

Work Ethic program promotes 'lifelong employability'

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Mentee Saniet Rander and Mentor Yeefah Thurman of Art and Science Salon.

In launching the new Evanston Work Ethic Program (WE), Evanston community leaders say they are



creating a model to address the shortfall between what businesses are increasingly looking for in employees and what high schools are supplying.

Business operators and entrepreneurs will tell you a four-year degree is not the only path to a successful and reliable career. Many are searching for ambitious, trainable candidates to fill well-paying skilled positions.

The WE program is built on the premise that the stigma around not going to a four-year college has limited the resources available to many strong students who struggle to find educational and career direction if they choose an alternative path. WE's goal is to match hard working high school students with high-powered mentors in specific career and tech fields.

Through a curriculum of career-readiness workshops and paid apprenticeships, students are immersed in business environments that lead to targeted post-secondary education and ultimately, a well-paying career.

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics **forecasts** that 2020, only 35 percent of all new jobs created will require a four-year degree, although that estimate has been **challenged as too low** (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/many-college-grads/>).

WE aims to serve high school graduates who dream of embarking on careers as coders, chefs, auto technicians, stylists, and healthcare professionals, all careers that require associate's degrees or certifications, but not four-year degrees.

It's estimated that over 50 percent of the nation's college freshman will fail to complete a four-year degree and be burdened with student loan debt and no clear path to a bankable career.

"Many students who take the traditional route to college can wind up feeling like a failure, saddled with debt, outside the education system, unprepared and on their own as they search for a path to solid careers," said WE's Executive Director Nancy Baker. "We want to let students know -- early on -- that there are multiple paths to success after high school."

Leaders in Chicago's business community are taking notice and responding to WE's call for mentors.

"It's a misconception that a bachelor degree is required to work in the tech industry," said Daniel Witenberg, WE mentor, digital product manager, and former designer at Rovio, the creator of Angry Birds. "Digital marketing, cyber security, and computer networking are just some of the careers options I can discuss with my mentee."

"My wife has a Ph.D. from Northwestern and is a university professor, but I bring home the bacon," said Hecky Powell, community organizer, owner of a highly successful Evanston restaurant and the founder of the Forrest E. Powell Foundation which launched the WE Program as part of its community service mission. "We're not just finding jobs for kids; we offer a new path to high paying careers that are challenging and support fulfilling lives. We engage, we educate and we employ."

WE launched Thursday evening when the first WE class of Evanston juniors meet their mentors, the first step in a two-year journey together. The program has already won capacity building grants from root2fruit of the Evanston Community Foundation and the Evanston Chamber of Commerce MashUp.