



Fostering and Educating the Leaders of Tomorrow

West Michigan Water Careers Program

Introduction

The Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) West Michigan Water Careers Program¹ embodies all four key elements of developing a water workforce: recruitment, retention, competency, and community partnerships. This case study will focus on the West Michigan Water Careers Program's emphasis on **recruitment** and **community partnerships**. Utilities with strong recruitment programs maintain a stable, robust, and qualified pool of applicants, and utilities that can develop meaningful community partnerships create value to both the utility and the community they serve. GRCC partnered with local workforce boards, community groups, and stakeholders to develop a transformative workforce training initiative that was tailored to the water sector and empowered individuals and

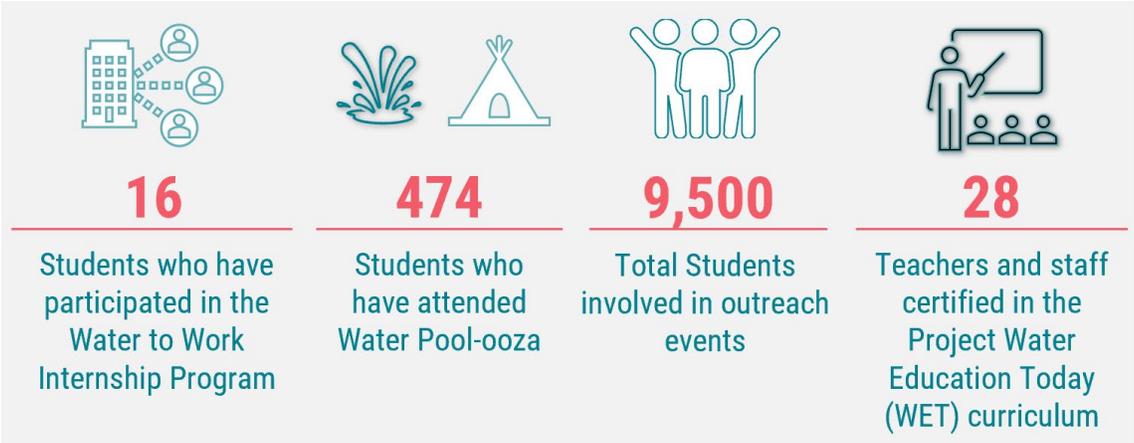
¹ To accelerate career pipelines in the water utilities sector and provide access to water utility workforce opportunities Congress, the American Water Infrastructure Act of 2018 authorized the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop a grant program under Section 1459E of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). EPA is authorized to award grants to nonprofit professional or service organizations, nonprofit labor organizations, nonprofit community colleges, institutions of higher education, or other nonprofit training and educational institutions to (1) assist in the development and use of innovative activities relating to water workforce development and career opportunities in the drinking water and wastewater utility sector, and (2) expand public awareness about drinking water and wastewater utilities and to connect individuals to careers in the drinking water and wastewater utility sector. In 2021 for the initial grant cycle, EPA selected a total of 9 organizations to receive grant funding under the "[Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program](#)." GRCC is one of these 9 recipients.

strengthened communities. Recruitment is key: by reaching students of all levels, the program creates a stable, robust, and qualified pool of applicants for the City of Grand Rapids and surrounding utilities.

In the vibrant City of Grand Rapids, Michigan, the West Michigan Water Careers Program serves as a hub of education, training, and economic development. The program’s mission is to provide accessible pathways to success for all learners, and it offers a wide array of courses and initiatives designed to meet the evolving needs of the community. Recognizing the critical importance of workforce development in sustaining local industries, GRCC and the City of Grand Rapids forged strategic partnerships with employers, government agencies, and industry organizations to create targeted training programs that align with emerging workforce demands. GRCC’s partners include Bay College, Grand Rapids Public Schools, and West Michigan Works!. Local community partners include the Grand Rapids Urban League, Steepletown Neighborhood Services, and the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT). This case study explores the collaborative efforts between GRCC and its community partners to shape a skilled and diverse water workforce through three programs: the Water Work Internship Program, the Water Careers Camp, and Water Pool-ooza.

Program

West Michigan Water Careers Program by the numbers:



Water to Work Internship Program

The Water to Work Internship Program is central to the West Michigan Water Workforce Careers Program’s commitment to workforce development. It is a collaborative initiative with Bay College that is designed to cultivate a skilled workforce for the water sector. Through this program, students gain hands-on experience and practical skills in various aspects of water management, including wastewater treatment, stormwater management, and water quality monitoring. Under the mentorship of industry professionals, interns participate in real-world projects, acquire industry certifications, and develop the competencies needed to succeed in the water workforce.

Moreover, the Water to Work Internship Program incorporates a strong focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that opportunities

“Behind every drop of water, there are hundreds of rewarding careers to explore. This program allows you to find a career that aligns with your values and makes a positive impact on our generation and beyond.”

Hillary Caron, Water Education & Programs Coordinator, City of Grand Rapids

for career advancement are accessible to individuals from all backgrounds. By actively recruiting underrepresented populations and providing support services such as career counseling and academic advising, GRCC aims to foster a more inclusive and equitable water workforce. Through these initiatives, GRCC is not only addressing critical workforce shortages but also is promoting social equity and economic mobility within the community.

The collaborative efforts between GRCC and its community partners have yielded significant outcomes and impact in the water sector and beyond. Multiple graduates of the Water to Work Internship Program have secured employment within the water industry. Building the water workforce through this program contributes to the operational capacity and resilience of local utilities and agencies.

Beyond its immediate benefits, the Water to Work Internship Program serves as a model for effective collaboration between educational institutions, employers, and industry stakeholders. By leveraging resources, expertise, and shared goals, stakeholders can address critical workforce needs, drive economic growth, and advance social equity in the community. As Grand Rapids continues to evolve as a hub of innovation and opportunity, initiatives like the Water to Work Internship Program play a vital role in shaping a more prosperous and sustainable future for all residents.

Water Careers Camp

The Water Careers Camp is another major workforce effort within the West Michigan Water Careers Program. This inexpensive annual summer camp offers a unique opportunity for middle school students to explore various career paths within the municipal water industry. This immersive camp provides hands-on experiences and educational sessions designed to introduce participants to the diverse range of roles and responsibilities involved in ensuring the safety and sustainability of water resources.

Through the camp's engaging activities, students gain insights into water treatment processes, water quality monitoring, infrastructure maintenance, and environmental conservation efforts. The camp includes interactive sessions facilitated by industry professionals, enabling students to interact with experts and gain valuable perspectives on career opportunities in the field.

Students in the Water Careers Camp not only develop a deeper understanding of the importance of water management but also acquire practical skills and knowledge that can pave the way for future careers in the water sector.

[READ THE STORY HERE »](#)



“What is nice about taking classes while we are working is that if we have any questions or don’t understand something, we can ask the professor, a co-worker, or another intern.”

Daniel Martinez, Cohort 1 Intern

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“Like water and sewer utilities across the nation, Grand Rapids is experiencing staffing shortages due to retirements and the lack of a diverse pool of qualified water professionals. We are confident that this partnership with GRCC will help to address our long-term workforce needs and encourage young people within the community to pursue a career in the water industry.”

Wayne Jernberg, Water Systems Manager, City of Grand Rapids



Water Pool-ooza

Water Pool-ooza is a free program aimed at educating community members about sustainability, conservation, and careers in water-related fields. The program features hands-on workshops, educational seminars, and demonstrations led by experts in the field, providing participants with valuable insights into water conservation practices, water quality management, and sustainable living strategies. Attendees learn about innovative technologies and initiatives aimed at addressing water challenges while also discovering potential career pathways in environmental science, engineering, and related disciplines.

Water Pool-ooza serves as a platform for fostering community engagement and raising awareness about the critical role that water plays in our daily lives. By partnering with GRCC, the City of Grand Rapids is empowering residents with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions and take proactive steps towards building a more sustainable future. Through its emphasis on education, collaboration, and action, Water Pool-ooza inspires individuals to become stewards of their local water resources and champions of environmental conservation efforts.

Lessons Learned

GRCC and their community partners created the West Michigan Water Careers Program to help bring people from the community into well-paying jobs in the water sector and to increase the overall awareness of the career pathways available to community members. Lessons learned from the initial programs include:

Reach out to your local workforce boards early in the process, as they can be very helpful for your recruitment and outreach.

Tie your programming to the state's science curriculum to encourage adoption by teachers.

Actively seek out community-based partners that are already doing great work in the communities that you are trying to reach.

Provide wrap around support services to your interns with the help of mentors, regular check-ins and office hours.

Provide your cohorts with additional resources, such as math and chemistry classes, to help them prepare for their exams.

“We are grateful to the EPA for partnering with us to provide this essential training, which will provide up-close looks at family-sustaining careers that keep our communities safer.”

Julie Parks, Former Dean of Workforce Training, Grand Rapids Community College

Next Steps

The West Michigan Water Workforce Program is expanding their program with students of all ages and to branching out to surrounding communities by identifying more regional partnerships. They are expanding their programs to help city employees gain additional skills to help advance the career paths for those already working for city government. Additional partners are joining the effort and are expanding the project's reach in terms of communities impacted. GRCC continues to work with their existing partners, and they will be joined by Muskegon Community College, the Cities of Holland, Wyoming and Muskegon Heights, and Plainfield Charter Township, Northview Public Schools and the Hispanic Center of West Michigan.

Conclusion

The West Michigan Water Workforce Program exemplifies the transformative power of education, workforce development, and community engagement in the water sector. By providing accessible pathways to careers in water management and engaging with the community on the benefits of local water utilities, the program is not only addressing critical workforce shortages but also fostering a more resilient and equitable community. As the demand for skilled water professionals continues to grow, initiatives like the West Michigan Water Workforce Program serve as catalysts for innovation, economic development, and social progress in Grand Rapids and beyond.



“Everything we’ve covered we’ve been able to do hands-on experience with. It really lines you up for success. It’s hard to not succeed within the program due to all the support and learning you’re doing.”

Angel Vazquez, Cohort 2 Intern

