

# Lehigh Valley Students Entering the Workforce With Skills That Are in Demand

By Paul Muschick

LEHIGH VALLEY - Seventeen seniors from the Bethlehem, Northampton, and Saucon Valley school districts will be a giant step ahead of their competition as they seek jobs after graduation.

They mastered professional skills that employers demand by passing a rigorous course at Bethlehem Area Vocational-Technical School (BAVTS).

The 17 earned their Professional Skills Certification and were recognized at a ceremony April 20.

"This is a special group. And I believe any employer, post-secondary institution, or branch of the military would be very lucky to have them," said Adam Lazarchak, executive director at BAVTS.

The Professional Skills Training Course, taught by instructors Anita Krick and Peg Wakstein of Northampton Community College, teaches "soft" skills that make employees successful, such as how to manage conflict and how to be punctual, communicate, collaborate, and organize.

The course was created in 2019 after research by Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp. (LVEDC) and the Workforce Board Lehigh Valley showed a need for workers to develop such talents.

"Our local employers identified that their biggest challenges are, one, finding skilled labor at all levels, and two, the people they interview and hire lack the necessary employability skills to obtain and retain their positions," Lazarchak said.

"Business and industry have stated that they would rather hire great employees and train them for the job rather than individuals with necessary talents but lack the skills to keep the job. We created this program so that we can guarantee employers that if they hire one of these individuals being recognized today, they would be getting a great employee," he said.

Northampton Community College developed the curriculum and BAVTS Bridges Foundation provides the funding, which comes from the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program and donations from businesses in the region.

The Professional Skills Training Course is open to only an elite group of students who are invited after demonstrating superior attendance, responsibility, attitude, and work ethic.

"Not everyone gets to take this class," Lazarchak said.

Of the 385 senior students at BAVTS, 50 were recommended for the program this school year and only the 17 achieved their certification.

"Having the opportunity makes me feel really good," said Tsaiquan Bacon, who attends Liberty High School in Bethlehem. He is pursuing a career in electrical construction.

He already has been putting what he's learned to use during a co-op with West Side Hammer Electric. He credits the class for positioning him to land that opportunity. When interviewing, he used a 30-second video that students created in the class to promote themselves.

Tara Mensinger of Northampton Area High School is pursuing a career in brick and block masonry. She was networking with potential employers who attended the certificate presentation ceremony and is confident what she learned will pay off.

"You learn a lot of things that most people don't get to learn," Mensinger said. "We get to learn all of our hard skills here, all of our physical things, but getting to learn all of the interviewing skills and the people skills is really what means a lot to me."

Lazarchak thanked the partners that engage in the program, including LVEDC, which surveyed area businesses about their needs and issued an Education and Talent Supply report in 2018 that recommended ways to strengthen the workforce.

LVEDC's work in that area is ongoing. The organization and the Workforce Board Lehigh Valley released an updated talent study in 2022 that reaffirmed regional partnerships and recommended additional strategies to bolster the talent pipeline.

The Education and Talent Supply Council, which brings together leaders from business, education, and community organizations, continues working to support other priority talent initiatives in the region.

LVEDC soon will be publishing the latest edition of its Hot Career Guide. It spotlights the most in-demand occupations in the Lehigh Valley and offers information about the educational requirements necessary for them, along with earnings potential.

"Employability skills are critical for success in the workplace. Lehigh Valley employers often prioritize these skills, even over hard skills at times, when recruiting new hires. We applaud BAVTS and NCC for leading the way and offering this opportunity to our workforce of tomorrow," said Karianne Gelinas, Vice President of Regional Partnerships & Talent Strategies at LVEDC. "The students who completed the Professional Skills Certificate have what employers are looking for, and we are thrilled to welcome them into Lehigh Valley workplaces as valuable employees prepared for success," she said.



Students receive their Professional Skills Certificate at Bethlehem Area Vocational-Technical School on April 20, 2023. (Christmas City Studio)

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