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WCA Pioneer Committed to the Skill Standards Cause

By Rich Christianson

If you want to get a better understanding of what makes the Woodwork Career Alliance of North America's (WCA) woodworking skill standards tick and why they are important, then a conversation with Patrick Molzahn is a good place to start.

Molzahn is director of the Cabinetmaking and Millwork program at Madison Area Technical College LINK: <http://madisoncollege.edu/program-info/cabinetmaking-and-millwork> in Madison, WI. He has been actively involved with the WCA and its initiatives to develop and promote industry recognized woodworking skill standards from the get-go. In 2005, he attended the first meeting where ideas for creating skill standards for the North American woodworking industry were hashed out.



When the WCA was formally chartered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in 2007, Molzahn was invited to serve on the board of directors and still does. He helped develop, write and edit many of the 240 and counting skill standards, each with a set of observable and measurable evaluations. As a WCA board member, he was anointed as one of the program's first chief evaluators, charged with training other educators to be credentialed as woodworking skills evaluators. Over the past four years he has personally credentialed some 60 evaluators.

In addition, Madison College was the beta test site where the first students were certified after the initial set of skill standards were released in 2012. *“We credentialed the first five students in the nation,”* Molzahn said. *“We also held the first evaluator training.”*

Molzahn was an early adopter of WCA skill standards by integrating them into the Madison College cabinetmaking and millwork curriculum. He also authored updates for the fifth edition of Modern Cabinetmaking LINK: <http://www.g-w.com/modern-cabinetmaking-2016> and incorporated the WCA skill standards in the book’s text. Included is a chapter Molzahn wrote that introduces students to woodworking careers. Three other new chapters written by Molzahn include an overview of the cabinet industry, CNC machinery and sharpening.

Why are the WCA woodworking skill standards important?

Molzahn said the skill standards create a common roadmap that woodworkers can use to chart a course for their personal career growth and that woodworking companies can use to guide training programs to develop a more highly skilled workforce.

“If you look at the history of our industry, you’ll see that it grew out of a mom and pop industry, especially for architectural woodwork shops that were small family run businesses as many that still are,” Molzahn said. *“Everybody had their own quality target. That’s why the Architectural Woodwork Institute (AWI) standards were initiated in the late ‘50s to define what constitutes quality and accuracy. Just like the AWI standards, the WCA skill standards are designed to bring us all together so that we are on the same page for what our expectations are.”*

“The skill standards work really nice for woodworking companies because they can link the steps of the standards to a pay scale,” Molzahn continued. *“This creates a path of advancement for workers; it gives them goals for continuous education. They know if they reach a higher level of certification they are worth more.”* *“The WCA skill standards are also helping to legitimize woodworking as a professional trade. Think of ASE, Automotive Service Excellence. You always see the ASE certificates on the wall and the patches on the mechanics’ uniforms. In a similar way, WCA is helping provide an identity for the woodworking profession.”*

Madison College’s Skills Program

A “self-taught woodworker,” Molzahn graduated with a BFA and post-baccalaureate from the Art Institute of Chicago and then ran a one-man architectural woodwork shop in Madison. In 2000, He traded in his business to become program director of the Cabinetmaking and Millwork program at Madison College where he had taught part time for a couple of years.

Today the program Molzahn oversees is housed in a well-equipped facility valued at \$1 million and organized around lean principles. His students comprised a “mixed bag” in terms of age, gender and woodworking experience. The average age of the 16 students currently enrolled in the program is 26. Molzahn said he once

had a 62-year-old student; upwards of 25% of his students have been female and he has taught four international students.

The cabinetmaking and millwork classes run 32 hours a week for about nine months. *“We start with layout in the fall and every unit starts with manual tools,”* Molzahn said. *“For example, students will start with hand saws then portable power saws and eventually work up to a sliding table saw. In their final quarter, students get exposure to CNC machining including Alphacam training.”*

Successful students graduate with a one-year technical diploma and a guarantee of landing a woodworking job if they are so inclined. In addition, many graduates earn their Green Certification, the first of the WCA’s five levels of professional certification LINK: <https://woodworkcareer.org/credential-landing/wca-credentials-2/>. Some students who have had prior professional woodworking experience are able to achieve Blue Certification. The popularity of the program is underscored by the perpetual waiting list that has existed since 2001. “We have never had a shortage of students,” Molzahn said.

WCA Gaining Street Cred

In case his 11 years of involvement is not enough to confirm his allegiance to the WCA’s cause, Molzahn successfully helped lobby the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development to recognize the WCA’s Sawblade Certificate, exclusively reserved for qualifying high school students, under Wisconsin Act 59 LINK: <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2013/related/acts/59>. Signed into law by Gov. Scott Walker in 2013, Act 59 awards grants to high school career and technical education programs tied to industry-recognized certifications. As a result, every Wisconsin high school that is a WCA Education member – LINK: <https://woodworkcareer.org/wca-education-membership/>, can receive up to a \$1,000 grant for each student who earns a Sawblade Certificate to invest in improving their programs.

In the grand scheme of things Wisconsin’s recognition is a small yet significant validation of the WCA skill standards. It illustrates the strides the standards are making to increase awareness and gain acceptance to help address the widespread skills gap that hamstringing the day-to-day operations of thousands of wood product manufacturers. Molzahn discussed how Act 59 might benefit not only high school wood shops but also the WCA, postsecondary programs like his and ultimately the woodworking industry at large.

“A lot of schools are facing a shortage of tech education teachers,” Molzahn said. *“This makes it easier for a principal or school board to close a program. Bringing in the Act 59 grant money helps teachers show the worth of their programs and creates an incentive for them to credential more students.*

“Act 59 also creates incentives for more high school woodworking programs to become a WCA Education member. We have 13 in Wisconsin now but I think that number can conceivably double in a year or two.”

Molzahn has only had the privilege of teaching two Sawblade Certificate holders so far, but knows that more will come as the WCA skill standards continue to gain traction at the high school level.

“The students who have achieved a Sawblade Certificate have demonstrated their interest in taking the time to go above and beyond their peers to do performance assessments,” he said. “Because they come to me with a little better knowledge of fundamentals I can take them further in my program. That’s a win for our program and a win for industry.”

Take a Video Tour of Madison Area College Technical Cabinet Program

Join Patrick Molzahn on a video tour of the lean practices at Madison Area Technical College’s Cabinetmaking & Millwork program. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8XIfpGUis>