

2015

Des Moines Skill Center

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Recommended Citation

DMACC, "Des Moines Skill Center" (2015). *Campus & Center Histories*. Paper 6.
http://openspace.dmacc.edu/campus_histories/6

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Des Moines Skill Center History

The Des Moines Skill Center Iowa began operation in the 1960's supported by a federal contract under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and the subsequent Manpower Development Training Act (MDTA). The mission of the center was to provide short-term employment-oriented vocational programs that developed work skills and resulted in graduates who would be prepared for immediate employment, primarily in greater Des Moines and Central Iowa.

The original Center was at Des Moines Technical High School. In the 1960's the Des Moines School District received the contract to operate this new federally funded program. The program was assigned to John Bell, Director of Vocational Education, who assigned Ross Cramlett, Director of Trade and Industrial Programs, to select a director. Walter Ramey was given operational responsibility. The programs were offered initially in the evenings in the Tech High School labs. The majority of instructors were full-time Tech High School instructors who were paid overtime for teaching the courses. Most students were high school graduates in the Des Moines area who had not gained a work skill during their high school experience. The original programs were auto body, business training, machine shop and welding. After moving to larger facilities on Bell Avenue these programs were added: shoe repair, small machine repairs (business machines), alteration tailoring, meat cutting, food services, business classes (marketing and office), upholstery and basic education.

After Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) was established it was more logical to have the program under the direction of a post-secondary institution. Dr. Phillip Langerman, vice president academic affairs at DMACC, negotiated the transfer in the early 1970's. The Center's first Director, Walter Ramey, continued in that capacity for a short time until he was selected to participate in a program at Texas Tech to pursue a doctoral degree. He was followed by Brian Hamilton who was subsequently appointed to be the Dean of the DMACC Boone Campus. George Nichols, assistant director, served as the acting director until Carl Rolf, was appointed.

The funding for the program was awarded by the US Department of Labor. The Central Iowa Regional Association of Local Governments (CIRLAG), composed of representatives of these governments in the eleven-county district that was served by DMACC, determined who would operate the program. Their decision was based on responses to a formal request for proposals (RFP).

The faculty and staff were skilled craftsmen and women who used individual instructional techniques to assist students in gaining the skills and competences required in their field of interest for employment.

After the move to the Bell Avenue facility the program was structured to permit new students to be admitted to programs every two weeks on Mondays. The curriculum was organized in modules so students could be at different points in the program based on their individual achievement. There was a maximum time for enrollment, usually 26 weeks. Students would exit the programs once they met the requirements or obtained a job.

Most entering students were on unemployment benefits and continued to receive a weekly compensation equal to that benefit. There was no cost for any aspect of the program (tuition, books or fees) since this was financed as a term of their enrollment and attendance in the programs. They were encouraged to complete the program, seek and obtain a job and stay employed. Most programs had acceptable placement rates.

The federal funding for the program ended in the late 1970's, when the US Department of Labor broadened the delivery model for addressing the needs of unemployed workers.

Fortunately, vocational program enrollments in college credit programs were expanding and most Skills Center faculty and some staff were transferred into similar positions at the DMACC Ankeny Campus.

Created August 2015 in celebration of DMACC's 50th Anniversary.