THE ACADEMY OF
CONSTRUCTION
AND TRADES

It was a dream come true for Florida’s Orlando-based Head Construction Inc.: In February 1996, the company was awarded a $37 million bid to build the new office building for E. Lynch Enterprises in Orlando. But last week, Lynch pulled the contract after continuous schedule delays pushed the completion date back at least 10 months.

Sources for both sides said the delays were not due to bad weather or design issues. Greg Head, president and chief executive officer of Head Construction, said his company could not find enough qualified laborers to meet the timetable and minimum quality standards.

Fortunately, this is only an imaginary scenario. Head Construction and E. Lynch Enterprises are fictitious companies. But the situation could be real.

Since 1980, the number of construction trade apprentices has dropped drastically. This is a direct reflection of U.S. population shifts. Almost every industry is having difficulty attracting young people with the necessary academic, analytical and technical skills needed for today’s workforce.

U.S. Census Bureau reports indicate that fewer young adults are entering construction and trade apprentices than ever before. The number of students learning carpentry, masonry, plumbing and electrical repair has dropped almost 78 percent since the last census, which was done in 1992.

At this rate, the construction industry could be faced with serious shortages of skilled labor by the year 2000. Fortunately, a diverse group of Florida industry and community leaders, school board members from Orange and Seminole counties and the Florida Department of Education banded together to make a difference.

In 1992, the Academy of Construction and Trades was formed. My own contracting company is one of the organization’s founders, and with good reason: Our company’s future, like yours, depends on our ability to attract highly skilled workers to produce quality products. Finding and keeping good workers helps reduce recruiting and training costs. The creation of ACT has been an integral part of my company’s ability to find skilled labor.

HOW THE ACT PROGRAM WORKS

ACT offers youth apprenticeships in carpentry, fire sprinklers, electrical, plumbing, and heating, ventilation and air conditioning. Nineteen high schools in Seminole and Orange counties have partnerships with ACT. The program introduces students to the numerous facets of construction and connects them to the industry early.

The two-year apprenticeship program begins with students in the 11th grade, and integrates academics, work-site learning and paid work experience, which is achieved with the assistance of 52 participating local contractors. In fact, contractors sponsor the apprentice throughout the remainder of his other training.

The students follow a rigid curriculum that combines practical courses and on-the-job training. Students must maintain a 2.0 grade point average, be at least 16 years old, regularly attend school and apprentice employment, document completion of 10th grade or sophomore level, and pass a drug screening test if necessary.

Once accepted into the work study pro-
gram, students receive instruction from skilled craftsmen and utilize the Wheels of Learning curricula. Wheels of Learning is a standardized training curricula used by colleges and contractors across the country to teach different trades.

The course is nationally recognized by all National Center for Construction Education and Research training facilities, so students have skills that are accredited and transferable from state to state.

After the 11th grade, participants are guaranteed summer employment with a local contractor, and they earn an above-average wage while obtaining high school credits. Local contractors pay students a minimum of $6 per hour, with a potential wage increase after 1,000 hours of employment.

Students often find this wage—and the job—more attractive than what is paid to their friends who are flipping burgers at fast food restaurants. And if students think they can drop out of school once they’ve land a good paying job, they’re wrong—they must remain in school in order to continue work for contractors.

The group of participating contractors has agreed to immediately terminate any student who withdraws from school, or, we will reduce the number of work hours assigned should a student experience a decline in grades.

Those involved in designing the ACT program have incorporated all the important elements necessary for the total growth of the participant. Although the main objective is to prepare students for the “real” world through work experience, ACT’s founders realize that students need to experience and participate in extracurricular high school activities.

Senior-year students have the opportunity to co-op, where they receive apprenticeship credits and paid on-the-job training alongside a master craftsman. These credits can be applied toward a post-secondary certificate of journeyman status, which pays an annual starting salary of $38,000. Another option is to transfer the credits to a local college, where continued education can result in an associate’s degree in construction.

After the participants graduate and complete the ACT program, students are entered in the NCCER’s National Craft Registry. This means that they are immediately recognized for their expertise in a specialized trade. Unlike those who did not participate in the program, ACT participants usually can expect an entry-level position with a higher starting salary. Given the current and forecasted labor shortages in the construction field, it would seem that
these young apprentices have seemingly unlimited options.

**PROGRAM CHALLENGES**

While students are very interested in the program because it offers them a chance to earn money and gain invaluable work experience, the ACT program has its share of challenge—and from some unlikely sources, including parents and the media.

ACT Program Director Jamie Buck says many parents sometimes don’t recognize the many opportunities in construction, such as design, architecture and project management, so they simply do not encourage their children to enter the construction field.

The misconception, she notes, has to do with a somewhat negative media image of construction workers.

“Many parents hope their child will choose a white-collar profession like medicine or accounting,” she says.

**PROMISING RESULTS**

In 1995, the ACT program enrolled 154 student apprentices, and 1996 numbers were expected to come in just under 300 apprentices. Since its introduction, ACT has successfully placed 100 percent of its graduates with local contractors.

And even though the ACT program has been implemented primarily in Orange and Seminole Counties only, it is hoped that it will serve as a model for other communities. Apprentice programs like ACT are playing an increasingly important role in many communities across the country. By identifying, guiding and training newcomers into the construction industry, the scenario described at the beginning of this article will never become reality.

**About the Author**

Ryburn Bailey is vice president and general manager of Brice Building Company’s Florida division, which includes offices in Orlando and Deerfield Beach. Incorporated in 1936, Brice is headquartered in Birmingham, Ala., and also has offices in Atlanta and New Orleans.