

I am Peter D'Orazio, Vice President of Institutional Advancement for The Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades.

In 1888, Isaiah Vansant Williamson, a Philadelphia merchant and philanthropist, founded The Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades. His purpose in founding the School was to provide financially- disadvantaged young men with the opportunity to become productive and respected members of society.

Williamson has trained vocational students on its campus in Media, PA for more than one hundred and twenty years. Approximately 80 students each year receive an Associate in Specialize Technology degree in the following trade programs: Carpentry; Masonry; Machine Tool Technology; Paint and Structural Coatings; Power Plant Technology and Horticulture, Landscaping and Turf Management. These degree programs are offered at no cost to students from low income or disadvantaged backgrounds and students are selected from high schools primarily in Pennsylvania and the surrounding Delaware Valley.

The funding of the school stems from the generosity of past and present donors.

The School is currently providing this free education to approximately 270 students enrolled in a three-year course of study. Graduates go on to pursue careers, many of them with Pennsylvania companies.

Fifty percent of the instruction is dedicated to practical hands-on trade education and training. Students arrive at Williamson with different trade backgrounds. Each student is educated in the theory and skills of his trade, beginning at the most basic level and progressing to more advanced levels. The other fifty percent of the instruction takes place in a classroom setting. Courses are taught in a manner that is relevant to the trade education provided by the school.

While the trade and academic education and training are exceptional, it is Williamson's values education that separates the School from other post-secondary institutions. Williamson emphasizes accountability through its moral training and character development. This training is presented from a Judeo-Christian perspective, which guides the daily Chapel program. The core values of Williamson are Faith, Integrity, Diligence Excellence and Service.

At Williamson, students are expected to adhere to a rigorous conduct code, work hard and to behave as gentlemen. Classroom dress includes coat and tie, along with strict grooming guidelines. The school firmly adheres to its zero-tolerance policy for drug and alcohol use.

Regarding Job Placement

Williamson has a very active career placement office that works with employers, in addition to working with students and shop instructors throughout the year. Each year, two job fairs are held on campus. Last year, over 100 companies visited Williamson. There were more companies represented, than there were graduating seniors. Every student is required to go through the career fair. Some of the companies, in addition to offering full-time positions, are looking to fill summer internships and spring co-ops, positions which often lead to full-time employment.

In addition to these job fairs, the curriculum at Williamson also includes resume writing and interview skills class that all students take. This is part of the well-rounded education that students receive that prepares them for the work world.

In discussions with employers, I hear over and over about the importance of the work ethic and character development that is desired when hiring Williamson graduates. In some cases, the skills learned here may not be the job that they are hiring for. Skills can be taught. One's character and work ethic cannot.

Points

- Need to recognize trade schools and vocational training as a valuable need for society. Colleges are not for everyone. Oftentimes, high schools are reluctant to push trade schools as an option, looking at trade schools as less desirable. In today's world, this attitude needs to change.
- Students are not being encouraged to go into the trades, and in many cases are not aware of trade opportunities.
- A survey of contractors often shows a lack of qualified and properly trained trade professionals.
- 100% of Williamson graduates that are looking for careers in the trades, find employment. (some students decide to pursue a bachelor's degree at area four year colleges).
- Three year program – Freshman learn the skills of the trade, Juniors continue to learn skills of the trade and learn how to work independently, Seniors continue to hone their skills and learn to supervise the freshmen.