

Iowa Western students built a house instead of a term paper

By Scott Stewart

sstewart@nonpareilonline.com | Posted: Saturday, May 10, 2014 12:00 am

As graduation approaches, students across Council Bluffs are showing off their end-of-the-year art projects, term papers and other accomplishments.

But students in Iowa Western Community College's construction technology program might have them all beat.

Students at Iowa Western built two houses for NeighborWorks Home Solutions, at 827 Fourth Ave. and 1803 Ave. B, replacing blighted properties with new, affordable homes for low- to moderate-income families. They held open houses Friday to give community members a chance to see the future homes.

The Iowa Western class built the residences from the ground up, starting with just a slab after dilapidated buildings were torn down. The students worked mid-August through last week wrapping up the projects.

David Hazlewood, the chairman of the construction technology program, said Iowa Western offers the chance to specialize in residential or commercial construction. The service-learning project gives them real world experience while also developing interpersonal skills and work ethic, he said.

The students spend Tuesdays and Thursdays in the classroom learning estimating, print reading, math, communications and other subjects. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, they are receiving hands-on instruction for six hours working on the houses.

"They're taking that knowledge and coming out here to the job sites," Hazlewood said. "A majority of our students have that desire to be out in the field, and that's their learning style: hands-on."

At the same time, they're learning the value of giving back to the community — making the project more than just a classroom or a job site.

"This lot was terrible," Hazlewood said. "It had trash on it, and it had vegetation that was dying."

James Schwarte, a graduate of Harlan Community High School, said he got interested in construction after high school when he and some friends worked summer jobs. That was about two years ago.

Now he is about to graduate with a diploma and an associate of applied science degree from Iowa Western, proving he has the skills to enter a stable industry. He said fewer people do their own work on houses these days, and a lot of expertise goes into working on older buildings.

“There’s always work to be done on houses,” Schwarte said. “When you do interior finish work, it takes a lot of skill.”

Next year, high-schoolers in the Council Bluffs Community School District will have the chance to join Iowa Western students in building houses along Spencer Avenue. Hazlewood said he expects more than 15 students from Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln high schools to participate.

Every week, Hazlewood said he gets three to five calls from companies looking to hire employees with construction skills who are personable and have a strong work ethic.

Hazlewood said bringing opportunities to high-schoolers allows them a chance to get ready to enter the workforce after graduation, go on to programs like Iowa Western’s or join the 40 percent of his students who go on to bachelor-degree programs in construction management, design or engineering.

“We’re going to get them exposed to this,” he said. “We’re filling the needs of the industry.”