

Lake Erie College HVACR Program Elevates Community and Campus



Lake Erie College took a step outside the box and is reaping the rewards. Founded in 1856, the school is based in Painesville, Ohio, about 30 miles from Cleveland. It's the only four-year college in Lake County, giving the institution's leadership, faculty, and staff an additional layer of responsibility for their community.

To meet that need, Lake Erie College partnered with Trane and the National Coalition of Certification Centers (NC3) in 2018 to create a state-of-the-art vocational technical lab and HVACR certification program.

"It's not the norm for a small, liberal arts college to offer certification programs like this one," said Dr. Brian Posler, President of Lake Erie College. "But we know the trades offer wonderful career opportunities, and a lot of students in Painesville and surrounding Lake County didn't have access to that type of training. It made sense for us to explore this opportunity."

An Idea is Born

Lake Erie College has 18 buildings, some of them quite old. Along with that, the school has a wide variety of heating and cooling machinery. This aging equipment is an ongoing challenge for the college's small maintenance team: Facilities Director Herb Dill and Facilities Manager Rob Goe.

Despite their tight budget, Dill and Goe were looking for creative ways to keep the equipment running well when they realized the campus was an ideal lab to teach HVACR. They could set up a rigorous night program to help young adults learn a trade. At the same time, their students could help them maintain the campus's diverse equipment.

Dill and Goe were passionate about the idea and, over the course of a year, helped convince Dr. Posler and the board of directors that the program was a good investment. The two now run Lake Erie College's HVACR lab and provide instruction.

"With all our HVACR maintenance needs, the campus itself becomes a lab to augment training," said Dr. Posler. "We married these maintenance needs with the community's need for more trades education. We realized there was this really important gap, and we needed to fill it."

The Trane Connection

In 2017, Trane boosted its presence in northeast Ohio, opening a new office in Cleveland. However, the company found there weren't enough HVACR training programs to generate the pipeline of skilled candidates they would need to fill its positions. They had to do more to support trades education in the region by building an HVACR lab and training program.

"We were talking to more traditional trade schools around the Cleveland metro area, and we couldn't find any partners interested in making that investment," said Trane General Manager Michael Bryan. "They were just satisfied with what they had. We had to look elsewhere."

With common goals, Lake Erie College and Trane sat down to discuss a potential collaboration. Since Dill and Goe had already established a training program two years earlier – relying on the campus's existing equipment – the college was a great place to build the new lab and augment the existing program.

"The aging HVAC systems on our campus provide an interesting learning opportunity for our students to be hands-on and put their learning in the lab to work on real-world equipment," said Dr. Posler. "If we could provide training for commercial HVAC systems, it would meet a need in this part of Ohio, as well as helping our campus."

Building the HVACR Lab

The HVACR lab houses current residential and commercial HVAC equipment, control systems, and training software. The lab, combined with the legacy systems around campus, gives students many diverse learning opportunities.

“What makes this program so unique is they get to see both sides of the coin – modern systems and older equipment,” said Bryan. “Students are interacting with equipment in use on campus that might be a couple of years old, ten years old, or more.”

This wide range of technologies gives Dill and Goe great opportunities to discuss the differences between units, such as energy efficiency and how these systems evolved.

Trane provided the equipment for the lab at cost and made other investments to get it up and running. Trane has also supported Lake Erie College with scholarships for students who want to join the program. The program adopted the NC3 curricula for students to become certified technicians and enter the workplace, while instructors received the requisite training for their own certifications.

Program Benefits

Lake Erie College initially envisioned running an 11-month night program for adults who wanted to expand their skills. However, around the time the lab was opening, the State of Ohio changed its high school workforce development programs. As a result, school districts desperately needed access to trade education opportunities for their students.

“We originally conceived the lab as a night program for working adults,” said Dr. Posler. “But it quickly evolved, and during the days, we made the lab available to high school students.”

The program has been a win-win. Lake Erie College provides an essential program for the community. Trane and its customers gain access to a steady stream of qualified tradespeople to help mitigate the ongoing worker shortage. Lake Erie College’s adult HVAC program has had a 96% placement rate, with students securing jobs at Trane, Trane distributors and other HVAC companies.

“We have hired four employees who were certified in the lab by Lake Erie College,” said Bryan. “We’ve also kicked off an internship program for high school students who aren’t sure if this is the trade they want.”

The program also provides an outlet for students who may not want to take the traditional college route but still want a great education. For many in this group, the lab has been a godsend.

“A lot of the students that come through this program don’t do as well just sitting all day in a classroom,” said Dr. Posler. “They want to be working with their hands and accomplishing things, so they love coming to the lab.”

In addition to meeting the community’s needs and supporting the college’s ongoing maintenance needs, the program has also been good for Lake Erie College’s bottom line.

“We wanted to have more diverse revenue sources and serve the needs of the region,” said Dr. Posler. “This checks all those boxes, but it’s an unusual fit. One of the things that makes this partnership so distinctive is that there are not a lot of liberal arts colleges providing trades preparation. We took a chance, and it’s worked out really well.”

Lake Erie College is constantly looking for the right ways to grow its trades education program. Working with Trane, they continue to explore new opportunities.



“We love our partnership with Trane, and we’re thinking about how we might expand it,” said Dr. Posler. “We’re always evaluating certifications or additional modules we should add. We want to stay current and continue meeting the needs of our region.”



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