AWCI of Colorado
Rolls the Wheels of Learning

By Doug Ideker
President, Gypsum Products, Inc.

Like many markets throughout the nation, Colorado is experiencing a shortage of skilled construction labor. The drywall industry has been hit especially hard over the past six years by Colorado’s slow construction market. Skilled framers, hangers and finishers have left Colorado in droves for the promise of more work in Nevada, California and the Pacific Northwest. Combined with the fact that there are very few entry level workers seeking employment in the industry and there has been a gradual improvement in construction in Colorado, wall and ceiling contractors are having trouble manning jobs with skilled, productive crews. Further compounding the problem has been the lack of an industry-sponsored training program.

In March 1990 a very important strategy and planning session was called and led by Doug Ideker, president of Gypsum Products, Inc. and then president of AWCI of Colorado. Ideker was instrumental in the determination to create a long term solution to the industry’s labor shortage. The leadership of AWCI of Colorado decided to create a committee to establish an industry training program. Committee members included chairman Ben Kelly, president of Great Northern Drywall, Inc.; Andy McAvin, president of Drywall Services, Inc.; Richard Vap, president of South Valley Drywall, Inc.; and Cordon McClurg, president of Jones Heartz Lime Company.

The first step was to order copies of the AWCI “Wheels of Learning” program which the committee used to begin tailoring the curriculum. Minor changes and modifications were made to the curriculum to accommodate code and construction variations in Colorado. The committee also wanted a program that would have equal appeal to commercial and residential contractors. After literally hundreds of man hours of research and discussion, the suggested curriculum was submitted to the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training (BAT) in late July.

Next the committee contacted the Construction Industry Training Council (CITC), which was a joint venture of the Associated General Contractors of Colorado, the American Subcontractors Association and the Associated Builders and Contractors of Colorado. CITC was formed specifically as an administrative, marketing and regulatory council for construction training programs. CITC provided assistance and guidelines for setting tuition rates, finding a classroom site, beginning the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training approval process, marketing of the program and selection of an instructor.

Kelly, McAvin, Vap and McClurg were determined to have the first class up and running for the fall 1990 semester, so the work went on. Area wall and ceiling contractors were notified that applications were being accepted for the instructor’s job. The committee established evaluation guidelines for the position and began interviewing the numerous applicants, finally selecting Mr. Frank Worthen, a field superintendent for South Valley Drywall, Inc. Mr. Worthen’s cre-
Students have 4000 hours of on-the-job training in addition to 300 classroom hours.

...dentials were excellent, and his many years of residential and commercial construction experience as well as his desire to help AWCI of Colorado establish a solid training program made him a unanimous choice of the committee.

At the same time, the committee was studying potential classroom and field training sites. The two-year program, consisting of 300 hours of classroom and lab instruction plus 4000 hours of on-the-job training, demanded settings which were comfortable and conducive to learning. Red Rocks Community College in western suburban Denver was selected for the classroom site and a warehouse, generously provided by AWCI member DELMC Builders, was chosen for the lab portion.

In early August the committee was notified that its curriculum had received BAT approval in record time which attested to the strength and completeness of the AWCI “Wheels of Learning” program and the modifications made by Kelly, McAvin, Vap and McClurg. All of the pieces were finally in place and the fall semester began. AWCI of Colorado member companies were given the first opportunity to enroll employees in the program which needed a minimum of 15 first year students to stand on its own.

In the fourth week of August, 1990, Frank Worthen handed out “Wheels of Learning” textbooks to 25 new students and AWCI of Colorado celebrated the beginning of a new era. (It should be noted that AWCI of Colorado was chartered as an affiliate of AWCI International in December 1988, making it a relatively new chapter. Expenses for establishing the new training program were paid from an endowment fund established by the leaders of the former AWCI of Colorado which disbanded in 1986.) Thanks to the hard work and perseverance of Ben Kelly, Andy McAvin, Richard Vap and Cordon McClurg, what was a dream five months earlier had become a reality destined to provide long term benefits to everyone involved in the wall and ceiling industry in Colorado.

The work is not finished, however. The committee is now studying ways to market the training program outside of the industry in an effort to attract new, career-minded individuals to the wall and ceiling business. They are also working on criteria to allow students with prior training to test out of the first year of the program and immediately enter the more intense second year program, thereby accelerating the flow of trained individuals into the work force.

Ben Kelly, chairman of the training program committee and AWCI of Colorado’s “Man of the Year,” summed it up best when he said, “One of the great parts of putting together this program was the way our association pooled the efforts of competitive companies for the common good. All of us knew we were facing a serious long term labor shortage and that we were the only ones who could do anything about it. We established a lofty goal, but thanks to AWCI International and the efforts of many of our local members, we are well on our way toward meeting it. Ultimately this program will help upgrade the image of the entire wall and ceiling industry in Colorado by providing our members with a consistent flow of competent, well trained labor which can be developed into the true craftsmen our industry so badly needs.”