



Boards Making a Difference

Cedar Falls CAPS Prepares Students for Their Purpose

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What if you could provide a fully immersive program where students solve real-world problems, in professional workplaces working alongside actual employers, and earn dual high school-college credit? And what if this program was beneficial to both your students AND community?

The Cedar Falls school district has figured out one way to offer this for students through an elective high school course that takes students out of the traditional classroom for half a day each day for one semester. The school district officially launched the Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) program in 2016 with full board and community support. While they researched many programs, they settled on the CAPS program because of its focus on supporting community businesses and industries with value added opportunities for projects. In the first year, 13 students completed the program and it offered one strand. Fast forward to 2019 where the program has 150 students involved in four strands.

“Data shows that students learn core tenets, innovation, problem solving, professional skills and career exploration in this program. It allows us to give back to the community, as well as lets students flourish and take pride in what they are producing,” said Superintendent Andy Pattee.

The CAPS program is part of an international program that has received recognition around the world. Cedar Falls currently has the only affiliated program in Iowa, but there are programs in 25 states and India.



THE ROAD TO THE CAPS PROGRAM

“Our board felt strongly that our students needed to develop soft skills, so we were very excited when we came across this program when exploring options. Those are things that our community partners talked about, those are things that they need and see that they are lacking when they have new hires. Our student associates understand that and are willing to develop those soft skills, which are greatly needed,” said Board Member Joyce Coil.

The district hosted open nights with board members and community members talking about options and programs. Once they narrowed it down to the CAPS program, board members, community members, CAPS program members and the Chamber Alliance Group met to discuss why that type of model might make sense for the district.

“We took several trips to visit other CAPS programs and one of the board members worked closely with our foundation to secure a grant for start-up costs. We’ve had strong board involvement from the start because this is a model that just makes sense for students and businesses,” said Pattee.

In addition to the start-up grant, community members generously donated funds for training and onboarding costs. While there were some initial costs to launch the program, ongoing costs are minimal. Hawkeye Community College and the University of Northern Iowa both partnered with the district to offer dual high school-college credit. Additionally, UNI hosts one of the strands on its campus.

“From the start, we’ve had a mindful approach with a collaborative mindset moving forward,” said Pattee.

CAPS PROVIDES NEW TALENT TO LOCAL BUSINESSES

In the Cedar Falls area, there are approximately 25-30 businesses working directly with the district in the program. There are another 15-20 businesses that have submitted projects and are waiting for the district to work with them. The strands are hosted in businesses, called host sites. Students can select projects based on their passion, so they offer a wide variety of projects for students who come into the program. When determining which strands to offer, the district is adaptive to the local economy and hopes to add additional strands in the future.

“The reason we chose the strands we did, we worked with the Chamber Alliance Group closely, and local businesses. We determined these were fast growing pathways into the future,” said Pattee.



Currently the CAPS program offers the following strands focused on high skilled, in-demand jobs:

- Education & Training
- Business Solutions
- Robotics & Engineering
- Medical & Health Services

“Our associates—we call our students involved in the CAPs program associates—are partners with companies. They are there to create a product or solve a problem. It’s a unique experience for them, and it’s fun as a board member to sit back and watch it all happen. When they come and present or when we get to watch them talk about projects or pitches, it puts a smile on our face. It’s amazing,” said Coil.

The program is designed to nurture student talents and help them expand their own personal aspirations.

A DAY (OR SEMESTER) IN THE LIFE OF A CAPS ASSOCIATE

So, what would an average semester look like for an associate in the CAPS program? First, there’s an orientation night before school starts for all students and parents. Then, all associates complete multiple trainings for the first few weeks, perfecting soft skills. This includes handshakes, eye contact, body basics, setting up client meetings, learning how to understand the scope of a project and outcomes, and even small talk.

“Students aren’t always accustomed to using many soft skills and so we are giving them these experiences—CAPS puts them in situations to help them understand what it looks like and feels like to be flexible and adaptive in any situation,” said Pattee.

Once associates select their area of interest, they look through the project pool and select a project offered by business partners. Companies give students guidelines for those projects, then students develop pitches. If selected, they work with that company onsite to bring that pitch into fruition.

“We’ve been fortunate that we’ve had associates come and present to the board at the beginning when they begin their CAPS experience, you can see how uncomfortable it is getting up and presenting in front of the group. Then when you see them six months later, they have grown in their ability to make eye contact with anyone they are communicating with, they are comfortable presenting in front of a group and able to share experiences. They are developing these soft skills that we as a



board felt so strongly were important along with what they were learning or experiencing with business partnerships,” said Coil.

Toward the end of the semester, there is a CAPS Community Showcase Night where students are invited who have shown interest in CAPS. Students hear from the associates and learn about their end of the year project, how they’ve progressed and what they’ve learned, what they’ve created or solved for the business partner.

“Associates are extremely impressive. The board is invited to these showcase nights, so we get to experience them several times a year. CAPS is an opportunity for associates to learn about themselves and where they’re headed in the future. I’ve never been disappointed in any of the stories I’ve heard so far,” said Coil.

It truly is a community showcase—a night of celebration with student associates and business partners.

Associates complete self-assessments and business partners provide feedback at the end of the semester. Grading is based on essential skills and core tenets within the CAPS model—collaboration, engagement, and following through with professional soft skills.

CAPS EXPANDS TO AREA HIGH SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Neighboring districts and families have heard about the Cedar Falls CAPS program and are interested in offering this experience to their own students. Cedar Falls has sharing arrangements with some local districts and is helping other districts start their own programs under their affiliate model.

“Schools with programs under our model have full access to the curriculum, sharing pools, onboarding and professional development. We can provide a high level of rigor, so when someone says they are doing a CAPS model, you know it’s at the same level across the board and you know what to expect,” said Pattee. “There’s an attractiveness for smaller districts—CAPS is focused on how to build sustainability in your own community, provide projects that are in high-demand fields, and ensure your students know what jobs are there in the future for them after they return from college,” said Pattee.

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