

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

A program designed to help students obtain college credits while still in high school is gaining momentum at Chase County Schools.

Initiated over a year ago, Career Academy, a joint project between CCS and Mid-Plains Community College, now involves approximately 16 students. Some are working toward an Associate's Degree while still in high school, while others are tallying up college credits.

The pilot program, of which CCS is the only school involved at this point, allows a student to take a fifth year of high school, or "early college experience," while living at home. At the same time, the student may realize 60 college credit hours, earning an Associate of Arts or Associate of Applied Science or Business Degree.

The student may then make the decision to transfer those credits to a four-year institution for a further degree.

For several years, CCS students have been able to take dual credit classes, or those which apply to both high school and college education. They have also been able to take distance learning college classes.

Mid Plains Community College Imperial Campus Coordinator Brenda Ledall said those students are now also able to take on-line classes or distance learning classes at the MPCC Imperial campus, or create internship opportunities, to fill college credits while they are CCS students.

They can earn 15 credit hours per semester. Therefore, if a student joins the program the summer before their junior year, Ledall said, "They may complete one or two semesters of college course work by the time they're seniors. If they chose to stay the fifth year, they'll finish the last 30 credit hours that year," Ledall stated.

The students' projected major is a consideration. Some students who participate in Career Academy may go on to college or to a school specializing in a certain type of career.

Ledall said that at present there are two juniors and four seniors at CCS who are working through Career Academy. They may follow through with the fifth year, or "early college experience," to complete the Associates Degree.

Those students are taking dual credit, on-line and distance learning classes in preparation for the degree.

"Some students are going to change their mind and do something unrelated," Ledall said, "but it's still a win-win situation, because they're getting one year of college in."

CCS has added a number of dual credit classes in the past year or two, including business, math, science, English and writing classes.

In addition, there are 10 students involved in the CEPA-funded technology side of the Career Academy. CEPA, or Career Education Program Act, is a Nebraska Department of Education grant that is paying for those students' classes.

The students have set up an off-site backup business for several schools in the area. The business saves, or backs up, a school's information in case of fire or a disaster that might wipe out all of the school's data.

Ledall said the business backs up CCS's data and saves it at Wauneta-Palisade High School. That school's data is saved at Dundy County High School.

And, that school's data is saved at CCS.

The students involved are taking college classes as they are developing their business. Some are studying the marketing, technology or business plan aspect of the business, she said.

The backup program may be offered to other schools in the future, Ledall said.

Career Academy, although still a new program at CCS, is touching a small but significant number of students, Ledall stated.

“You see highly motivated students working diligently toward a degree on top of already busy lives. It’s neat for me to see students coming here (MPCC campus) to take (teachers’) classes and learn from their experience.”

Ledall said the teachers are very ready to accommodate the students, who benefit greatly.

“The fact that they have that nurturing aspect of a small town...when they go into the world they have that foundation to start with.”

CCS Superintendent Matt Fisher said that although the number of students participating in Career Academy is small at present, he hopes to pick up two to four students out of each class in the next few years, building up to 10 at a time in the early college experience.

“It’s going to take some time for it to catch on,” he said of the fifth year high school/college program.

“We need to get the kids to buy into it. The parents already like it because of the finances. It saves money,” he said.

He added that students have the mindset that they want to be out and away after four years of high school. “But, they can finish up a degree a year sooner if they go this route,” he noted.

Fisher said he and Dr. Richard Tubbs of McCook Community College (MCC) initiated the program after discussing what MCC could provide for CCS students.

He said students who participate in Career Academy come out one year ahead of their high school peers in college credits and a year’s worth of tuition.

Ledall said those students participating may walk through high school graduation with their peers and then finish their last year of college at CCS and get their high school and Associates Degree diplomas at the same time.

“I think it’s a great alternative to students who would like to stay in Imperial and work in our community. That’s why we started Career Academy—to fill the work force needs we have” and to urge young people to remain in Imperial.

An informational meeting about Career Academy will be held March 4 from 6:30-8 p.m. at CCS for students and parents interested in learning more.

Fisher said sophomores are targeted for information “because they’d be the juniors the next year who would begin taking college classes.

“That’s the ideal level to start them on the path,” he commented. He planned the meeting to coincide with the time that students are signing up for fall classes.

Juniors and seniors who want to reexamine the program are also invited to attend the meeting.