



Swap Stops in the Halls of TCHS¹

By Elizabeth Tran

Still riding the crest of student enthusiasm for exploring nontraditional careers, the Technical College High School's (TCHS) Pennock's Bridge campus hosted their second annual "Swap Day," on November 20, 2012, an event designed to expose male and female students to nontraditional careers.² Swap Day encourages students to face any gender bias they have and look beyond the stereotypes of a particular career or program of study to discover or develop their skills and interests.

"Don't be afraid to envision yourself in a career or change your program of study to one that is nontraditional," is the advice I received from Connor, a senior nontraditional student in TCHS's Health Occupations program. I kept his advice in mind as I visited several Swap Day stations throughout the school.

The cosmetology classroom of instructor Jackie Butcher-Jones was the first swap stop on the tour. A classroom full of males prepares to give or receive a manicure for the first time as Ms. Butcher-Jones explains, "There are over 1,500 bacteria that exist underneath your fingernails. No matter where you are or what you're doing, it is important to be well groomed," as a way to emphasize the importance of professional appearance. Keenly aware of some students' hesitation to participate in an activity they consider exclusively female, Ms. Butcher-Jones seizes an opportunity to dispel a myth about male participation in the beauty industry, "Many men own salons. I have former students who have acquired great financial success." And, for good measure, she references the popular SciFi channel television show "Face Off," a studio make-up competition/reality show and excitedly exclaims, "Did you know there are more men who do make-up than women in Hollywood!" Judging by the looks upon the students' faces, they were quite surprised.

I made my way over to the Engine Technology and Recreation Vehicles classroom of Dr. Stuart Savin, who recently began teaching at TCHS. Taking a look around, I ask Dr. Savin why there are three different activity stations available to visiting students. He informs, "I know that some [female] students are intimidated to do a project involving a flame, and that's fine. But it is still important that they try something new. That is why I have alternate options that aren't so far beyond their comfort level. I want them to come in and feel encouraged to try something new and succeed."

¹ Students' last names have been withheld to protect their identities.

² Perkins legislation designates a field as nontraditional if less than 25 per cent of the workforce is male or female.



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I observe an Engine Technology and Recreational Vehicles student named Noah providing patient guidance to a young woman soldering for the first time. For students like Noah, Swap Day is about trying something new and sharing skills. He articulates the benefits of Swap Day and states, “I like interacting with new people, and I feel good showing someone a new skill. When I participated in the first Swap Day, I learned new skills in the Health Occupations program and am a better person for it.”

My next swap stop brings me to the classroom of HVAC instructor Bart Heagy, who makes ice cream using HVAC equipment to demonstrate the science behind heat transference. As the visiting students enjoyed their confections, Mr. Heagy takes a moment to impart important information—there are not enough qualified technicians to meet the demands of the growing HVAC industry. But, because HVAC has great economic prospects, it provides a great opportunity for women to achieve economic independence, especially when considering that there is a steady rise in female-headed households in the United States. Courtney, one of the student swappers, left Mr. Heagy’s classroom proving that ability has nothing to do with gender, confidently expressing, “Females can do this, too!”

Swap Day is a festive event and an education mixer for students and teachers alike. They are contributing to the signature positive atmosphere in TCHS Pennock’s Bridge halls, developing soft skills that will mold them into valued future employees, and, most importantly, recognizing that gender has nothing to do with ability or the lack thereof.