



XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL

LOCATION:

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENT:

100 certifications earned per year

SUCCESS METRICS:

- » Enables partnership whereby students intern with local businesses
- » Validates in-demand technology skill set
- » Learning materials and GMetrix practice exams contribute to high pass rate

Iowa High School Bolsters STEM Offerings with Microsoft Office Specialist Certification Program

Success Story

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Practice Makes Perfect: STEM Curriculum Aims to Certify Students and Fill Local IT Positions

Xavier High School is a private Catholic school in Cedar Rapids, Iowa with a vision to create a STEM environment that gauges students' interests in computer science and programming and provides both curricular and extracurricular STEM experiences.

Xavier works to infuse technology throughout its curriculum and structure course offerings to focus on student technology training. "As a result of these offerings, Xavier students are equipped with valuable 21st century skills," says Tom Keating, Xavier Principal.

Tim O'Brien teaches Computer Business Applications and Intermediate Computer Business Applications at Xavier – two courses that include training on Microsoft Office. The courses include Word, Excel, Access and PowerPoint, and the integration of the programs. The intermediate course provides students with three dual enrollment college credits from the local Kirkwood Community College.

A few years ago, O'Brien wondered how his students could further validate the skills they learned in his course to prepare for filling open positions in the community.

"I wanted my students to be able to provide IT and other computer-related assistance at businesses here in Cedar Rapids," says O'Brien. "The Computer Business Applications courses were already teaching them how to use in-demand technology tools, and I was looking for a way to take the validation of those skills to the next level."

STARTING A SUCCESSFUL MICROSOFT OFFICE SPECIALIST PROGRAM

Since O'Brien had also been an adjunct professor for Kirkwood Community College for 10 years, he was taking summer workshops there when he heard about Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) certification. MOS guarantees that every certified user has demonstrated the ability to command the full features and functionality of Microsoft Office, preparing them for future workforce opportunities.

"When I heard about MOS I felt like it would allow my students to catch employers' eyes and stand out," says O'Brien. "What better way to prove you know Excel than to have that real-world certification? MOS is an incredible verification for their skillset."

Under O'Brien's guidance Xavier quickly launched the Microsoft Imagine Academy and became a Certiport Authorized Testing Center to begin offering MOS certification. The program was made possible by funding through the Iowa Governor's STEM Advisory Council, whereby Xavier received a grant for 500 student and 10 instructor certification vouchers.

"Mr. O'Brien included the Microsoft Imagine Academy in his courses to increase student interest and prepare them for successful IT careers," says Keating.

Each student completes two semesters of course work containing Microsoft Official Academic Courseware (MOAC) and lesson plans and uses GMetrix software for additional formal training and guided practice to prepare for the certification exam. Students who then successfully pass GMetrix training tests through the school's Certiport Testing Center are eligible to become MOS certified.

"GMetrix is crucial to our success and

we have tailored it perfectly to our purposes," says O'Brien. "It is the biggest contributor to our high pass rate. No one likes to fail an exam, and GMetrix helps us to ensure our students are ready to take the MOS certification exams."

To date, every student enrolled in the Computer Business Applications course has passed Microsoft Word certification. Many of those advance to the Intermediate Computer Business Applications and all of those who continue have passed the MOS Excel, Access, and PowerPoint exams.

"By industry standards these students are considered proficient in the usage of Microsoft Word and Excel," says O'Brien. "Students enrolled in the Independent Study course may reach the expert level, earning the distinction of being a MOS Master. I can't overstate the value of these industry-recognized certifications for my students."

MOVING FROM MOS TO THE WORKFORCE

Through Xavier's community partners at Dave Wright Nissan-Subaru and TrueNorth Companies, MOS-certified students receive opportunities for employment, utilizing their MOS skills to make a positive impact on the community. Several Xavier students have interned at Dave Wright Nissan Subaru, which was a part of the academy's "customer discovery" phase. Student interns work with the dealership's database, providing spreadsheet and multimedia assistance in addition to helping with various customer retention efforts. Others have interned with TrueNorth Companies, and one is now working for them while he is still in college and will be starting a new internship in Silicon Valley in the summer.

"We started an internship program to help our students gain real-world professional experience while providing key services to area businesses," said O'Brien. "Our students are able to take what they're learning in the class and take that directly to the workplace."

O'Brien is the only business teacher at Xavier so growth is somewhat limited but his class size has doubled over the past year. "I think both students and parents are seeing the value of MOS certification. I hear constantly about the

need for our students to know Excel for jobs and word is spreading that we offer them a way to learn the program and validate those skills to employers."

Continued funding through the Iowa Governor's STEM Advisory Council will be crucial for sustaining the initiative and providing certification vouchers. GMetrix software site license renewal will also require continued funding through the school.

Xavier High school plans to connect with additional community partners that would be willing to employ their students who become Microsoft Office Specialists and Masters.

"The MOS program opens doors for our students and allows them to show real-world skills," said O'Brien. "There is nothing better than hearing from a former student about their success thanks to MOS certification."

One such student, Tina Wu, attends University of Notre Dame. She recently called O'Brien to tell him about an internship she landed with Microsoft this summer. Wu attended a competitive career fair at Notre Dame, and was asked about her MOS certification during a Microsoft interview. "She felt strongly that one of the things that helped her get the internship was that she had earned all four MOS certifications at Xavier."

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Microsoft

Office Specialist