' growing enrollment is closing in on 800 students from the Centennial, Central Bucks, Council Rock and New Hope-Solebury school districts. And while some of the school's 22 programs ring traditional, such as welding and automotive technology, pathways in health sciences, the arts and business hit a more modern note.

"There's a lot of new technology coming out, and we want to prepare these students for what's in the real world," said Steve Guinan, who teaches business, technology and multimedia at Middle Bucks.

Guinan will oversee the creation of a new program for the 2014-15 school year, titled Administrative Sciences and Technology. Guinan says students will first learn modern business applications and practices before applying what's learned in the institute's school store. By the end of the three-year program, students will have learned principles of accounting, management, marketing and analysis and be prepared for traditionally white-collar careers.

"There's a huge need for accountants and entrepreneurs out there," Guinan said. "We want to prepare our students for success in the higher priority occupations."

But schools like Middle Bucks don't determine what constitutes an occupation as high-priority. Administrators say regulations are made at the state level, with policymakers in Harrisburg who want to see able students fill jobs, whether they are in car repair or banking management.



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"In order to start a new program here, it has to be what the Department of Labor and Industry refers to as a high-priority occupation," said Kathryn Strouse, administrative director at Middle Bucks, adding that in-demand jobs like financial advisers and administrative assistants made the school's new business program come to fruition.

Funding for career and technical schools partly comes from the U.S. Department of Education. Much like the No Child Left Behind Act ties federal funding to standardized testing results, the federal Perkins Act uses results of the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute, or NOCTI exams, as part of its formula to dole out dollars to technical schools.

"The Perkins Act was largely concerned with special needs students in the past, but in more recent times has shifted its focus to increasing rigors of career and technical education," said Bernard Wagenseller, executive director of the Upper Bucks County Technical School in Bedminster. "Now we have skin in the game with math, reading and science. There's a much clearer understanding now that the successful technology student must be proficient academically."

Administrators at Bucks County Technical High School in Bristol Township have to focus equally on academics and technical development. Since 2000, the school has served as a comprehensive high school, meaning its 1,500 students attend the school full time and take the same standardized tests as traditional students.

"We're getting as high quality kids as any other high school," said Kevin Ody, workforce development and community relations coordinator. "We have students here placing very high on their SATs, getting into Drexel University and Widener. A lot of these kids want to go to college, and use skills they've learned here to fund that."

One of only 14 comprehensive high schools in the state, BCTHS maintains a waiting list and lottery system to enroll students from sending districts, Ody said.

"We're seeing parents starting to realize the importance of having both a diploma and a skill certificate," Ody said. "They're hearing reports that graduates are having a difficult time finding employment, and many of our kids go right into employment, even after high school, and earn money."

According to an eight-year study by the National Center for Education Statistics, Career and Technical Education students who graduated in 2004 but did not pursue a higher degree earned an average hourly wage of \$14.54. When a post-secondary degree was obtained, the average hourly wage jumped to \$18.14.

Broken down by trade, engineers earned the highest average wage at \$21.80 an hour, followed by information technology, at \$20.96, and marketing, at \$19.93.

Wagenseller says he has seen the evolution of career and technical education firsthand. A graduate of a vo-tech program, Wagenseller spent 20 years in the HVAC industry before switching to a career in education.

"When I went into the HVAC industry in the 1970s, I was vacuuming soot out of boilers. By the time I left, I was at a nuclear power plant writing complicated algorithms to control cooled water equipment," Wagenseller said.

Due to the more demanding nature of jobs that lead from career and technical education, Wagenseller says more and more students pursue higher education following graduation. Although numbers for Upper Bucks were not available, NCES statistics showed approximately 72 percent of technical school graduates went on to pursue post-secondary degrees in 2012, numbers consistent with data provided by Middle Bucks and BCTHS.

"We're seeing more students going to college, from Montgomery County Community College up to Harvard and Colgate," Wagenseller said.

One student who will be following that path is David Reilly, a senior in Middle Bucks' engineering-related technology program. After moving to the area from Arizona as a sophomore, Reilly said that he found William Tennent High School didn't have the programs to nurture his natural interest in engineering, and he said he chose a more in-depth experience at Middle Bucks.

Now, after learning skills in 3D printing, AutoCAD software and industrial design, Reilly will head to Drexel University's engineering program with 10 credits already in his pocket through an affiliation with the school.

"I feel very lucky to have had a program like this," Reilly said. "It was a lot more hands-on."

Administrators say a top priority is to allow graduating students to take credits or certifications with them and develop relationships with regional colleges.

Students of Middle Bucks' Commercial Art and Design program earn certification in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, for example, and can earn credits from Bucks County Community College.

Similarly, students in health sciences and occupations can become a certified nurse's aide before continuing education at schools such as Gwynedd Mercy and Temple universities. Junior Lucia Minniti plans on taking that pathway, and says she'll be able to use the certification to earn money and experience while in nursing school.

A student of New Hope-Solebury High School, Minniti saw Middle Bucks as a place to go beyond the education offered at her high school.

"As a freshman I took an honors biology course, and after that the school really didn't offer anything more than basic health courses," Minniti said. "I came here to learn about anatomy and physiology, and explore health science more in depth."

Even in fields as traditional as agriculture, technical schools are changing. Mary Miller-Ettwein, animal technology instructor at Upper Bucks, says her program is a far cry from what it was a decade ago.

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"It used to be what was (jokingly) called a 'chows and plows,' program, designed for kids on the farm to learn better management techniques," Miller-Ettwein said. "As the community and job outlook changed, we kept evolving the curriculum to technology and the science of caring for animals."

Now, students like senior Hannah Morrison learn how to vaccinate, tag, and keep animals, and how to use record-keeping software. Already gaining experience through an affiliation with Delaware Valley College, Morrison plans on becoming part of the 60 percent of students from the program who pursue a college degree after graduation.

"I've wanted to be a veterinarian for as long as people have asked me what I wanted to do," Morrison said. "The whole reason I went into this program was to get hands-on experience and learn what the field is like."

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