

NINA MOINI: There's a growing demand for workers in fields like construction, manufacturing, robotics, and other skilled trades, but sometimes getting students interested in those careers can be a challenge. Dunwoody College of Technology is trying a new approach. It's launching a program that brings college-level technical courses into high school classrooms, and students will receive college credit.

The pilot starts this fall in six Minnesota School districts. Dunwoody College president Scott Stallman is here to explain how the program works and what the college hopes it can accomplish. Thanks for your time this afternoon.

**SCOTT
STALLMAN:** Thank you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: I'd love to start just with the challenge that you're trying to solve. When we talk about these skilled trades that are so critical to the way that everything functions, why did you feel like a new approach was maybe needed to try to get folks on board or interested in this path?

**SCOTT
STALLMAN:** Well, more than ever, high school students are starting on their career pathways while they're still in high school. So students more and more are taking college level courses for college credit and high school credit, so dual credit courses, while they're still in high school. The abundance of these courses though tend to be starter courses or the first year's worth of courses for what amounts to a traditional university education or perhaps a career pathway in, say, the health sciences so biology, anatomy and physiology and other courses in that area. What is pretty much always left out are first semester courses in the skilled trades, courses like basic electronics and things of that nature.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, that's interesting. What does it look like when a high school student takes one of these courses-- I guess they're called Dunwoody immersive courses from their high school classroom-- because to your point, a lot of the college readiness stuff is in books, maybe not as hands on. How is it in these courses?

**SCOTT
STALLMAN:** Well, they are online courses, but-- so they use some traditional things like Canvas as a portal for the online course. But they use a lot of other software that-- and they even use some VR technology. And the courses are story driven, and they're gamified.

Instead of, say, reading a textbook and answering questions, students follow a narrative and work through interactive challenges that let them explore the material themselves. And the hands-on lab work happens in VR using Meta Quest headsets, and-- but that's just one piece of the much larger course. The whole experience in, say, DC circuit fundamentals that course, it means using real measurement tools, resistors, and diodes to build a working circuit so everything would look like it does in real life. It's just happening in VR.

NINA MOINI: Virtual reality, wow. That's fascinating. I had no idea that that's how things were taught nowadays. It's such a great skill and a tool to have.

Which students in Minnesota will get to be involved in this pilot? I know we talked about six school districts. Can you quickly say where they are and how folks are getting involved?

SCOTT Oh, happy to. The schools that we're partnering with, Eden Prairie Schools, the Edina Virtual Pathways, Wayzata
STALLMAN: Public Schools, White Bear Lake School District, Avalon School-- it's a charter school in St. Paul-- and Hermantown Community Schools. And we also have a lot more districts who are interested for next semester.

And part of why these schools wanted to be interested in this is because students-- it's not like traditional PSEO where a student has to leave their campus and travel to college for class. Dunwoody Immersive keeps students right where they are at the high school and keeps the high school experience intact and keeps the funding local instead of sending it to other institutions.

NINA MOINI: What's your sense for how much interest there is in trade career paths or paths that would be involved in this pilot? Do you think that it has changed at all with coming to the forefront, people thinking earlier about which kind of career paths to or which trades or skills to pursue? What are you noticing?

SCOTT Yeah, I think we're seeing nationally a trend of more families and more students asking thoughtful questions
STALLMAN: about return on investment of education as affordability becomes more and more of an issue. And the skilled trades are part of that conversation I think in ways that maybe they weren't a decade ago. So that high pay, high demand field, that pathway, they're evaluating more pathways than perhaps they would have 10, 15 years ago, and skilled trades are a big part of that.

NINA MOINI: And I know the virtual lab or VR technology, it's not what people would typically think of when they think of training. They would maybe think of more hands on-- I know you mentioned there's some hands on work as well. But is it important to update the way that things are taught as well?

SCOTT Remember, these are just introductory courses. We would never replace our entire curriculum with something
STALLMAN: like this. But this is a great entry level for students to start getting college credit and to evaluate not only the course but also in these courses going to be a lot of career exploration, people talking about the fields that actually work in the fields. So students will be able to assess whether or not this is something for them and something that they want to pursue further at a time in their life where the stakes are relatively low compared to, say, when they're in their early 20s and they're really pressured to make those career decisions.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. What does the pathway look like for someone heading into the trades who might take these courses and then go that route. Say they come to Dunwoody. What is it like in terms of years cost, and when you talk about a lot of people assessing maybe a typical four year state college or university and people making those decisions, can you give us an idea of how it stacks up or might compare?

SCOTT Sure Well, according to Georgetown University, who does a study on return on investment every year, they call it
STALLMAN: net present value, 20 years-- after 20 years of earnings, your first 20 years of earnings, Dunwoody ranks third among all colleges in the state of Minnesota. That's all colleges.

So these careers are very lucrative. And when you look at satisfaction surveys of people who work in these fields, again and again you see extremely high job satisfaction. So the pathway would look like maybe you take one of these courses or two of these courses at your local high school and decide that you want to pursue them at Dunwoody or at another college, and you come and you take usually two years worth of coursework.

And if it's, say, automation or manufacturing or electrical construction, any-- construction project management, and then you can get working in the field right away. And if you choose to go on to a four-year degree, Dunwoody has those, too. We have degrees in automation, engineering controls, technology, cybersecurity, and a lot of plus two programs that you can stack on top of those associate's degrees to get you that bachelor's degree later on if that's what you want to do.

NINA MOINI: So as you're moving forward in this I guess the landscape that we're in right now and the changes in technology, how are you feeling about the future of the trades? Are you excited about the level of interest that there is? How are you feeling about the future because a lot of us do wonder if these are jobs that are going to need to be filled in future generations.

SCOTT STALLMAN: Yeah. I think that the demand is going to continue in a lot of these fields. We see increasing demand in almost all of our subject matter areas. That's what we're about. It's really our niche and our focus, and what our mission is is preparing students for high pay, high demand fields. That's what we do.

So we're very interested in exactly what you're talking about, the future of these fields. And we think it's very bright. That said, five people in these fields are retiring for every two people that are entering. So we continue to see a dearth of skilled trades people coming into the field. So we really want to do our part in changing that, and we think with a program like Dunwoody Immersive, we can do that because there's a clear gap currently in the offerings for high school students. Dual credit for these fields.

NINA MOINI: Thanks so much for coming by the show and telling us about this. Good luck with it. Thank you.

SCOTT STALLMAN: Thank you so much. Have a great day.

NINA MOINI: You, too. That was Scott Stallman, president of Dunwoody College of Technology.