



Students cluster around drawing at Los Angeles Trade Technical College.

EDUCATION ENR Next: Interns Grab Real World Experience, Not Coffee

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Forget about fetching coffee. These interns are grabbing real world experience.

Diego Ramirez, a 17-year-old recent high school graduate, works alongside project managers and graduate engineering student interns in the environmental remediation group at Earth Tech, Inc. in Long Beach, Calif. He runs cost and volume estimations on contaminated soil zones, which will inform clients about how to excavate and then backfill with clean material. His order of the day is formulas and data tabulation on Excel spreadsheets, not mindless filing.

Ramirez is one of over 130 high school level students this year participating in the Los Angeles Unified School District's inaugural I'm a Student Exploring Excellence program (<http://www.laschools.org/contractor/sbop/isee>). Better known as iSEE, the program rallies construction, architecture, and engineering professionals to give students an in-depth introduction to building careers.

It's a mutually beneficial program, says Frank Pollare, vice president of corporate communications for Ramirez's host company, Earth Tech. "It exposes young people to a new industry, before they even get to college," he says. "But it's also good from a company standpoint, because it lets us expose our work and culture to them, giving us an opportunity to bring someone back as a full-time employee."

Ramirez, for instance, says he wants to come back to Earth Tech next summer or even after graduation. Though he had no prior exposure to the field, he says the iSEE internship has encouraged him to pursue an engineering career. Ramirez plans to study mechanical engineering at the University of Southern California this fall.

It's a goal achieved for the iSEE program, which is just wrapping up its first year. "Students might have just had a simple interest, but now they have a really good grasp of these fields," says Veronica Soto, LAUSD director of contractor relations and small business program, who spearheaded iSEE.

The program includes monthly Saturday seminars from March through July, offering anything from how to read blueprints to engineering school visits. Then students are placed, typically according to preference, in a two-month paid internship at a local architecture, engineering, or construction firm.

According to Soto, 95% of iSEE participants are minority, from over 50 different schools in LAUSD's 80 total high schools. "It's a real cross section of the district," she says. "We are changing the face of the industry."

The program is also an optimistic respite for the 700-sq-mile school district notorious for overcrowding. "One of our biggest challenges has always been the sheer volume of construction in Los Angeles," says Guy Mehula, chief facilities executive. As the nation's second largest school district by student population, trailing only New York City, LAUSD has long juggled school addition and modernization projects long juggled school addition and modernization projects (<http://enr.construction.com/people/people/archives/030407.asp>).

This school year, 39 schools that once forced students to take classes outside customary school calendars and hours are returning to traditional two-semester programs.

Local involvement has been key to iSEE. As with its "bootcamp" for contractors seeking bids and a trade apprenticeship program, LAUSD has been able to tap into its vast construction network. Mehula sees iSEE was an extension of these programs, this time linking high school juniors and seniors with potential career paths.

Gary Viano of Golden State Framers, Placentia, Calif., has been building with LAUSD for 25 years. He applauds iSEE for its investment in the local youth. He employs four interns, including one who became an indentured carpenter. "I had a colorful childhood myself. Any program that helps the youth of America is something I'm behind."

Coordinators foresee expanding the program next year. Plans include establishing partnerships with higher institutions to give participants an opportunity to earn college credit.

Carolyn Agustin, a rising high school senior, spent her iSEE internship at Base Architecture, a small firm in Los Angeles. iSEE's success might be as simple as her words: "I had always pictured architects working long hours, without time for anything else. But this actually looks fun."



Students at the first iSEE seminar hear about mechanical and electrical engineering and architecture and another student works on a door or window frame.