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SKILLED TRADES
& APPLIED TECHNOLOGY

The Epicenter of Local Trades



PEASLEE TECH

by Tara Trenary, photos by Steven Hertzog

An alternative to traditional college, Peaslee Tech offers programs that teach a trade, apprenticeships while in training and direct access to the workforce upon graduating — all without incurring debt.



Dr. Kevin W. Kelley,
Chief Executive Officer, Peaslee Tech

The outside of The Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center looks like an industrial building straight out of the 1970s, but walk through its front doors, and you'll find yourself standing in a state-of-the-art facility equipped with technology to train students in transportation, health care, manufacturing and many other skilled trades. It offers more than 800 classes and is guided by demand from Douglas County businesses and organizations.

Walking down the main hall of this 76,000-square-foot space, you pass classrooms made for education and testing, including classes for such things as ESL (English as a second language), real estate licensing and obtaining a GED. Outside these classrooms is a large breakout area where students can gather for breaks and get drinks and snacks. Further down the hall in the woodworking lab, a carpentry instructor works with a group from the Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence building raised flower beds to place outside of the Boys & Girls Club headquarters. A lab a bit further down and across the hall houses Avium, a startup born of University of Kansas (KU) graduates that studies hydrogen as an element for a more sustainable future. Its technology is intended to "accelerate the widespread use and adoption of green hydrogen for energy storage, chemical processing, industrial use, heating and transportation," according to its website.

Employee offices dot the hall, and upon entering yet another large space, we find a dwelling built by residential carpentry students for Tenants to Homeowners, and local nonprofit

dedicated to providing affordable housing. Electrician students did the wiring, and plumbing students will do some of the plumbing. "We are trying to incorporate as many of our students into that house as we can," explains Charlie Lauts, M.A., Enrollment Services Coordinator at Peaslee Technical Training Center and retired 30-year industrial arts teacher at Lawrence High School.

This house is meant to be a first step out of homelessness, she continues. "The rent will be affordable. They'll have to have a job. It's one bedroom, one bath, so very small," she says. The dimensions of this house are 11 feet x 35 feet. Tenants must work to save money and then move out so another eligible tenant can move in. The plan right now is to build 10, two a year, Lauts adds. "The first two will go on the same lot. They [the City] have lots throughout Lawrence. The goal is to get people out of homelessness."

Other large spaces throughout the facility are used for HVAC, auto tech—including engine repair, brakes and suspension, and supported by all five major dealerships in town—electrical, welding, truck driving, construction, robotics, industrial maintenance and electrician training. "Our welding class goes to three different levels. Each level is 14 weeks long, but most of them are hired pretty much when they're done with the first level," Lauts says. "Recruiters come to the class and hand out applications, it's such a high-demand job." Though welding is not a glamorous job but a dirty one, she says welders are in high demand, especially now with the Panasonic Battery Plant coming to DeSoto to make batteries for electric cars. The \$4-billion, 4-million-square-foot plant is slated to begin production in 2025. It will bring more than 4,000 jobs to the area.

Dr. Kevin W. Kelley observing Peaslee Tech students working on the affordable housing home in conjunction with Tenants to Homeowners, designed and built by Peaslee Tech



A PASSIONATE BEGINNING

Located at 2920 Haskell Ave., Peaslee Tech, as it's locally known, was named for Dwayne Peaslee, a local pipe fitter who had a passion for educational and vocational training. His goal was to help people see how important the skilled trades are to quality of life. He wanted local citizens who want to work in Lawrence and Douglas County to have an opportunity for a great career.

"I was a friend of Dwayne [Peaslee] since the mid-80s," says Shirley Martin-Smith, chair of the Peaslee Tech board. "He had a gift about him that made people realize how important technical skills were." She says watching him talk to people so eloquently about the importance of the technical trade and the great living one can gain was inspiring.

"He was very proud of his work. He really believed that you could have the American dream ... even if you didn't go to college," she adds. "He affected me, but he affected hundreds of other people in this county to believe in technical training and to realize the importance of it."

Rep. Mike Amyx, Kansas State Legislature District 45 and former Peaslee Tech board member, agrees. He says he was convinced by Dwayne that this was something that needed to be done, putting together a facility that was going to be able to take care of itself and of its students, and prepare them for their future employment. "He really believed in Lawrence and Douglas County, in making sure we were prepared for whatever the next step was going to be, that we were about job creation and had a workforce that was going to be educated and prepared to move into those new jobs. He'd be pretty proud of the Center and everything that is going on there."

Since its conception, Peaslee Tech has been a component of Douglas County's economic development effort, explains Kevin Kelley, CEO. Its role is training local residents for livable-wage jobs. Initially, the training was provided by community colleges from throughout the region, but in November 2017, Peaslee Tech was approved by the Kansas Board of Regents as a post-secondary education provider. Since then, he continues, it has started 18 open-enrollment programs and 14 apprenticeship programs, making Peaslee Tech the largest provider of apprenticeship programs in Kansas. During the same period, it expanded service to local businesses in the form of customized training programs. Peaslee is on track to reach 3,000 enrollments in 2023.

Peaslee Tech currently has 40 employees, five full time and 35 part time. There are 32 instructors, with the remainder of the staff supporting recruitment, administration and facilities. The 2023 budget is approximately \$1.6 million, with about 25% from Douglas County, 12.5% from the City of Lawrence, 48% from instructional income and grants, and the majority of the remaining from lease income.

It was formed in cooperation with KU through efforts of the Lawrence Douglas County Economic Development Corporation, Douglas County and the City of Lawrence, Kelley explains. Initial collaborations were in the form of training skilled-trade employees. That has expanded with Peaslee hosting the development of the KU Solar Car project, a group of engineering students developing KU's first solar-powered car, and more recently, with Avium, located on the Peaslee campus.

Peaslee Tech also works with the Apartment Association of Kansas City, which sends its apartment facilities maintenance people to learn a little bit of everything—from electrical to landscaping to drywall—so they can work on apartments. And it houses The Crunch, a large meeting space and private offices for people who want to start their own business and have nowhere else to work. It's dedicated to supporting the success of entrepreneurs by providing space, equipment and expertise. Many local groups also use the space, including Leadership Kansas, Leadership Lawrence, 1 Million Cups and local unions. The Crunch is tied to KU's Small Business Development Center.

In addition to most major local employers, Kelley continues, Peaslee works with Heartland Works, Kansas Vocational Rehabilitation, Kansas Department for Children and Family Services, the Lawrence Branch of the NAACP, Catholic Charities, Tenants to Homeowners and many

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Charlie Lauts working on the interior of their affordable house; Charlie Lauts and Jay Hundley outside an affordable house



others. It also works within the local school district. Enrollment Coordinator Lauts does the educational outreach, meaning she visits all of Douglas County middle and high schools, and conducts tours of the facility for local school kids, as well.

Peaslee is supported by the Lawrence Workforce Center, which offers grants that help with tuition assistance for any program if a student qualifies. The Department for Children and Families and Catholic Charities also send people to Peaslee.

“Our unique focus on the needs of Douglas County organizations versus on the learner benefits both the businesses and the learners. We do not deliver programs that don’t support community needs,” Kelley adds.

HANDS-ON EDUCATION

According to the American Institute of Medical Science and Education, the top 10 benefits of a technical school are its cost effectiveness; students learning by practice; easier admission requirements; flexibility and convenience; a good investment; students acquiring jobs before graduating; graduates having higher rates of employment; no unnecessary classes required; smaller class sizes providing a more personalized education; and careers being available in lucrative fields.

“I wish this place would’ve been here 30 years ago,” Lauts says. As a former industrial arts teacher, she explains she had so many students who would take her engineering class because they loved problem-solving but didn’t love math and science, so engineering was not in their world. “Being able to send them here to be an HVAC technician or an electrician, or something like that, would’ve been such a perfect fit for so many of my students.”

She says one problem is parents’ expectations that their kids must go to college. “So many parents believe their kids need to go to college, but this is just another way to do that. College is for some kids but not for all kids.” When she started teaching in the 1980s, the mindset was, “You need to go to college, you have to go to college, where are you going to college?” Then, she explains, it became too expensive to go to college for some, and people began to focus on what they were and were not actually getting out of it. “So many of the careers now don’t require a four-year degree, and you still get paid really well without the debt. There’s a lot of parents whose minds just haven’t grabbed on to that yet,” she says.

Lauts explains that in the Peaslee truck-driving program recently, both an 18- and a 19-year-old got their licenses. “It’s a good career for them, and it can lead them a lot of directions.” On the flip side, she adds, a 40-year-old man who’s trying to find a second career might be attracted to Peaslee because of the many programs that offer apprenticeships while students are in school. “They can be working in the industry while they’re taking our classes. So they’re earning while they’re learning. A lot of people take advantage of that.”

Peaslee Tech fills another educational opportunity for those who are getting out of high school or simply looking for a new career in their life, Amyx adds. “It gives them an opportunity to say, ‘I’ve always wanted to do this, and it’s something I’d be good at.’ If the program is offered at Peaslee Tech, they’re able to get in there and hands-on learn, and know upon completion that they’re going to be able to get out in the community and work. It gives them an opportunity for success.”

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

The most important challenge of Peaslee Tech and the focus of the board and CEO Kelley right now is permanent funding. Funding from the city, Douglas County, the private sector, income from grants and instructional income is in place, Martin-Smith explains. Peaslee staff has worked with the state legislature and is currently working with the senate to get permission as a county to gain support and hold a public vote for this permanent funding. “We would

like to not have to go to the city or county and ask for money every year,” she adds.

Peaslee was needed in this community for decades, Martin-Smith continues. “And when the tipping point finally came, the business community and school district and KU and Haskell all came together and said this is something we should do. It was awesome to see. No arguments, nobody said no. The timing was right.”

She says it’s been interesting to watch how years ago so little was spoken about technical trades and what they can do for a career, and how they can be a great alternative. “But it’s now obvious that you can get training, and you can go out and get a good-paying job without debt. I think it’s been a challenge to help people see how respectable these jobs are.” She believes it’s absolutely critical that we provide the training locally to a diverse community from all ages and career paths.

“We’re training them so they get the skills they want that meet what businesses need in our community,” Martin-Smith continues. “If we don’t keep the skills flowing into the companies, you can’t keep the businesses here.” She says Peaslee’s goal is to provide the training to people from different walks of life and to improve the retention and expansion of the businesses already here. Also, to attract new businesses. “It’s all about retention and employee satisfaction on the job. If a company can take an employee, and Peaslee can help build

their skills, they’re going to stay with that company and make more income. It all works well together,” she adds.

Martin-Smith says she’s amazed at the talent that is attracted to Peaslee Tech. “They are all [Peaslee Tech staff members] so generous with their knowledge and experience, and they’re always excited about sharing what they know. The students are so anxious to learn. They want to be there. It’s fascinating the people who are attracted to Peaslee.”

Kelley, his staff and the board do a good job making sure they understand what the next up-and-coming certification is needed, Amyx explains. “That’s an important part. They make sure we are meeting those opportunities for folks to get certified and go right into the marketplace and get jobs.

“I was convinced by Dwayne that this was something we needed to make sure we were able to do,” he continues, “to put together a facility that was going to be able to take care of itself and take care of the students, and prepare them for their future employment. I think we, as a community and a county, have met those needs and will continue to push and get better and better, and continue to be able to give folks an opportunity to be successful.”

Surely Dwayne Peaslee himself would be pleased. Martin-Smith says he used to kid her and say, “You know, if we don’t train these plumbers, you’re all gonna be doing your own plumbing.’ That always stuck with me, because I don’t want to do my own plumbing.” ▲



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