



Lake Area Technical College

Welding Technology

Watertown, South Dakota, home to Lake Area Technical College, is a predominantly white community, and the neighboring regions and states that send students to Lake Area Tech are mostly white too. The highly successful college could fill its seats without reaching out to students of color. But the student population at Lake Area Tech—including in the welding program—is becoming increasingly diverse, in part because of the program’s targeted outreach and support of refugees.

Eastern South Dakota is rich in manufacturing jobs and has a high demand for welding technicians. Lake Area Tech’s welding program has actively recruited from the region’s growing population of Karen refugees from Myanmar by welcoming them

on campus visits and inviting them to enroll, then effectively teaching them technical skills that result in careers with family-sustaining wages.

The college has adapted as its student body evolves. For instance, after welding instructors observed that refugee students were experiencing cultural and language barriers, Lake Area Tech developed an English as a second language program to not only assist students with language skills but also help them acclimate to the community.

Leaders of the welding program have looked outward as well, to advocate for a more diverse population of graduates in the workplace. One such example came recently when a transgender student—in

a historically male-dominated profession—provided feedback that there were only men’s bathrooms at a major local employer. Program leaders spoke with the employer, which added all-gender bathrooms for female and transgender employees.

These small changes have begun to have deeper impacts for Lake Area Tech, both in terms of their partnerships with industry and also their broader diversity and equity strategy. As President Mike Cartney explains, “When we talk about diversity and equity, is our goal to mirror society? Or to provide workforce with diverse industry needs? Is there a difference between those things? Now we’re having these conversations with employers too.” ■



YEAR-TO-YEAR RETENTION:

OVERALL:

92%

STUDENTS OF COLOR:

88%

LOW-INCOME STUDENTS:

89%

WOMEN:

100%