

# COMMUNITY

THE MAGAZINE OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Volume 10, Issue 2



## Authentic College Experience

Inclusive environment awaits young adults with autism on  
MCC South Omaha Campus

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**METROPOLITAN**  
Community College

## Volume 10, Issue 2

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# A LETTER FROM THE MCC FOUNDATION

The holiday season is upon us, and I want to take a moment to thank you all for your support. As I reflect on this past year, it is clear that Metropolitan Community College is living up to our mission of delivering relevant, student-centered education to a diverse community of learners.

In this issue of Community Magazine, we share stories that celebrate student and faculty success. Students are our purpose, and every student has their own unique story. You'll read a story about the College's collaboration with Autism Action Partnership and how we are working to give young adults with autism a real college experience while also learning skills that go beyond the classroom.

I hope you enjoy reading about the College's continuous commitment to students. In the fall quarter, MCC started providing tuition free college classes to high school students. This gives Nebraska high school students a head start, no matter what path they take after high school.

MCC and the MCC Foundation are committed to making education accessible to everyone in our community. We are able to provide scholarships, resources for students with food insecurity, supplies and equipment for our instructors and so much more because of generous community support. Your support makes a huge difference to everyone here at MCC.

To all our partners and supporters, student success is the heart of what we do, thanks to your support. We can't wait to celebrate another year of milestones with you.

Sincerely,



Amy Recker  
Associate vice president for advancement  
Executive director, MCC Foundation



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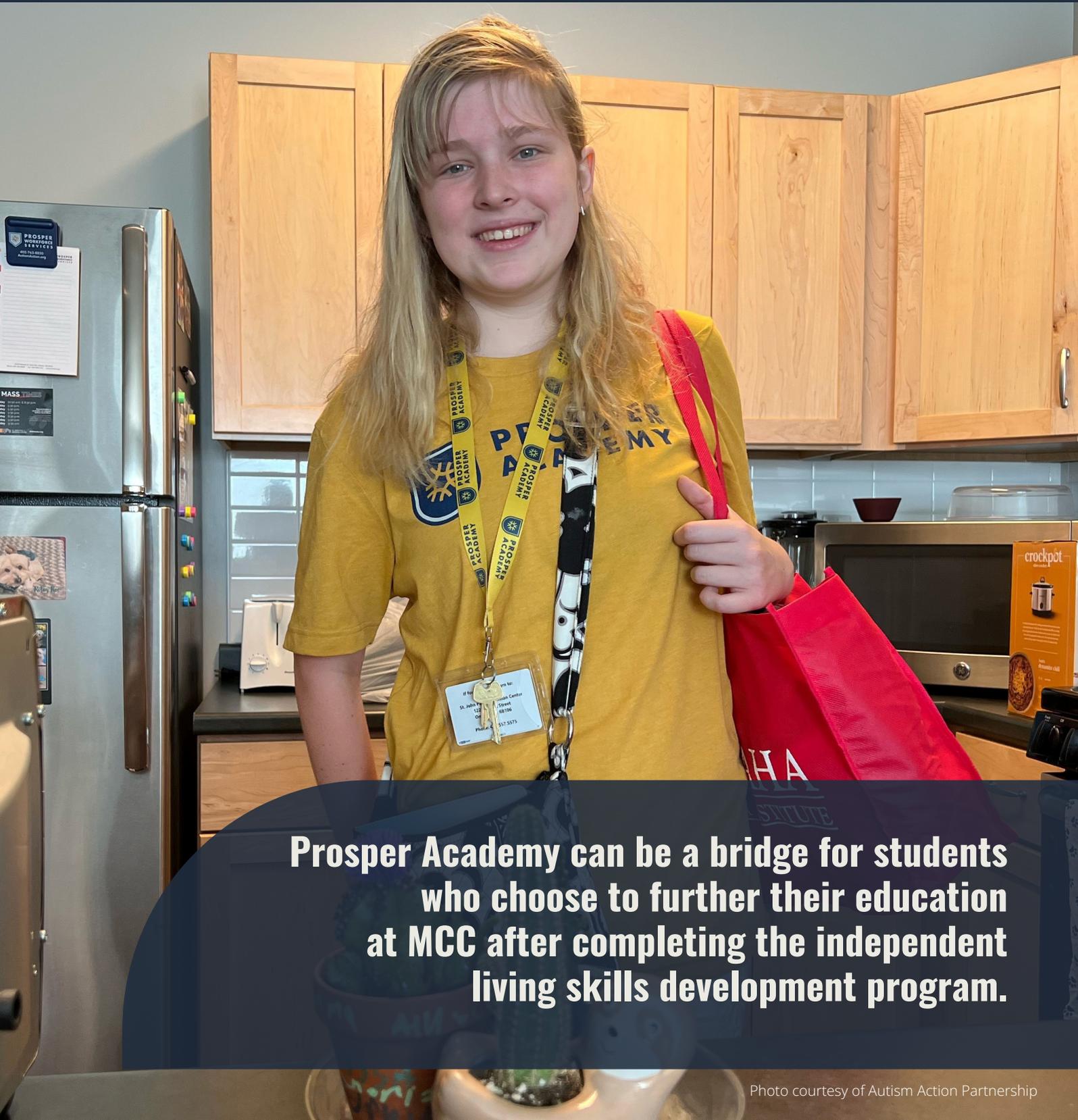
**Cover photos courtesy of:** Autism Action Partnership, Jeremy Tutini



Metropolitan  
Community College  
**FOUNDATION**

# Authentic College Experience

Inclusive environment awaits young adults with autism on MCC South Omaha Campus



**Prosper Academy can be a bridge for students who choose to further their education at MCC after completing the independent living skills development program.**

**Robert Woods can navigate a syllabus. Take, for instance, his literature class at Bellevue East High School. As soon as he learned which book his class would read during the new semester, he would consume every page of it before the second day of class. When it came time to discuss the content weeks later, Woods had reread the book several times. The depth of his understanding of the characters regularly led to lively classroom discussions with his teacher that would sometimes become the lesson for the rest of the class.**

Like most students, Woods is stronger in some subjects than others, but no academic topic would be too daunting for the 21-year-old college student. But as a person on the autism spectrum, navigating the college experience is where Woods needs some extra support — registering for classes, scheduling a meeting with an advisor, buying the books and getting to campus on his own.

Autism is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as “a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.” Through the Omaha-based Autism Action Partnership’s recently launched Prosper Academy, Woods and five other young adults with autism are spending the next two years developing independent living skills while living at the St. John Paul II Newman Center. After completing this program, participants should have a foundation of new skills to draw from in pursuit of their next life goal.

Through the partnership with AAP, a significant piece of the real-world lessons Woods will learn over the next two years will take place at Metropolitan Community College. Prosper Academy students are enrolled as noncredit students at MCC, where they will be gaining an authentic college experience at the South Omaha Campus. Prosper Academy can also be a bridge for students who choose to further their education at MCC after completing the academy.

Over the duration of the program, they will take 32 independent living courses, provided through the Learn4Independence™ curriculum, which is specifically developed for individuals with autism. Course content will be delivered through MCC systems and absorbed in a campus setting. All instruction is provided by AAP.

To replicate the college experience as closely as possible, students in the Prosper Academy share suite-style dormitories at the Newman Center, located on South 71st Street, bordering the UNO campus and Aksarben Village. Woods and his three roommates do typical things college students do, like playing video games together and making food runs to the grocery store up the street. But the norms that guide daily social interactions aren’t as clear to a person with autism. For example, if a coworker having a bad day at work is asked, “How’s your day going?” and responds sarcastically with, “I’ve never been better,” a person with autism could take that answer literally.

Emily Sutton, AAP program director, joined the organization in December 2021 to help launch the Prosper Academy. She said the program is designed to address what one participant refers to as a postsecondary “cliff” awaiting young adults with autism after finishing high school. The participant said having the opportunity to be one of the first people in the Midwest in a program that addresses this gap in services made it worth pursuing — even if being in the first group creates some nervous energy within.

## Bridging the postsecondary gap

There are two traditional areas of programming available for people with autism: programs for young kids or support for people who are more severely impacted. Sutton said Prosper Academy participants have a need for services that fall outside of these traditional programs.

“[Prosper Academy] folks are kind of in the middle. They have a real opportunity to live on their own but just need reinforcements, supports and a safe place to practice,” Sutton said.

Sutton said neurotypical people learn independent living skills through lived experience — choosing the doctor they want to see or applying for or resigning from a job. For people with autism, the social cues that aid neurotypical people in gathering information aren’t as apparent. Prosper Academy seeks to develop a working knowledge for navigating the social interactions everyday life requires through a more formalized program delivered in a supportive, inclusive environment.

“We’re creating a space where as that individual needs it, they can tap into supports that we have readily available to them,” Sutton said. “A space where they can explore all the potential they already have inside of themselves.”

Kyran Connor, director of the MCC South Omaha Campus, said the College is proud to offer a setting in which some of these important learning experiences can be facilitated.

“We’re offering [Prosper Academy] programming on campus which allows them an opportunity to experience college life,” Connor said.

Prosper Academy students have been assimilated into the MCC system. Each student has an MCC student ID, their own email address, access to checking out books from the library and other student resources. The Learn4Independence™ curriculum has been imported into Canvas, the College’s learning management system. An MCC navigator meets with academy students to discuss the nuances of the campus. An MCC disability support specialist is also available to assist with any needs that arise.



MCC is also providing assistance on the way to and from the South Omaha Campus. All Prosper Academy students have a Pass to Class bus pass that is available to all MCC students. Arranging their own transportation is a fundamental part of the independent living experience at the academy.

“For us, it’s just about being a good partner, supporting students on the autism spectrum and making sure they are comfortable coming to MCC,” Connor said.

Sutton said MCC leadership enthusiastically embraced the vision for Prosper Academy during the concept phase — long before students moved into the Newman Center in late August.

“We have been very fortunate since the beginning when we first approached MCC about the possibility of partnering and providing as much of an authentic college experience as possible for students in our academy,” Sutton said. “There was no question whatsoever about this program being complementary to what MCC is all about.”

After the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the timing for launching the program was more ideal, Connor said a series of tours and orientations with program participants is how the College sought to create a feeling of familiarity to help ground them. New environments can be neurologically overwhelming and even painful for people with autism, whose brains are highly active processing the sensory information around them.

**“What we’re doing is really carving out autism-specific support for students in a sensory-friendly setting so they can experience life on campus and in the dormitory,” Sutton said.**

## Taking course content into the classroom of life

Like MCC academic programs, Prosper Academy course content is brought to life by applying it outside of the classroom. Each individual lesson builds into a larger concept digested over time. For example, Prosper Academy students are learning to do their own grocery shopping. The classroom lesson shows students how to make a list and plan a budget for the items they need on a weekly basis. The food budget they are learning now will be a line item of the broader household budget they learn about in the future.

In September, Prosper Academy students began making their first trips to Aldi, a short walk north along the Keystone pedestrian trail from the Newman Center. While tracking down the items on their shopping lists, Alec Hurlocker, 25, came across a humidifier that wasn't initially part of his planned shopping. He was considering purchasing it for his bedroom. Lizzie Lanspa, the AAP activities coordinator supporting the students during their shopping trip, helped Hurlocker consider the purchase.

"Is this in your budget, Alec?" Lanspa asked.

Hurlocker didn't have his budget with him, so Lanspa presented other information to consider.

"Would this be very easy to carry home tonight?" Lanspa inquired about the bulky, boxed item that weighed a few pounds.

"No," Hurlocker replied, and he moved on to the next aisle.

Lanspa said autism presents differently in each individual, so she modifies her guidance for each student based on the individual level of support needed when performing activities. The last participant to complete their shopping said anxiety is a prevalent part of their experience of autism. It made its presence felt as the student was trying to locate the last item on the list needed for the week ahead. Lanspa pointed to the appropriate aisle and instructed, "Now go ahead and find it yourself."

Lanspa walked behind the registers where the other students were bagging their groceries. She watched as the last shopper entered the checkout lane behind two unaffiliated customers.

"This is a big moment," Lanspa said with eagerness. The student had never gone through the lane unassisted before. The student nervously fidgeted and looked to Lanspa from about 50 feet away several times as the preceding customers in line completed their purchases. Keeping her attention fixed on the student the entire time, Lanspa nodded affirmatively and shot a thumbs up into the air each time doubt crept in during the transaction process.

The Aldi employee rang up the last item, swiped the student's payment card and provided the receipt for another one of the dozens of transactions processed at that register that day, but none more significant. The student smiled when rejoining the group.

On the walk home, the same student, who was initially apprehensive about sharing personal details, talked openly about the anxiety they manage on a daily basis, not being correctly diagnosed until junior year of high school and the relief that came with having a better understanding of why the slightest of intrusions, like an unanticipated incoming phone call, can set off overwhelming internal alarms.

The student shared stories about well-intentioned case managers not knowing exactly how to help in the past and the opportunity at Prosper Academy to be supported in a way that hasn't been attempted before in this community and most others across the country. They admitted there is no guarantee that two years from now life will look entirely different than it did at the grocery store this particular Tuesday evening, yet in only three weeks of being at the academy, successful moments are already happening.





Photo courtesy of Autism Action Partnership

## Lessons in trying

One of the most valuable deliverables Prosper Academy offers participants is a safe place to fail, Sutton said, something the world at large generally lacks.

“There are triggers that can cause students to have a meltdown, which I think happens to all adults, but it’s a little different for somebody with sensory needs,” Sutton said. “We’re putting a safety net around them so that they’ll be able to get back up and try again.”

Tom Woods said something inevitably happens when people outside the autism community get to know his son Robert on a personal level. On trips to the grocery store, it’s not uncommon to hear people calling out to greet Robert over shelves as they pass through the aisles.

“Robert has a huge heart and will help anyone at any time. He always provides a presence that is just open and receiving, and people just gravitate to that like you wouldn’t believe,” Woods said. “So in a humble way, not knowing it, he does create a big impact when he’s around people, especially when he’s around them for a while and they get to know him.”

Parents and other adults in the lives of Prosper Academy students are referred to as “supportive adults” and are highly involved in the student’s journey to independence.

“We’ve designed a support system and communication process to keep our supportive adults in alignment with their student as they go through these two years of learning,” Sutton said. “We have information sessions where we talk about the logistics of the program, but we also talk about more of the social-emotional things like letting go [at completion of the program].”

Sutton said over the course of the program, Prosper Academy staff will work with students to identify the areas of their lives they would like to be able to manage on their own upon completion.

“Independence looks different for everybody. It might be financial independence. It might be to get a job that isn’t just walking distance of the home. It could be to make decisions about their medical treatment or nutrition,” Sutton said. “For some, it will look like, ‘I want to live in an apartment or a house on my own or with roommates where I’m not dependent upon my caretakers, my parents or other supportive adults in my life.’”

Helping supportive adults is a major component of all AAP programming, which includes community outreach and family resources; social support groups and activities; workforce training and consultation services; and independent living programs and services.

"We teach supportive adults that their student moving on means that their role in their life is going to look different. That's an emotional process to go through," Sutton said. "They may have power of attorney but may no longer need to make medical decisions or get to a place where their guardianship isn't necessary because the young person has the skills they need to make responsible decisions for themselves."

Kris Woods, Robert's mother, said Prosper Academy is creating experiences for her son that simply can't be replicated at home.

"Living at home and living out in the world are very different experiences. Robert had been talking about wanting to be more independent and felt like he wasn't getting opportunities to do that," she said.

Tom Woods said each independent living skill developed during the academy teaches the student how to complete an individual task or manage a specific situation. The product of all those experiences adds up to something far greater, with more possibility than ever afforded to his son before.

"He is building his capacity for life. All those experiences are built on top of each other and create a foundation of the 'I can do it' attitude," he said.

Robert Woods is indeed finding he can do it. He is working as a custodian at the Newman Center; each participant is required to have a job throughout the duration of the program. He's training for his first half-marathon, running eight miles a day on the Keystone Trail. Tall and slender with no visible body fat, he looks like he runs half-marathons all the time — he lettered twice in cross country in high school. He plans to represent Prosper Academy at the run in Omaha later this fall.

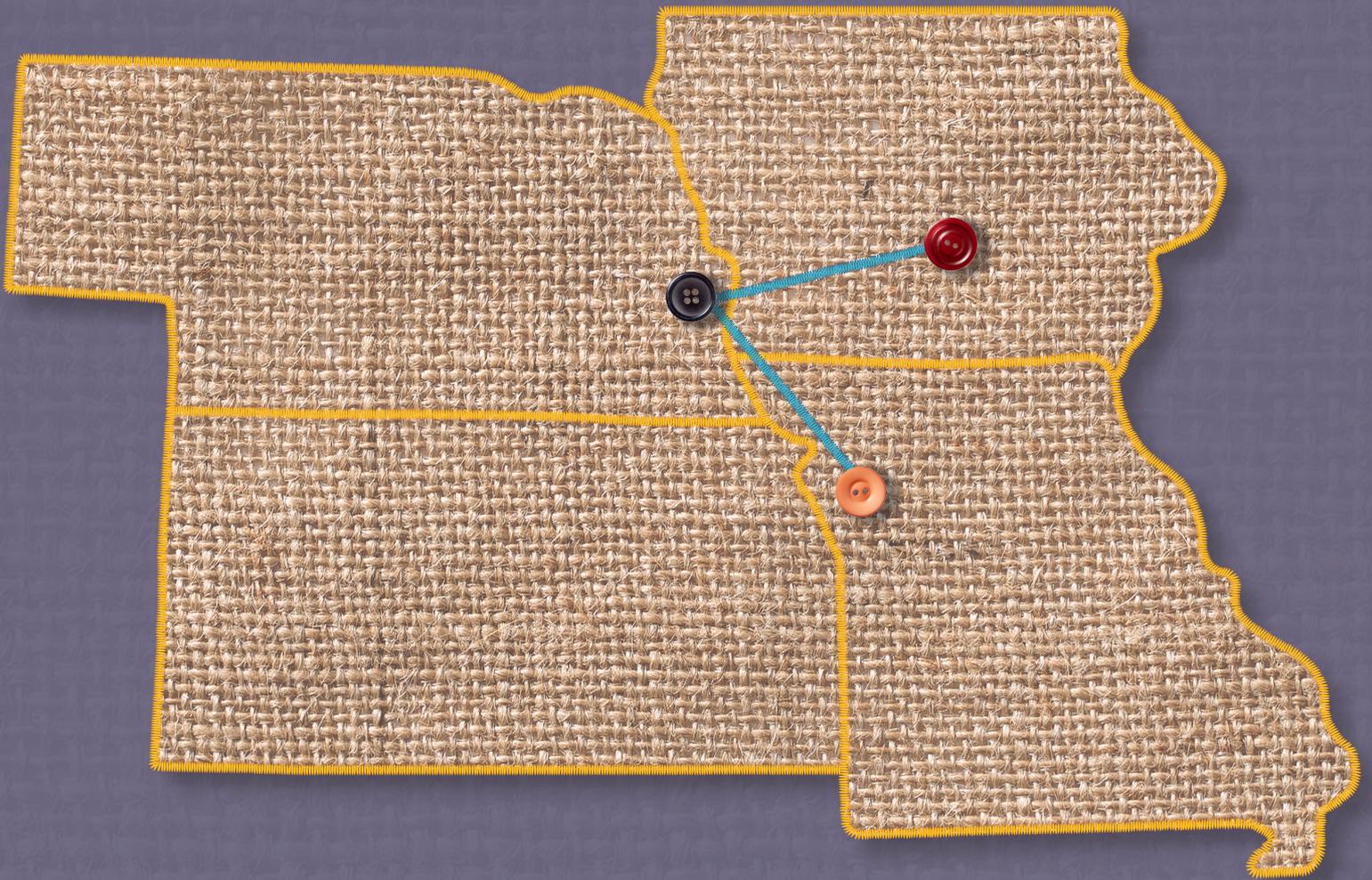
When not propelled by his own sneakers, Woods has the bus route to the South Omaha Campus down. New skills like filing his assignments electronically and enhancing his note-taking abilities are forming and having their intended effect.

"It makes me a lot more confident. I remember thinking, 'Well, this actually looks pretty difficult, maybe I shouldn't try it,'" Robert Woods said of learning the bus route. "Then you actually try it, and I'm like, 'Okay, that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.' And if I can do that, I can assume I can do a little more."

As he's learning new skills, he'll retain those that have always come naturally, like when one of his roommates lost his wallet the other day and everyone teamed up to help find it.

"All of us were just like, 'Well, that's Adulting 101 for you.'"





## ***DESTINATION MCC:***

College threads  
needle with niche  
upholstery offering

The idea came in 1981, eight months into her pregnancy while she was staring at a “beat-up old rocker” that was still structurally sound.

“I could recover that,” Kathy Foust thought to herself.

A completely self-taught upholsterer, Foust did such a nice job recovering the rocking chair that her husband bought her an \$800 machine for additional projects. She took out a classified ad in the Omaha World-Herald under the “Services” heading and lined up her first paid gig — a six-cushion, skirted couch.

Before she was able to collect her \$75 payment, she had to redo the cushions on it three times. It taught her an important business lesson on pricing and the value of quality work.

After 35 years and hundreds more upholstery projects, Foust’s initial desire to have a nice chair to rock her baby girl in eventually gave birth to the Metropolitan Community College noncredit upholstery program.

“It’s an art that I have been doing for almost 45 years, and I still love it. There’s a passion to it that you enjoy,” Foust said.

There’s also a big opportunity. Home economics programs used to have more of a presence in high school education, funneling graduates into upholstery careers. Similar to other skilled trades, established professionals like Foust are approaching the end of their careers, leaving a skills gap that widens with every retirement.

“There are so many more people today who have never sat behind a sewing machine and put something together,” Foust said.

The upholstery workforce is so scarce, when searching the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for employment information, 20% of states lack the data available to report on the industry. Among the 40 that do, supply and demand rings true with employment — fewer workers are driving higher wages. Nebraska is among the group of states with the smallest share of industry employment against the national average. Nebraska is also among the states with the highest annual mean wage (\$42,200-\$52,060).

Lyn Ziegenbein, executive director emerita of the Peter Kiewit Foundation, envisioned establishing a dedicated neighborhood where “lost arts” like upholstery could be explored. At MCC Makerspace, the program is hosted within the resurgent New North Makerhood, an art colony north of 11th and Cuming streets. The area was once a commercial

center that became blighted over decades of neglect. Located blocks away from Abbott Drive, along a common route to the airport, the drive presented a confusing picture of Omaha to visitors.

“From the airport coming into Omaha, looking south, you would see all of our wonderful trophies like the convention center, First National tower and the Woodmen tower. Then you’d look north of Cuming Street, and you would think, ‘Now wait a minute, which is the real Omaha?’” Ziegenbein said of the area that has since been beautified by a gift to the city from the Peter Kiewit Foundation during her tenure as executive director.

“What we have going on now on the north side of Cuming Street is a rebirthing of downtown because this used to be a very busy commercial area that gradually faded. Now it’s coming back,” Ziegenbein said.

*MCC Makerspace is part of the refurbished fabric in an emerging, creative neighborhood*

Ziegenbein said one the “first instigations” for the New North Makerhood project came about 15 years ago. It was the result of searching for a new upholsterer after discovering two businesses she had used for past projects were no longer operating. Through word of mouth, she met Foust.



"In the course of our conversation, [Foust] told me that she was also worried about the declining availability of custom upholstery and that it would be a real loss for the community," Ziegenbein said. "We need to pass it on in our culture and our society, or things like that will disappear entirely."

"Having a place like [the New North Makerhood] educates the whole community because there are a lot of people who would not be aware of these kinds of artistic skills, not only in their functionality, but also their recreational enjoyment of them. I've been to makerhoods in other parts of the country, and they are special, well-known areas in their communities. They really help to enhance the quality of life."

The New North Makerhood is a nonprofit organization, offering more affordable rent for studio space to artists and craftspeople than privately-owned properties. All work sold in the space is created by the artists who crafted them. More than new 30 studios will be available in the community in the near future, Ziegenbein said. A building that formerly housed a lumberyard is being converted to offer work, community and gallery space.

"There's so much diversity in the kinds of things that are being done. You have Kathy doing custom upholstery, and then right outside her door is pottery, where MCC has its own kiln. Then you walk a few more yards to the north in the building, and you find a printmaker. So right there, you have three somewhat disappearing arts that are coming back in one space."

One of Foust's first students, Stephani Keene, is now an MCC instructor. She owns and operates Keene and Daughters Upholstery in Glenwood, Iowa, with her daughter-in-law, Lizz Keene, also an MCC instructor. Stephani Keene said in addition to the lack of business competition, there are several other market conditions that are favorable to pursuing careers in upholstery, with quality being the biggest driver.

"Furniture has changed. You have furniture that lasts only two years and is disposable. And you have this new generation coming up that wants to reuse and recycle. They have an appreciation for craftsmanship. There's renewed interest in reusing things in grandma's house because they've lasted 50-, 70-, 100-plus years. They're noticing a big difference in quality," Keene said.

She also noted that with the shift to remote work instigated by the pandemic, people were at home more than ever before, looking at their furniture.

"It was good for upholstery because people want to redo things, but unfortunately, a lot of the schools have fallen by the wayside to teach it, so MCC has really given us the opportunity to start from scratch," Keene said.

MCC is one of the only educational institutions in the region to offer an upholstery program. The MCC Makerspace, is a destination to learn the skill. Blocks away from the recently opened MCC IT Express location in the historic Ashton building, MCC Makerspace adds to the College's footprint in North Omaha.

MCC Makerspace also happens to be frequented by multiple out-of-state students who regularly attend classes in person in Omaha due to the lack of academic-level upholstery training offered elsewhere throughout the region.

Over the past year, there have been students who have traveled from the surrounding areas of Des Moines, Iowa, and Kansas City, Missouri, to join local students in working on their pieces, improving their techniques, broadening their abilities and developing the confidence to launch their own businesses.

Pat Nagel-Wilson regularly travels more than 150 miles from Indianola, Iowa. She started coming to MCC Makerspace after she retired in 2018 from a career as a special educator for the blind and visually impaired. She has a daughter and granddaughter who live in Omaha, whom she visits on her trips to attend the Upholstery Lab course. The seven-week class meets for three hours one day each week.

Nagel-Wilson said each upholstery project brings an interesting challenge, like navigating the 48 tufted buttons on an antique chair she restored a couple years ago. After the piece is finished, an assortment of memories remain. Every once in a while, the upholsterer finds an unforgettable surprise, like a prize a child finds in the bottom of a cereal box.

"On a chair I picked out from a thrift store and worked on last fall, as we were uncovering it, I found a gold garnet ring," Nagel-Wilson said.

And sometimes, on the far less glamorous side of restoring other people's castaway furniture, you get more surprise that you bargain for — like the time Nagel-Wilson discovered a rodent's abandoned nest while uncovering a chair bought at a thrift shop. Despite that experience, Nagel-Wilson said it's fun to hunt for items to restore at yard sales, flea markets or on social media sites. The "before" and "after" pictures bring a lot of satisfaction, she said.



Nagel-Wilson said what she enjoys most about MCC upholstery courses are the small class sizes (capped at eight per class), choosing her own pieces to work on and often seeing the same people attend courses offered each quarter. She mostly considers herself a hobbyist but has done one paid project so far.

"It's a wonderful program. You learn something new every time you attend class. I get to come and see my granddaughter and just have fun and camaraderie when I come to class," Nagel-Wilson said.

### *A single class launches a career*

For Stephani Keene, the path from her first class to a career was comparable to a sewing machine with a rate of over 1,000 stitches per minute. "She was in my first class," Foust said of Stephani Keene. "I could tell right away she was gifted, and she started teaching the year after me."

Keene said she was enthralled.

"I loved the whole process of breaking a piece down, learning from what I've taken apart and putting it back together. There's creativity, craftsmanship and a skill to grow. Every piece is different," Keene said.

After sharing the experience in class with the people in her life, she quickly learned about the intense demand for her services.

"Everyone was like, 'Come get my furniture.' I started doing things on the side on my living room floor," Keene said. Soon after, she opened her business with her daughter-in-law, and a position with the Glenwood Resource Center opened for an upholsterer. Keene said she got the job because of the classes she took with Foust.

"For the last five years I have worked on applying those skills on a lot of unique things for adults with disabilities," Keene said. "That one single class I took with Kathy launched my upholstery career and took over my life in a good way because I love what I do, and I love sharing that passion and energy with my students."

In addition to being a fulfilling way to earn a living, it's been financially rewarding, Keene said.



"It's more than doubled my income. It's a lucrative business to get into," Keene said. "They aren't low-paying jobs to start out, but it's very low initial financial investment to start your own upholstery business. The classes are inexpensive, the equipment isn't crazy high and you don't have to get a loan. It's a really great startup — business comes knocking almost immediately."

Foust also advocates for student hobbyists to take a hard look at becoming entrepreneurs. She said the key to success in any business is developing a good reputation.

"People are booked three to six months ahead all the time across the country," Foust said. "If you can make \$50 an hour, then you can make \$90 an hour once you're faster. If you sell fabric, you're earning extra there, too."

### *Humming along*

The MCC upholstery program started with one instructor, a class of 10 students and two machines. It is now humming along with four instructors and eight machines that serve around 300 students throughout an academic year.

"I feel pretty humble that it has been such a success," Foust said. "It's not just me. It's all the instructors. And a huge part of it is MCC."

[The College] gives me practically whatever I want. I'm up to eight machines now. It's a good cooperation between everyone involved."

Like demand for the work, MCC upholstery classes get booked up quickly. And there's a lot of fun to be had, something Foust stitches into the lessons.

"There's a lot of camaraderie and friendships that have developed. Everyone brings in their own piece, they redo it and are proud of it," Foust said. "And we also goof around, act silly sometimes and yell at each other."

Ziegenbein said the success of the New North Makerhood has been "gratifying and humbling." Gratifying because it pinpointed a need validated by the distances people travel to obtain the training and humbling "to see the kind of talent we have in our town."

Ziegenbein said having the strong educational partnership of MCC is an essential component.

"One of the things I have come to appreciate about the College is that it is strengthening the future of our community with the quality and diversity of its programs," Ziegenbein said. "When you look at what MCC has done in both North and South Omaha, they're revitalizing neighborhoods, which wasn't [the College's] first mission, but that's what they've done."



**For more information on the upholstery program or to view course information, visit [mccneb.edu/CE](http://mccneb.edu/CE).**



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season  
for giving.*

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# FACES of MCC





“MCC was a turn in the right direction being a first-generation college student, as I had no idea what possibilities were ahead. There are so many fond memories I have as a student from the interactions I’ve had with employees who are still here today. With positive encouragement came growth and maturity, and I was able to become an employee at MCC. I love our community and surrounding areas. Being in the role of a Workforce Education career skills coach provides the opportunity to be a voice of change in someone’s career choices or changes.

My experience as a student and now as an employee is full-circle. I am able to embrace our differences, understand life cycles and have the ability to relate to the students at MCC with real-life experiences.

As an MCC student, I was supported and encouraged by those who believed in me. Now it is my turn to believe in and encourage our students through my work as a career skills coach.”

**-Ty Wagner**  
MCC career skills coach



“When I began working at MCC a little more than 10 years ago, I realized that I could complete an associate degree while employed at the College. I started taking classes in 2014 and graduated with an Associate in Applied Science in General Studies in 2021. I was honored to share the story of the path I took to complete my associate degree at the 2021 MCC Commencement Ceremony, at which my grandson and I both graduated with our general studies degrees.

Taking classes at MCC encouraged me to expand my knowledge and provided insight into some of the challenges and time commitments that all students face, both traditional and nontraditional. Taking on-campus and online classes allowed me to interact with students of all ages and from other backgrounds. MCC represents an education path for many different people in so many different stages in their lives.

As I said in my graduation speech, ‘You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream,’ a quote by C.S. Lewis. I think my role at the College is to encourage students of all ages to be curious and never stop learning. Education is something we can do all our life, and it’s never too late to take a class or learn something new.”

**-Connie Taylor**  
MCC Academic Affairs, business associate

# POSITIVELY CHARGED:

## MCC alum Depree Seavers is an electrician with a community mission

As he drilled holes, laid conduit and ran new wiring in the gutted old home, Jason Gentry remembered visiting it as a child. The corner lot near 30th and Vane streets in North Omaha, just blocks from the Metropolitan Community College Fort Omaha Campus, was the site of a fatal fire in 2020. Gentry's dad, an Omaha firefighter, was on the crew that put the blaze out that ended one life, destroyed a home and damaged other nearby residences.

"I used to come here and get two-dollar bills from the man who lived here. All the kids in the neighborhood did," said Gentry, a 20-year-old MCC electrical technology student.

He worked on another home earlier this week on North 38th Street that had been rescued from the City of Omaha's list of condemned houses. Restoring it required a complete overhaul of the electrical work.

Gentry, who is working as an electrician apprentice during his second year of pursuing an associate degree at MCC, said he and his classmates are gaining valuable experience working for Black Power Redevelopers. The company is owned by Depree Seavers, an MCC alum who supports the College's electrical technology students on the route to becoming electricians with paid, credit-earning internships.

"Working and rebuilding in the community I grew up in is definitely the best part," Gentry said of his work with Seavers.

Seavers, 29, has maintained a close connection to MCC since enrolling in the 2012 fall quarter. He earned associate degrees in electrical technology (2014) and paramedicine (2017) and became a certified firefighter through the College (2020). Since founding Black Power Redevelopers in 2018, he's employed seven MCC students as apprentices.



A 2011 Benson High School graduate, Seavers has a passion for taking on projects in North Omaha. He passed his licensure exam as a master electrician in September, giving him the ability to pull permits and secure more work, including his first project with Habitat for Humanity.

"My goal is to redevelop the community by making safer homes. I want the [North Omaha] community to have the same luxury as the homes that are out west," Seavers said. "I see a lot of homes [in North Omaha] that have serious electrical hazards, panels that aren't fused right — homes that just aren't safe."

"I do projects for everyone. Everyone needs a good electrician, but mainly, I started this business to support my people and give them the opportunity to have a good electrician."

Part of how Seavers fulfills the mission of his company is sharing his experience through community service. Over the summer, he partnered with Step-Up Omaha!, an Empowerment Network Collaborative employment initiative that recruits, trains and places Omaha youth and young adults in paid summer jobs and work experience opportunities to strengthen the next generation of the workforce. A group of high school students learned on-the-job skills from Seavers working with tools, using ladders, installing electrical boxes and learning about safety and how to work with customers.

"They hung around with us for about two months, and now they have a little knowledge about an electrical panel, and what's safe and not safe," Seavers said.

In addition to electrical work, the long-term goal for his company is to grow into real estate development, he said.

One of his goals as a landlord is to build trust and dignity in the tenant-landlord relationship. Those values are shaped by one particularly impactful experience he had on a service call to a mother and daughter living in North Omaha.

"The landlord was treating his tenants as if they were nobody, and we were over there fixing some electrical hazards, and while we were installing a plug for a stove, the young lady said, 'I see why my mom doesn't like to rent. I see why she wants to own the house,'" Seavers recalled. "I don't ever want to be that type of person if I was to have someone renting from me."

Seavers recently purchased his first duplex, taking an important step toward his goal. But the first step he made to pursue a career as an electrician at MCC is the one that made everything that has happened since possible.



## A conduit of opportunity and growth

When first enrolling at MCC and trying to decide what career path to take, Seavers credits one-on-one experiences with advisors and instructors in helping to envision himself in a career as an electrician. Seavers said he's also glad he followed advice he received from Kyran Connor, MCC executive director of the South Omaha Campus.

Connor recommended Seavers learn a trade "and make some good money while you're young." That brought him into the classroom of Dave Horst, a now retired MCC instructor who helped Seavers develop a technical understanding of electrical technology.

"You grow up all your life using electricity but never really understanding or having an awareness of how it works," Seavers said. "Mr. Horst was a good teacher that I could connect with, and he taught the class in a way I could understand. When the teaching is great, you fall in love with the class."

Devin Smith, a 20-year-old Omaha South High School grad, is finding the same connection at MCC that was awaiting Seavers when he decided to pursue an associate in electrical technology.

Smith was a promising offensive lineman in high school with an offer to play Division I college football at the University of Wyoming. But life took a different turn when he found out at 17 he was going to be a dad and needed to provide for his daughter.



"I had to think of different ways that I could provide for my family. I talked to my counselors and had a lot of uncomfortable conversations, but it all helped me grow and learn how to be a man," Smith said.

Smith said the education he's receiving at the Fort Omaha Campus prepared him well for the experience he's gaining in the field with Seavers. Smith credits his instructor, Zach Pechacek, with helping him understand the technical aspects of the work, like wiring up a panel, but also see the bigger picture. He recalls a formative discussion he had with Pechacek about what it takes to make it in the real world in the trade.

"[Pechacek] told me how it was and never lied to me. He's a really good teacher. I have had him most of my college career, and he has really set me up for success," Smith said. "To this day, he says if I ever need help just to call him."



## Betting on himself

After earning his associate in electrical technology in 2014, Seavers started gaining experience in the industry but continued working toward his associate degree as a paramedic and then his fire science certification. After working with a few different electricians and doing work on the side in his free time — the infancy stages of Black Power Redevelopers — he was hired as a part-time firefighter with the Bellevue Fire Department. When it became a full-time department, Seavers had a decision to make: go all in on Black Power Redevelopers or be a full-time firefighter.

The allure of being his own boss was the deciding factor for choosing the electrician route.

"When you work for somebody else, you're limited on how much you can make and how many hours you can work. At Black Power Redevelopers, I can work as long as I want and the hours I want. The sky is the limit," Seavers said.

In June 2020, Seavers took out a small business loan for \$25,000 to buy his first work truck, hired his first employees shortly after and started building his customer base. In 2021, he generated more than six figures in billable work, and his goal is to do more than \$1 million in projects by the close of 2022, which he said is within reach.

"It's hard. I am an African American coming from poverty, so starting up a business was not easy because I didn't have any funding. I didn't really have anyone pushing me along. All of this came from doing good business, making connections and meeting people in the community," Seavers said.

Long odds and high bars don't discourage Seavers. He was the first boy to graduate high school in his extended family in more than 40 years, and before his younger brother earned a bachelor's degree, was the only one in his family to attend college.

"What's a little funny is I wasn't that kid who had a 4.0 GPA. I didn't take honors classes. When you look back at my transcripts coming out of high school, I think people probably thought, 'God, I don't really see this kid going far,'" Seavers said. "I always applied myself and did my homework, but I wasn't good at taking tests. Something just happened in college."

Good things continue to happen by doing the right thing for his customers, he said. He credits word of mouth to building his business, which is licensed, insured and bonded and has added two more work trucks.

"People truly are inspired by what I'm doing. It's challenging, but it's also pretty fun," Seavers said.



## Creating connection to the bigger picture

Seavers and two MCC apprentices, Smith and Tia Bowles, entered a Benson home that turned 100 years old in 2022. It was damaged by the straight-line winds that wiped out power for more than 100,000 Omaha residents in July 2021 and was in need of minor electrical repairs.

The scope of work was to install three new outlets to the exterior of the home, repair nonworking outlets in the garage and fix a doorbell that never worked when the new owners bought the home in 2018.

It was only the second day on the job for Bowles. Seavers looked up to the ceiling, pointed to the wiring and instructed her to survey the electrical lines.

"I want you to understand the whole picture, how everything fits together," Seavers said.



The discouraged homeowner said he attempted to have two companies come to the house to bid on the job and called around a half-dozen others to get quotes, but they never called back.

Of the two that responded, one came to the house but never provided an estimate despite attempted follow-ups; the other didn't show up for a virtual appointment and never responded to a request to reschedule.

Seavers came to the house to bid the job on Friday, Sept. 2, and Smith and Bowles completed the work in a matter of hours on Sept. 6. While doing the work, Seavers identified the electrical line to the doorbell and realized it was difficult to access. It would require ripping out plaster and would also cost hundreds more in labor than initially thought. Seavers explained to the homeowner what the repair would entail and the additional cost.

Seavers told his customer he could do the work in a day, but he also shared that if the homeowner wasn't set on having a traditional chime, a video doorbell system would be a more affordable and modern alternative. The homeowner went with his recommendation.

"Working for Depree is actually teaching me how to run a business, not just learning how to be an employee," Gentry said. "He looks at us like family. Just learning from him makes me want to work harder, not only to look good for the people we're working for — I want to look good for my boss."

Smith, who spent the summer working with Seavers, said he knows he's getting an education

that goes beyond circuit breakers — a current has been established that is channeling into other, more important areas of his life.

"I've learned so much these past three months working with Depree," Smith said. "He's taught me a lot about services, codes and, in general, just how to be a better man. Ever since I joined his company, I have seen a lot of improvement in myself."

Seavers said getting his master electrician license was "a dream come true" that solidifies his career.

"I want to focus on community service, Black Power Redevelopers and mentoring youth in becoming electricians," Seavers said.

Seavers also hopes to be a good example to his 6-year-old son, Messiah — who already has foundational knowledge about electricity from coming to jobs with his dad over the summer — as well as his 2-year-old daughter, Mariah, and another baby girl, Miah, due this month.

With the start of the new fall quarter, new students studying electrical technology at MCC will enter the program, and Seavers will continue to do what he can to share his experience with them.

"Just because you know how to run wires doesn't mean you understand it. It's not as easy as red goes to red, black goes to black and white to white. It gets a lot trickier than that," Seavers said. "That's why I preach to people to go to school and get that knowledge so they have an easier time passing the test to get their license."



**For more information on the MCC electrical technology program, visit [mccneb.edu/Electrical-Technology](http://mccneb.edu/Electrical-Technology).**



# THIS MAGIC MOMENT:



## First-generation college student gets scholarship surprise from NBA great

Darnell Jackson Jr. may be too young to know that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and James Worthy were basketball players with the Los Angeles Lakers during the 1980s, but the 18-year-old can relate to how those Hall-of-Famers were able to maximize opportunities created by their teammate Magic Johnson, though.

Johnson had an arsenal of passes so dazzling during his playing days, his team became known as the “Showtime Lakers” because of the entertainment value of their basketball skill. They won five NBA championships in the 1980s. In basketball retirement, Johnson is chairman and CEO of Magic Johnson Enterprises, an investment conglomerate with products and services that focus primarily on ethnically diverse and underserved urban communities.

Johnson was the keynote speaker at an Empowerment Network event in Omaha in June. During his NBA career, he made 9,887 passes that led directly to points for his teammates — sixth most in the history of the league. Johnson was up to his old tricks when he dished out a big assist to Jackson: he told the Benson High School graduate he’d be footing the bill for his college education at Metropolitan Community College.

“I was just going there to hear what he had to say,” said Jackson, a wide receiver in high school and a big Kansas City Chiefs fan who hopes to be a college football coach someday. “I’d seen some highlights of him (Johnson) and knew he had five rings.”

Johnson shared a pivotal moment that happened during his freshman year of high school. His teacher pointed out that he was reading at a seventh grade level. Johnson had to go to summer school to catch up.

“I had challenges in my life, but I met them head on. You can do anything you want in life, but it has to be through education,” Johnson said.

Jackson said when he walked into the event, college wasn’t an option he was considering. No one in his family had gone before him, and he didn’t think he could afford it.

“I wasn’t even thinking about it. I didn’t know what I was going to do after high school,” Jackson said. In the moments after Johnson called any high school senior to the stage (Jackson was the only one in

the audience) to tell him his college education was covered, he admitted it hadn’t fully sunk in what had just occurred, but he responded appropriately.

“I thanked him for the opportunity, and I told him I won’t let him down,” Jackson said.

Reality set in when he came home.

“It was amazing. My grandfather was there, my dad was there and my little cousins and my little brother. It was perfect, especially for my cousins and little brother to be there because I want to be a role model for them. I’m the first. Now I’m setting an example for the next ones coming up,” Jackson said.

Jackson is following through on his word. He registered and completed a summer class and is enrolled in five classes this fall. He is focusing on his general education credits with introductory courses in business, English composition, college writing, sociology and Black history.

Aside from the content in the curriculum, he’s also absorbing important life lessons since graduating high school, one being that you can’t be in the right place at the right time if you don’t show up. Like the day he had an opportunity to go to the Empowerment Network event or the first days of class during the summer and fall quarters.

“In good academic standing” his transcript reads. To others who might not be thinking about college like he wasn’t just a few months ago, he offers this advice:

“You never know until you try. Don’t believe what other people say about it. Go see for yourself,” Jackson said.

MCC is set to award more than \$4 million in scholarships in the 2022-23 academic year — it’s largest amount in recent history. In addition to the unique scholarship Johnson provided to Jackson, MCC offers more than 150 scholarship programs each year. Students who want to apply need only complete a single application. The College will determine eligible funding. Visit [mccneb.edu/Scholarships](http://mccneb.edu/Scholarships) to apply.

**For organizations interested in providing scholarship opportunities to MCC students, contact the scholarships office at [scholarships@mccneb.edu](mailto:scholarships@mccneb.edu).**



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## FOUR-ALARM OPPORTUNITIES IN A FOUR-COUNTY REGION

Brian Davis will never forget the adrenaline that came the first time he heard the alarm sound at the Bennington Fire Department. He and the team gathered their gear, jumped into the firetruck and rushed to the burning house near Stone Creek Golf Course in northwest Omaha. It was just a stone's throw from his training ground on "the Hill" at the Metropolitan Community College Applied Technology Center.

But this was the real thing — his first fire as a member of the department.

When they arrived at the scene, Davis was "on the nozzle" — the first in line on the hose line, confronting the intense flames inside with a powerful blast of water.

"My heart was beating 150 miles an hour, and I had such tunnel vision on pulling that line to the front. I couldn't believe it was actually happening and all the education and hard work was about to pay off," Davis said.

Temperatures reached heights he'd never experienced before. He couldn't see anything — thick black smoke filled the air from a house full of synthetic materials engulfed in flames. The only line of sight is often a few inches of visibility above

the floor, a crevice hiding under rising heat. The senses of touch, hearing and smell take on much more importance, Davis said.

"It's not like TV. Once you put water on the fire, it goes pitch black other than a little orange glow. With all the synthetic materials that are in houses nowadays, it's dark, black, turbulent smoke everywhere," Davis said. "So you watch the smoke going over your head and see what direction it's pulling, and that's where you need to go to put out the fire. You can feel where the heat is getting stronger versus where it's getting weaker and fading."

"You want to get that fire out as quickly as possible, and you feel terrible for the homeowner. At the same time, it's rewarding because it is what I trained for. This is the glory of the job," Davis said.

Davis is one of the first nine full-time, paid members of the Bennington Fire Department. Seven members of the first class received their fire science technology training and certification from MCC. Davis is on track to finish his Associate in Applied Science in Fire Science Technology in spring 2023, an achievement that can create opportunities for advancement in the future.

But right now, his focus is on building the traditions of the new Bennington department. He works as closely with his coworkers as professionals in any industry can — cooking, cleaning, eating and bunking together. And entrusting their lives to one another. That's life in the firehouse, where Davis spends 10, 24-hour shifts each month.

"I was number six out of the nine hired, so it's pretty cool that no matter how many people they hire, how the department grows, I'll be one of the only guys with a single-digit badge number," Davis said. "It's a neat opportunity. We're able to kind of set the tone for how we want the department to move on going forward."

## GROWING A FIRE SCIENCE TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM FOR A GROWING REGION

As the MCC four-county service area continues to grow, with it comes an increased need for more robust fire and emergency services. Like Bennington, areas that surround the Omaha metro area have seen their fire departments evolve from volunteer departments to paid, full-time departments. The College's four-county area (Douglas, Dodge, Sarpy and Washington) is home to more than half of Nebraska's 1,800 paid/paid-per-call firefighters.

Volunteer departments still play a critical role in serving a mostly rural state. Of the more than 17,200 firefighters that serve Nebraska communities, more than 15,400 are unpaid volunteers.

Scott Fitzpatrick, battalion chief of fire prevention/public education for the Omaha Fire Department, said the opportunity for a career in firefighting is more accessible than ever before. He and Jeffrey "Boomer" Strawn, MCC fire science technology program director, said there are three main drivers of career opportunities locally and nationally — the development of the four-county area, the pace of American life and the need to keep pace with retiring firefighters, who generally retire earlier than other workers due to the physical demands of the career.

"People are busier and don't have the same amount of time to give as they did 25 years ago," Fitzpatrick said. "It's harder to have volunteer departments in towns like Bellevue that have 60,000 people now or communities that are growing like Gretna."

Fitzpatrick said the Omaha Fire Department opens its doors to applicants every two years. When he joined the department 22 years ago, he was one of about 1,600 who applied; last spring, about 600 applied.

"There is plenty of opportunity if you have the right education and experience to quickly join the workforce as a paid firefighter. It's very obtainable right now," Fitzpatrick said. "There are a lot of departments in the area that are looking for people all the time now."

Strawn, who is also an EMS and fire science instructor, said he routinely sees MCC students make quick entry into the field while still working on their associate degrees. The Fremont Fire Department recently added three to its growing department, and all three came through MCC, Strawn said. Other MCC students find work beyond the four-county region, including metropolitan departments in Lincoln, Nebraska; Kansas City, Missouri; and Memphis, Tennessee.

"I see the great opportunities that our students are getting now, and it's only going to get better because as our workforce ages, the need for replacement is huge," Strawn said.



**JEFFREY "BOOMER" STRAWN**

## EXTENDING THE FIRE SCIENCE CAREER LADDER TO REACH FURTHER IN THE COMMUNITY

Strawn joined the College 10 years ago. His goal was to take MCC fire science technology from infancy to maturity to better serve the evolving needs of the area. The program has grown under his leadership.

The College added an immersive virtual reality fire simulator at the Applied Technology Center in 2021. It is one of the latest examples of MCC investments in innovative training that creates immersive learning experiences for students. Offutt Air Force Base and the Houston Fire Department use the same simulation technology, Strawn said.

The past decade has also been characterized by community outreach that has grown the program from a new offering into a one-of-a-kind, accessible and relevant training model that serves the region and beyond. Strawn attributes its progression to outreach efforts in area high schools, youth programs, and relationship-building and coordination with area fire departments.

"We are the premier destination for students who want to become firefighters, as well as those who are in fire service already and looking to get

promoted to become a captain or battalion chief by completing their degree," Strawn said.

Strawn said what makes the College's program unique is it prepares the student who wants to make firefighting a full-time career, but it also provides continuing education and training for volunteer departments in the four-county area such as those in Ralston, Gretna, Springfield, Irvington, Ponca Hills, Blair and Fort Calhoun.

"If you're a volunteer firefighter in Gretna or Springfield, you're working a full-time job, plus responding to 1,500 calls a year. Finding time for training is tough, so to be able to offer them training at night or on weekends, specific to those agencies, that's what we like doing. It's all about making the program more accessible to agencies," Strawn said.

Strawn, who grew up in a family of firefighters and spent the first half of his career as a firefighter, said he's fortunate to have the support of the College to evolve the program.

"From grain bin rescues to live fires, auto extrication using the Jaws of Life and aerial operations, there's a whole litany of services that we provide that are beneficial to the four counties. And we've seen community partnerships grow exponentially to offer them," Strawn said.



Fitzpatrick said the hands-on training provided through the MCC fire science technology program created an important new postsecondary educational offering.

“When I was first on the job, all the fire departments encouraged everyone to at least get their associate degree, and the only place to do that was in Lincoln. Once MCC came along with this program, it really helped,” Fitzpatrick said. “We had a lot of guys who started completing their associate there, and [MCC] offered a better fire protection technology class. It wasn’t all just book learning, it had more pertinent, hands-on information — what you really need to know when you’re in the field.”

Fitzpatrick said a strength of the College’s program is the credibility of those administering it.

“Having instructors who have been captains of paid departments and have done it for 20-plus years, and some who are still doing it and coming in to teach on their days off, I think that is huge,” Fitzpatrick said.

## A PATHWAY TO A BADGE BY 20

Davis, 20, said he officially started on his path to be a firefighter through the MCC Career Academy at Ralston High School. But he had an inkling several

years before getting to high school that’s what he wanted to do for a living someday.

“I had my birthday party at a fire station when I was like 10 years old,” Davis said.

Strawn said reaching a 10-year-old child like Davis was an opportunity MCC recognized. The College launched a program in partnership with DREAM Organization at Howard Kennedy Elementary School, located at North 30th and Binney streets, where 100% of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch.

“There was a need for the firefighters to be seen in the community. We needed to be a positive influence and could accomplish that through public education, helping second- to fifth-grade students understand that there needs to be a working smoke detector on each level of the house,” Strawn said.

After sparking initial interest in the elementary grades, Strawn said creating a program for continued engagement through high school was vital. With the fire science program being hosted at the MCC Applied Technology Center near 120th and State streets, launching a pilot program at nearby Omaha Northwest High School made sense. Cheryl Logan, who was the newly hired Omaha Public School superintendent, agreed.



"[Logan] opened up the high school academy at Northwest almost immediately, so right in our backyard, we've had students that come through Howard Kennedy and then get on the inside track their junior and senior years at Northwest High School. We have had a lot of success with that."

Strawn said the Tri-County Fire Corps Exploring Program was created in 2018 in collaboration with the Omaha Fire Department and other departments surrounding the Omaha area to reach students outside of the Howard Kennedy-Northwest pathway. Students ages 16-20 participate in hands-on firefighting and EMT learning experiences by touring 10 different fire stations in Omaha and surrounding communities on Saturdays, as well as one session at MCC. Those who complete the 11-week program leave with CPR and Stop the Bleed certifications. The program is offered twice each year.

"The College's involvement [in the Tri-County Fire Corps Exploring Program] has been nothing short of great from day one to getting this program rolling. Right in our backyard, it helps the firefighters of the future," Fitzpatrick said.

Like many of the College's programs, the accelerated path to a lucrative career is appealing and affordable. The majority of MCC fire science technology students are self-pay, forgoing taking on student loans to complete their certification or associate degree.

"We know there are students out there who don't necessarily want to pursue a four-year degree, who are community-driven — students who want to come in, get into the bunker with a new set of gear and learn through experience," Strawn said.



## FAST TRACKS TO REWARDING CAREERS, STRONG BONDS WITH COWORKERS AND COMMUNITY

Biye Belew, 20, will move to Tennessee to join the Memphis Fire Department in March 2023. He was introduced to the College's fire science technology program by way of the nonprofit, Avenue Scholars, while attending Papillion-La Vista High School, a partner school.

Avenue Scholars provides comprehensive, individualized support services to help Omaha-area students identify, prepare for and enter financially sustaining, high-demand careers that require an associate degree or less. Eligibility is based on financial need.

A program-sponsored visit to Omaha Fire Station #1 on Jackson Street captured his interest. Working with a career coach and doing more research on the opportunities in the field helped sustain it. Together, they worked through the uncertainty that comes with making big life decisions.

"I definitely wouldn't have wound up in fire science without help," Belew said. "I was nervous about the college experience, and I didn't want to regret spending time and money working on a degree and not liking it or using it."

Belew said participating in the program helped him finish high school with an EMT academy license in hand. He then earned an associate in paramedicine at MCC and is on track to finish an associate in fire science technology in the summer of 2023.

Belew said he feels fortunate to have a good-paying job so soon after high school. A couple weeks before moving to his new home, he was looking forward to sampling the quality music and food Memphis offers in abundance. He's also eager to put his training into practice on the job.

"I am excited to use all the skills I have been taught and finally have a career in firefighting," Belew said.

Davis said what he enjoys most about his new career is the variety and camaraderie that comes with it. No day is exactly the same. Over a 10-day period, Davis works five 24-hour shifts. Six consecutive off days follow, and the schedule repeats.

Firefighters work nearly 1,000 more hours in a year than a typical 9-to-5 employee. From a compensation standpoint, Davis said he's in a comfortable place early in his career. He earns more than \$50,000 a year with good benefits and little debt.



"A lot of my friends who I went to high school with are still taking classes and working at grocery stores and things like that. It's really cool to be able to say that I have a full-time career at this age," Davis said. "I have great health, dental and vision insurance, have a retirement plan and a Roth, and I get paid really well. I can't complain. I'm really lucky to be in the position that I'm in."

The day is filled with work routines like maintenance and preparation, as well as the typical duties of any residence like cooking and cleaning. Besides responding to fires, Davis said the crew responds to medical events and other emergency response services, as well as educating the public on fire safety.

"There's a lot of public outreach that we're involved in," Davis said. "I remember when I had to give my first fire safety presentation at the Jackson station to about 60 children. I like public speaking, but it can be nerve-racking. [The MCC fire science program] teaches you how to interact with the public. I didn't really think about that when I was starting, but it's definitely important to make sure that everybody's educated and feels safe."

When he's interacting with the kids who look up to him at those events, a feeling of satisfaction comes with it. As he makes eye contact when he's teaching them lessons, something familiar reflects back.

"It's nice to be able to give back and return the favor because I can see myself in some of those kids' eyes. Hopefully I can inspire somebody to take the path that I took," Davis said.

It's not something that can be tracked, but Fitzpatrick said the inspiration factor is how a lot of careers in firefighting start. The MCC fire science technology program is there to provide the academic framework, hands-on training and community outreach to harness that attraction to grow into a sustainable career in the field.

"This partnership [with MCC] has been invaluable," Fitzpatrick said. "Firefighters that have their degree or EMT training from the College before coming on with us has helped out the Omaha Fire Department. When they go through [our training], it's a review for them. We get better quality and better educated people."



**For more information on the MCC fire science technology program, visit [mccneb.edu/Fire-Science](http://mccneb.edu/Fire-Science).**



# PROGRAM PIONEERS:

## First cohort of students complete certifications at MCC Rapid IT Employment Academy

"I knew I'd see you here," said Josh Trudell as his classmate Biova Lawson Fessou walked in on graduation day. When they first met in April, neither knew then if the federally funded information technology training program they were stepping in to would lead to better opportunities in the second halves of their careers.

Fessou, 48, smiled and shook hands with Trudell, 42, to celebrate the completion of their work at the Metropolitan Community College Rapid IT Employment Academy. The program is hosted in the historic Ashton building in north downtown within the emerging Millwork Commons community. The tech-centric business district is a future-focused endeavor happening within the footprint of Omaha's industrial past — a fitting location for students who aspire to rejuvenate their careers in a high-demand field.

Trudell and Fessou were among the first cohort of MCC students to successfully complete the 12-week program. Participants learn technologies and skills needed to support a hybrid workforce. After passing the CompTIA Core 1 and Core 2 exams, students are eligible to take the CompTIA A+ certification exam, an industry-recognized certification key to launching a career in IT. The grant tied to the program provides participants vouchers for two attempts to pass the CompTIA A+ exam. At the time of publication, all 11 participants had completed the program and four had earned their CompTIA A+ certification.

Representatives from local tech companies who partner with MCC to deliver the program attended the completion ceremony to celebrate the 11 students they so badly need to enter the IT workforce. Occupations in the sector are projected to increase 13% by 2030, but a skills gap already exists for these positions, and people of color and women are underrepresented in the industry.

Robert Caldwell, who previously served as the MCC project manager for the Rapid IT Training and Employment Initiative, said the program is designed to address these industry challenges. Tuition is fully funded for individuals who meet federal grant eligibility requirements, a value Caldwell estimates to amount to between \$4,000 and \$6,000.

The federal initiative is designed to prepare individuals who are unemployed, underemployed or underrepresented in it for careers in this field. The goal is to add 350 technology workers to the regional job market by 2026.

"There is a high-talent workforce locally and a lot of opportunity for employment in IT in general, but many people do need upskilling to fill these roles," Caldwell said. "The academy provides a great opportunity for people who have an interest in working with technology or are seeking to change careers to a high-demand, high-wage industry with strong potential for advancement."



## Strength of place, programs and partnerships

MCC is one of five organizations in the country selected to participate in the U.S. Department of Labor project, underscoring the Midwest's vitality to the national tech sector, as well as the College's ability to execute the program. In addition to the MCC academies in Omaha and Fremont, which draw students from urban and rural backgrounds, organizations based in the tech hubs of San Francisco, Dallas, Denver and Philadelphia were also awarded federal funding.

"On a national level, MCC is on the forefront with taking on these really innovative and competitive grants, and we're representing very well in the pool of sites for this program. We're doing a lot of things that other community colleges are not doing or are just beginning to scratch the surface with," Caldwell said.

In addition to being located in a tech-enabled city like Omaha, the College's strategic relationships positioned it to secure the grant funding. Showing their support, representatives from Lutz & Company, Oriental Trading, WP Engine and more were on hand to celebrate students' completion in August, and in some cases, welcome students who completed the program into roles with their companies.

Scott Kroeger, director of sales and operations for Lutz Technology, a local provider of managed technology, custom software development and creative services, said it was a "no-brainer" to get involved with the program. Lutz is a multiyear MCC completion ceremony sponsor.

The federal initiative is designed to prepare individuals who are unemployed, underemployed or underrepresented for careers in IT. The goal is to add 350 technology workers to the regional job market by 2026.

"As our hiring needs continue to grow, the academy does a lot of the homework and screening for us to find good candidates. Instead of casting with a wide net, I'm fishing in a pond that has been well stocked because of [the College's] vetting ability," Kroeger said. "Just like students going through med school, through our network, we can help them find what they are truly looking for in the world of IT during their odyssey."

During training, students toured local technology companies and representatives also dropped in on classes to give an overview of working in the industry and the expansive careers that fall under the technology umbrella. The program teaches foundational IT skills, and students leave the accelerated delivery format with industry-recognized certifications that can open doors to career opportunities in cybersecurity; data backup, recovery and storage; device configuration; networking; operating systems; technical support; and troubleshooting.



## A diverse cohort

The first students to earn their certifications ranged from 20 to 48 years old, coming from different career experiences, nationalities, ethnicities and motivations for pursuing the program. What unites them is a desire to establish footing in an industry ripe with opportunity.

Kamden Stover's initial interest in IT came about from online gaming. He previously attended a four-year college to work on a degree in the field but found a better fit in the MCC program. With two classes a week and the ability to do some of the learning independently, the 20-year-old said the pace of the program worked well as did its location. MCC IT Express sits within an up-and-coming mixed-use property with restaurants, a coffee shop and lots of independent working space open to the public.

"The fact that I was able to come back to this passion I have — completing this program means so much more than a piece of paper to me," Stover said.

It also helped him land a paid internship with Lutz where he will dive deeper into cybersecurity.

Stover also enjoyed the completion ceremony itself. As a 2020 Papillion-La Vista High School graduate, he didn't have an in-person graduation to celebrate his rite of passage because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the achievement with peers, instructors and industry partners was meaningful, he said.

"It was a really neat feeling and made me feel accomplished," Stover said.

Like Stover, Zach Chohon had a natural curiosity about technology that led him to the program, mainly developed from being the unofficial expert for technology issues at every job he has ever held.

"I thought to myself, 'Well, I'm doing this kind of stuff all the time, so I might as well get credit for it,'" Chohon said.

Chohon made it official. He earned his CompTIA A+ certification, and with it in place, he understands it's just the beginning of the learning process in the field, which excites him.

"IT is just about learning and getting in that mindset. Technology is always changing, and you're always going to need to learn new things," Chohon said.

Fessou, who grew up in the West African country of Togo, said he is a troubleshooter by nature. He had some previous computer science experience from going to college in Togo and Ghana, and after hearing about the program from a friend at church, he decided to pursue an opportunity to return to the field.

Fessou works as a full-time maintenance technician at Tyson Foods diagnosing, maintaining and repairing production equipment. He is seeking to apply lessons learned about the interworking of machinery to operating a computer network.

"As a child, I saw my big brother repairing televisions, radios and all kinds of electronic devices, so I became interested in making repairs. I liked to touch everything to understand their functions," Fessou said. "I always have dreamed of making a career in computer science, and networking is the area I am aiming for because the world today is like a planetary village since everything is so interconnected. I want to be a part of that."

Trudell had no prior IT experience before entering the program and said he was at a crossroads in his life when he heard about the academy, frustrated by a lack of concentrated career experience. With varied work experience in retail, manufacturing, warehousing and call center support, he wanted to find a career with more sustainable employment opportunities and began working on his associate degree last year at MCC.

"This whole cybersecurity push is like a Hail Mary pass in trying to refocus and reframe my life. I was in a dark place because I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere and thought I might be a little late in the game to be trying this," Trudell said.

An MCC counselor told him about the program. He had his doubts about whether he would be accepted, and when he found out he was one of the first four chosen out of more than 200 applicants, it gave him a renewed sense of purpose.

"It's highly competitive, and it's a lot of work to even apply, so when I found out I got in out of 200-some people, I thought, 'I'm going to do everything it takes,'" Trudell said.

Madhu Gurung, who recently moved with her family to Omaha by way of Seattle, said the program provides a good opportunity for her to return to the workforce after leaving it to raise her second child. Before moving to Omaha, she had worked in data entry and customer service roles and said her interest in studying data science is what led her to the academy.

Gurung said she enjoyed being in the first group of students to complete the certification. In addition to being among the first in the new program, completing it as a woman is an additional source of pride, she said. Women account for only 26.7% of the total tech labor market.

"We can set an example for other students," Gurung said. "They can look at us and say, 'They didn't have any prior experience, and they did it, so why not us?'"



## A career ladder worth climbing

Each student at the completion event said they had some doubts along their paths to certification but felt supported in working through them. In addition to technical skills training, students receive hands-on support, career coaching and access to student resources like tutoring, paid internships and job placement assistance.

"I'm not going to lie, this is a hard course. You spend about four hours in the classroom and about three or four hours at home to make sure you absorb all the content. It may be a hard and daunting course, but you get the support you need. It's 100% worth it," Stover said.

Fessou said working full time while taking classes and the time apart from his wife, Marie, and teenage son, Jacob, were difficult challenges, but proved to be worth the sacrifice. He was nervous he wouldn't have enough time to answer all the questions.

"But as I answered the questions, confidence grew in me because I spent time reading my lessons and assessments. At the end of the exam, I noticed that I was on time, and a few minutes later, I had a smile on my face when I saw, 'Pass.' I said to myself I hadn't wasted time for nothing," Fessou said.

The credits earned in the Rapid IT Academy are transferrable to the College's associate degree program, which develops students for more specialized IT roles.

"The alignment with our credit programs is important," Caldwell said. "If a student comes into this program and completes their certification, they can get nine credit hours that count toward an MCC information technology associate degree. If they want to continue at MCC, there's an avenue for them."

An avenue that can lead to transformative change.

"There is a career ladder here. If students want to move up, gain responsibility and become more specialized, there's so much opportunity to do that. The pay is really good for entry-level jobs, which in some cases start around \$45,000 a year. When you get into tier-two or tier-three positions, you can make six figures in this industry," Caldwell said.

Trudell said it hasn't been easy, but for the first time in a long time, he can feel positive change happening in his life. With his first certification now complete, he is continuing to work on his associate degree in IT. He is maintaining a 3.9 grade-point average and building on his CompTIA A+ certification.

Trudell said he almost missed out on something big. "There's a timing, a universal essence, God — whatever you want to call it — that just comes in at the right time for you to be involved in a situation because I was in a bad place right before I got into this program," Trudell said. "I was going to let school go. I really was. And then the program came in and redirected the current of my life."

**The MCC Rapid IT Employment Academy begins a new cohort each month. For more information about the program or to speak with staff member, visit [mccneb.edu/RapidIT](http://mccneb.edu/RapidIT) and fill out the interest inquiry form.**

# MCC WIDENING PATHWAY TO COLLEGE FOR NEBRASKA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

In an age when student loan forgiveness is a part of the conversation, Metropolitan Community College is changing the conversation by taking debt out of the equation for Nebraska high school students who want to earn college credits before they graduate.

MCC is providing college tuition at no cost on the front end for the next three academic years, making college more accessible to high school students than ever before in the four-county region it serves.

Tuition and facility fees for all the College's high school enrollment programs will be waived thanks to American Rescue Plan Act funding made available to Nebraska community colleges by the state legislature's approval of Legislative Bill 1014.

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to earn college credits toward MCC career degrees or transfer baccalaureate degrees while concurrently working on their high school diplomas. More than 100,000 students are enrolled in Nebraska high schools, and all of them are eligible for tuition-free college credits at MCC.

"Rather than getting pulled into a loan situation and wondering if it is something that will need to be paid off or forgiven, what we're doing with this funding is more preemptive," said Tom McDonnell, Ed.D., MCC vice president for academic affairs. "This is a phenomenal opportunity to make a huge difference in access to postsecondary education."

Dual credit programs have been on the rise nationally, and especially at MCC, for more than a decade. McDonnell sees that as a reflection of the community college's growing role in preparing and transitioning students into postsecondary education.

McDonnell said the College's investment in students underscores the impact MCC believes

it can make by widening the pathway to college and adding an express lane to degree or program completion. Each Nebraska community college was awarded ARPA funding in proportion to the size of its enrollment. Each institution has the ability to allocate funding based on what works best in its community.

McDonnell said the College's financial vitality and strong working partnerships with area school districts made it possible to provide dual enrollment tuition waivers to Nebraska high school students. Tuition waivers apply across all five MCC dual enrollment programs — Career Academy, CollegeNOW!, Concurrent Enrollment, Gateway to College and Kickstart Online Institute.

"Historically, we run a little leaner and have been incredibly good stewards of our resources to begin with, so we were in the financial position to maximize those funds," McDonnell said. "We thought we could do the most good for our constituents by investing in students."

Before the 2022-23 academic year, Nebraska high school students had received half-price dual enrollment classes at MCC. Emmalee Sheppard, a senior at Fremont High School, who has been taking college classes on location at Fremont High School since her sophomore year, said it's a "an easy decision" to knock out general education credits. They will transfer toward the bachelor degree she plans to pursue at a four-year university after graduating.

"I've already taken all the necessary classes for high school that I need to graduate, so I've got to get a jumpstart on my college classes," said Sheppard, who is using the dual enrollment classes to help her get a better idea of the three majors she is considering — sociology, marketing and psychology.

***"I FEEL LIKE MCC REALLY PREPARES YOU FOR OTHER STEPS IN LIFE AND RELIEVES ME OF ANY STRESS OR ANXIETY ABOUT GOING TO COLLEGE."***



**MCC CAN  
HELP SAVE**

**\$1,900**

**PER CLASS \***

Three of the classes she is currently taking in high school this fall — Macroeconomics, English Composition I and English Composition II — also count toward her undergraduate degree. Before this school year began, she had already earned 18.5 credit hours. She currently maintains a 4.0 GPA at MCC and has yet to take a class on campus.

The four-sport athlete doesn't feel overwhelmed navigating her course load, nor is she so busy that she's missing out on the experiences that make the last year of high school special.

"I'm still making great memories my senior year, like going to football games, spending time with my friends and going shopping," Sheppard said. "College courses take time, but they don't take up all your time. I always find time to do the things that I love."

One of the greatest skills she said she has gained from the experience is time management, an ability that applies to every facet of adult life. She also has a better idea of what to expect in terms of the pace of assignments and the amount of time she needs to reserve for studying in college.

"It is a big step to take a college class while you are in high school, but it's not that hard or far from where you are in high school," Sheppard said. "It's a relief to know that I don't have to worry about what the course load will look like for each class or test-taking strategies. I feel like MCC really prepares you for other steps in life and relieves me of any stress or anxiety about going to college."

It also provides a more palatable answer to the question, "How much will college cost?" With the average cost per credit hour of any four-year institution in 2022 being \$636, a Nebraska high school student can save about \$1,900 per class at MCC through the 2024-25 academic year.

For students looking to enter the workforce immediately after high school, it is feasible to finish high school with an associate degree at MCC. The 2022 graduating class at Millard South High School featured more than 150 students who simultaneously completed MCC associate degrees when they finished high school.

"There's a significant economic impact in terms of the cost savings to the student, but there are also some additional savings related to the cost of attendance by being able to take classes at your home high school, not having to pay room and board or saving on transportation by taking the classes online," McDonnell said.

MCC Career Academy programs are offered on-site at local high schools for welding, automotive, construction, health care, precision machining and more. In some cases, like at Blair High School, MCC faculty travel to the high school to teach classes, McDonnell said.

McDonnell said the College's embrace of dual enrollment programs more than a decade ago is filling an important need in education.

"The dynamic of high school education is changing. We've already proven it — you can knock out some college credits while in high school," McDonnell said.

With more MCC programs reaching area high schools every year, McDonnell said dual enrollment has sustainable momentum in the education system.

"Slowly but surely, one superintendent told another superintendent and more and more school districts have embraced the concept. Now we're off and running," McDonnell said.

\*According to 2022 statistics from the Education Data Initiative

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT MCC HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS, VISIT  
MCCNEB.EDU/SECONDARY-PARTNERSHIPS.**



# SOLVING THE MATH READINESS EQUATION

One thing has remained a constant in Marcia Vergo's career as a math instructor. When she introduces herself to strangers, they reply by telling her they stink at math.

"I hear that a lot," said Vergo, a Metropolitan Community College instructor who started with the College as a math center coordinator.

According to 2020 information from the National Academy of Science, nearly 6 out of every 10 community college students and 1 in 3 four-year college students need developmental math classes to be able to begin attaining their degree. College math readiness is a significant barrier to postsecondary completion — only 25% of students who need developmental math ever complete a degree or program.

Getting more students to come to college with a better understanding of math was the problem Vergo was looking to work on when she went on sabbatical in 2011.

"I could see through my tutoring experience that if students were simply passed through math without really understanding it, they didn't necessarily succeed," Vergo said.

The idea she came back with, and subsequently helped implement at Gretna High School, is now gaining traction as a program model across most of Nebraska's community colleges as part of the collaborative Nebraska Math Readiness Project. The goal of NMRP is "to be the statewide, systematic approach that addresses the low percentage of Nebraska high school students who are college-ready in math upon high school graduation."

"I visited different schools around the country that had a developmental math module. It was guided by a software program, everyone was in a big room working at their own pace but all with a deadline to complete the course. After looking at all the different modules, I came back to my dean and said, 'I think there are so many students who would benefit from this,'" Vergo said.

## Bridging the Math Barrier

### 2021-22 MCC NMRP Student Performance

- 90% completed at least one NMRP class
- 61% considered college-ready (national average is 33%)
- 20% completed MCC credit-level math course



16.8 mean ACT score

MCC piloted its new instructional approach at Gretna High School in 2015, three years before the launch of NMRP, which is designed to support high school students who have the desire to go on to college but need to further develop foundational math skills to succeed on arrival. For the first four years of NMRP, each community college worked independently to boost college-level math proficiency in their academic regions of the state. This year, several of Nebraska's community colleges are working from a dual enrollment model that is similar to the MCC program design. Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to take college classes for credit while still enrolled in high school.

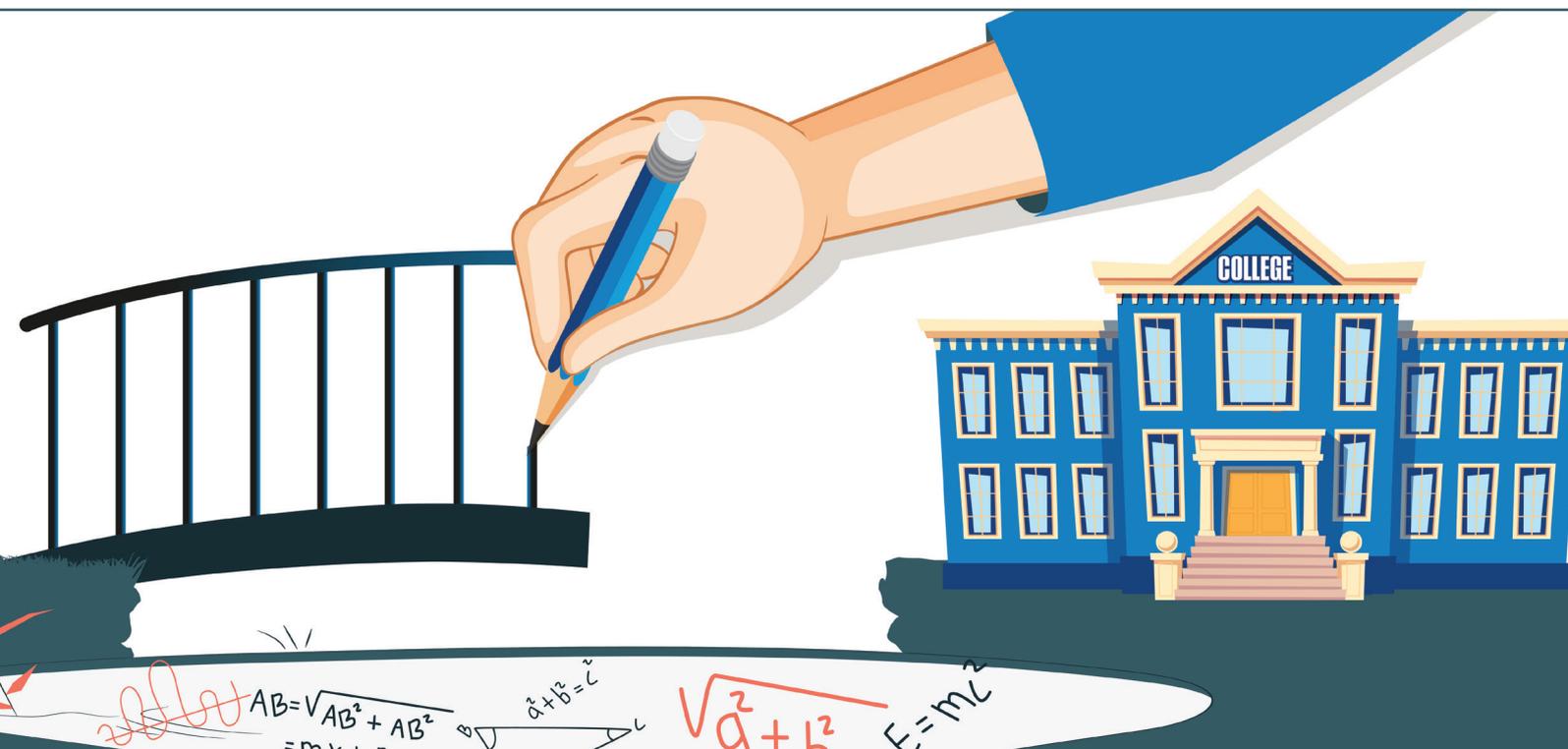
Mike Flesch, MCC dean of math and natural sciences, said reaching students who need developmental math classes for college while they are still in high school is key to the College's program design. First, it is more cost effective since dual enrollment programs at MCC are being offered for free to Nebraska high school students for the next three academic years. Second, developmental math classes taken in high school give students time to brush up on concepts and address gaps in their math background. Flesch said the program helps students gain confidence and take ownership of their learning during the process.

"We're trying to get students to be college-ready and stay out of the developmental loop. We want them to arrive on a college campus ready to succeed in college-level courses," Flesch said. "In NMRP, many can complete the credit-level math class needed for their degree. The program can plant a seed that they are capable and widen their horizons to what is possible after graduation."

The student population enrolling in the NMRP program has a mean ACT score around 16.8. Students who score 20 and below traditionally are not considered college-ready. Most are required to begin in developmental coursework. These students may take the least amount of math in high school that is required, and many avoid taking a math class as a senior. Flesch said the College is encouraging students to take a fourth year of math and use their senior year to solidify their math foundation.

Due to the long-range nature of tracking outcomes, the available data sample is small, but NMRP is showing signs of breaking down the math barrier. Math readiness scores for students in the College's NMRP region are outperforming national averages, and in convincing fashion based on the 2021-22 student performance data. Of the 405 students enrolled in the program last year — a population who would not have been considered college-ready because of their ACT scores upon entering the program — more than 90% completed at least one NMRP class. More than 61% of MCC NMRP participants are considered college-ready (as opposed to the 33% national average). More than 20% completed the credit-level course required for many of the College's two-year programs.

The reach of the program is growing significantly, highlighted by the largest school district in the state, Omaha Public Schools, expanding its NMRP offerings to students in all OPS high schools this year. NMRP reaches across more than 50 high schools and 40 school districts; about 1,000 students are enrolled for the 2022-23 academic year across the state of Nebraska. MCC serves 13 districts in its four-county service region.



Of the 185 students to complete the first cohort of the program (students who have completed two years of college), 74% enrolled in college; 72% persisted to the second year of college; and their cumulative grade-point average was 2.94. The median grade in credit math courses was a B+.

"A lot of these students are first-generation college students, so I think this program has multiple ways of affecting young people, not only by improving their math skills, but to give them the vision, 'I could go to college,'" Flesch said.

The year-long program employs a diagnostic and computer-assisted learning approach that combines online, self-paced interactive learning with highly engaged instruction and coaching focused on addressing individual learning gaps. Collaborative oversight and evaluation by the University of Nebraska Omaha informs continuous improvement of student performance.

Class sizes are limited and instruction is presented in a modular format, covering categories like positive and negative integers; fractions; decimals; ratios; proportions and percentages; and solving equations. Each module has homework and quizzes that must be passed at 80% or higher before moving on to the next unit. Many learning resources are built into the program to support student learning. If students don't pass, they work with an instructor one-on-one to work through the concepts in more detail.

"Those are valuable teaching moments," Vergo said.

During these one-on-one interactions, she said students are able to gain an understanding of concepts that don't always crystalize during group lectures due to the different learning styles of students and pace of instruction.

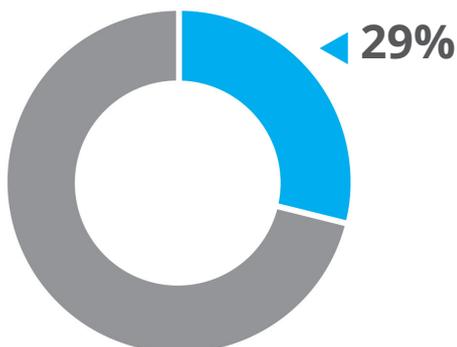
There are two tracks to the program: one designed for students who plan to enter the trades and the other for students who plan to pursue a degree at a four-year college. Flesch and Vergo said the contextualization of the material for either track is important for two reasons. For the trades, course content is specific to the industry they are entering. For the four-year college track, it covers the student for the many different roles a bachelor's degree can serve.

"The most applicable thing you learn in math, no matter your career, is it teaches you to think logically," Vergo said. "We also don't know where life is going to take us. Just like packing to go on a trip, you have to take a little of everything sometimes so you're prepared for whatever happens. If you go on in life without math, you're limiting yourself quite a bit."

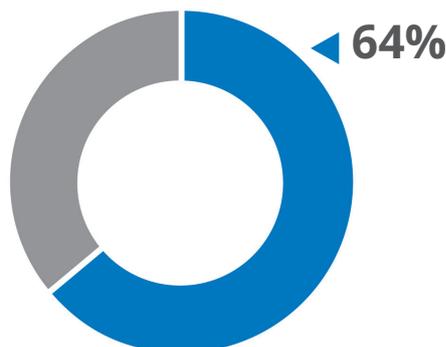
There's also a lot of practical applications, from tracking the effectiveness of financial investments over time to knowing how many gallons of paint to buy for a wall that needs a new color. Seeing students advance through the modules, make connections that didn't seem possible before and realize college is a place they can go is what energizes Vergo the most.

"I'll never forget a girl who was retaking her test and needed to get an 80% before she could move on. When she passed she was so excited and said, 'I have never scored 80% on a math test before, and I can't wait to go home and tell my mom,'" Vergo said. "It is so wonderful to see the students dig in and want to make something better for themselves."

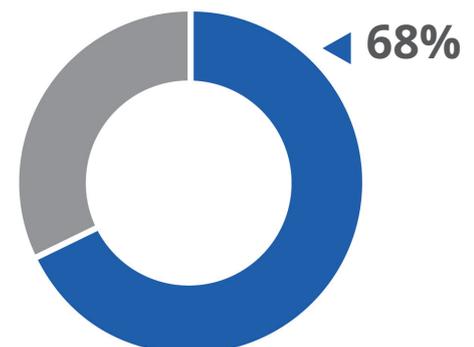
## Percentage of Nebraska students who passed a college credit-level math course at MCC in 2021



Students with ACT scores <20 (or no score) who passed credit-level math



Students with ACT scores 20+ who passed credit-level math



NMRP participants who passed credit-level math



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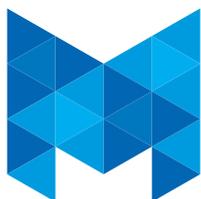
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