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Viewpoint: Offering students a fresh start at an education

By Michael Berndt, Interim President of Dakota County Technical College & Inver Hills Community College

A new year often inspires us to set goals for personal improvement—in my case, to spend more time outdoors and less time in front of a computer. For others, the goal is more ambitious—to improve their job prospects or transition to a new career. At Dakota County Technical College (DCTC) and Inver Hills Community College, we support many adults who have returned to school for a fresh start. Coming back to school can be intimidating, but it can also change the direction of your life.

For many of us, it is important to find a vocation, not just a job. We want the work we do in the world to be fulfilling, meaningful, and to align with our personal strengths. Unfortunately, our awareness of possible careers tends to be limited, so we don't know about our many options. For example, many of our students come to Inver Hills and DCTC to be nurses. They may not know that other great professions exist in the healthcare field—medical assisting, medical coding, paramedics, administrative assistant, and so on. They may also not know the many career options with a nursing degree—corporate consulting, healthcare education, clinical research, medical equipment sales, and nursing IT, just to name a few. Opportunities are extensive. A great benefit of coming to a community or technical college is that we can help students explore programs of study and discover their area of passion.

We also pride ourselves on being adult-friendly colleges. We believe it is never too late to start or continue your education. In fact, Inver Hills was recently ranked as one of the best schools in the country for adult learners by *Washington Monthly* magazine. One way we serve adults is by evaluating military experience, industry certifications, and prior knowledge for potential college credit. Our credit-for-prior-learning program can help adults accelerate their progress to a degree. Another popular option is our individualized degree. Students work with an advisor to design a degree that fits their particular needs whether it is a change in career, seeking a promotion, or accomplishing a personal life goal.

One example of a student looking for a fresh start is Inver Hills alumna Margeurite Pettus. Margeurite received a bachelor of science degree from the University of Minnesota and spent more than six years working in water and land resource management when she decided she wanted a career change. She

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enrolled in the paralegal program at Inver Hills and earned her post-graduate paralegal certificate. Margeurite completed her 180-hour paralegal internship at Robins Kaplan LLP – one of the nation’s highest-rated trial law firms – ultimately landing a full-time job there as a triage call specialist. She is well on her way to accomplishing her ultimate goal of becoming a paralegal.

Margeurite’s story demonstrates two things that we value greatly at DCTC and Inver Hills: supporting adult students who are seeking a career change and preparing them for the workforce. We have incredible relationships with the business communities in Dakota and Scott counties, and the employers that we partner with often tell us that our students are well prepared for their roles. Not only are graduates well qualified, but employers build relationships with students over the course of their education. In some of our programs, students attend classes in the morning and work for companies in afternoon.

I value the hope that comes with the new year. Success stories like Margeurite’s remind me that it is never too late to discover your vocation and connect it to a great career.

About Dakota County Technical College

Dakota County Technical College (DCTC) provides highly skilled and technical training for today’s most in-demand jobs. The DCTC community includes more than 2,200 full- and part-time students training in 55 different programs to boost their earning potential and launch or change their careers. DCTC was founded in 1970 and is located less than 20 miles south of Saint Paul in Rosemount, Minnesota.

About Inver Hills Community College

Inver Hills Community College (Inver Hills) is a place where students can get an affordable, high-quality education to launch their college degree in a supportive environment. With an enrollment of more than 5,000 full- and part-time students, the Inver Hills experience is defined by small class sizes and an engaged and active community that prepares students to succeed at a four-year college or to enter the workforce. Founded in 1970, the campus is located in Inver Grove Heights, less than 10 miles from Saint Paul, Minnesota.

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