

Program allows students to explore health care careers

Different Approach to delivering career, technical education

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By Jenny Kirk, Staff Writer

GRANITE FALLS — Courtesy of various partnerships, a unique medical careers program was recently offered to high school students around the Granite Falls area.

Fifteen students — high schoolers from Yellow Medicine East, Lakeview, MACCRAY, Montevideo and Renville County West — finished out the semester-long class this past week at Minnesota West Community and Technical College.

The 15 students are from Yellow Medicine East, Lakeview, Montevideo, MACCRAY and Renville County West.

“This program has been years in the planning, but may now serve as a new model for delivering career and technical education courses in the region,” said Tom Hoff, career and technical project coordinator at Southwest West Central Service Cooperative. *“It is a program that matches regional labor market needs, gaps in courses that high schools are able to deliver and student interest in elective courses.”*

Students met on Tuesdays and Thursdays each week from 8-9:30 a.m. Hoff said the hybrid course involved online, face-to-face and community based aspects, with students exploring a wide range of medical and health careers.

“The five schools agreed to be a part of a pilot project that shares resources and pools students to form a class they could not offer on their own,” he said. *“We know that health care is one of the career fields to drive the economic engine for the region and we also know that medical and health careers is consistently the top interest among high school students.”*

SWWC Service Cooperative’s Lisa Gregoire and Gail Polejewski were also instrumental in helping the pilot program get off and running. Hired by SWWC, Shanda Walker teaches the class on the Minnesota West-Granite Falls campus.

“This is the first time we’ve offered this at this location,” Walker said. “The program has really evolved. They’ve been working on it for about two years, trying to get this running between the schools and the Cooperative. It finally came to life in January, and so far, it seems to be going very well. We have a lot of student interest for the upcoming school year. We’re really excited about that.”

Hoff said Karen Jacobson, the executive director for Minnesota River Valley Education District, provided him the opportunity to present the concept for the class to their member superintendents.

“Without that meeting, this project would not be where it is today,” he said.

In addition to taking a risk on a different approach to delivering career and technical education, participating school districts also supply a per seat tuition to help make the program sustainable, Hoff said. It also took willing students, he said.

“This took courage and commitment to be part of something that is very different from their typical school experience,” Hoff said.

Most of the students are juniors and seniors, though the class is open to sophomores as well.

“Due to the fact that it’s the first year offering the class, we wanted to have the individuals who will be graduating to get first opportunity to come into the class,” Walker said. “Some may have to have a human anatomy class before they really think about the medical field, and they have to be able to drive, so we’ll probably see mostly juniors and seniors.”

Walker said the students not only get their high school credit for the class, but they also get an articulated college credit through Minnesota West as well. While it is a different atmosphere for the high school students, they’ve done really well adjusting, she said.

“They’re coming into the college setting, where they’re much more responsible for their work,” Walker said. “They’re only meeting with me here in the lectures and labs two days a week, so they’re having to be a little bit more independent in getting their work done and doing the online assignments. It’s different for them when they don’t see a teacher every day who is kind of hounding them to get their stuff done. It’s a big change, but the students have done really well with it.”

For the most part, students carpool with other students from their district. It's another aspect they're responsible for.

Along with classroom discussions, field trips and guest speakers, students also took part in three job shadowing experiences. The students then selected one of the experiences to give a speech on.

"They are learning a ton," Walker said. "They're absorbing it all so well. I think they're excited to get that glimpse into that world."

Walker said the collaboration couldn't be done without all cooperation from medical facilities in the area.

"All the local hospitals, clinics and different employers have really been amazing as far as participating, whether it's coming in for guest speaking or allowing the students to do job shadowing," Walker said.

Walker said there are a lot of different considerations that come in with medical careers, like all the privacy, confidentiality and background checks, so it is a time-consuming process and definitely puts a lot of work on the human resources departments at those locations.

"They've been so gracious in taking the time and the patience to work with our students so they have the necessary requirements," Walker said. "They know they're not producing an employee or anyone who is going to produce revenue for them. They're just doing it so the students can learn."

Along with the local medical facilities in the students' hometowns, students have been to Marshall, Willmar, Hendricks and other places. Walker said she is optimistic that the facilities will continue collaborating in the future.

"I'd expect enrollment will be closer to 25 in the fall," she said. "Schools have already opened it up on their registration, so students are allowed to enroll for the fall semester. We're getting reports that the numbers are there, so it's exciting."

Hoff said that SWWC serves as the fiscal host for the project, while Minnesota West provides classroom space and access to their nursing lab.

“They have lots of expertise in the area of medical and health science that they have shared for the benefit of this program,” he said. “The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development has also been an invaluable source of labor market data to make sure we are meeting regional economic needs.”

Along with various business partners, the program benefited from the involvement of Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council.

“They have extensive relationships with the business community and have been instrumental in helping make connections for students’ job shadowing,” Hoff said. “Southwest Initiative Foundation provided seed money in the form of a grant to get the program started. Minnesota Carl Perkins Program also provided a grant to help offset start-up costs.”

Walker said the medical careers program is expected to expand to two other Minnesota West campuses in the near future. Hoff also noted that its success is likely to lead to the expansion of other career fields, such as information technology, mechanics and construction trades.