Project Title: Workforce Preparedness

Project Partner: West Branch Community School District

Group Members: Jacolyn Carfrae, Brianna Davenport, Serenity Delgado, Eleana Lemus & Julia Schneider

ISSUE STATEMENT:

West Branch Community School District seeks to understand how they could improve their workforce readiness opportunities and encourage more participation in their existing programs. Only 11% of high school students in Iowa feel fully prepared to choose their path after completing high school.[i] The goal of this project is to increase student knowledge of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and boost enrollment to raise the percentage of students in West Branch High School who feel prepared following graduation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study by Dougherty, Gottfried, and Sublett examines how Arkansas's "Smart Core" graduation policy, which increased required Career and Technical Education (CTE) credits, affected student outcomes.[ii] Students had to enroll in six CTE credits during their time in high school compared to the required four English and math credits and three science and social studies requirements. This study followed students through all four years of high school and one year following graduation to analyze any changes in college (two-year or four-year) attendance or job placement, and their earnings. They found that offering more CTE courses increased student enrollment in CTE and was associated with higher college attendance. The authors urge researchers to consider opportunity costs for students enrolling in courses and how that may sway enrollment. For West Branch, these findings highlight how expanding access to CTE experiences, such as through J-Term or community partnerships, can improve student preparation for both college and the workforce.

In "Heterogeneity in High School Career and Technical Education Outcomes," Ecton and Dougherty investigate the wide variation, or heterogeneity, in student outcomes associated with high school CTE.[iii] Using statewide administrative data from Massachusetts, the authors analyzed student-level course records, college enrollment and completion data, and unemployment insurance earnings to evaluate how CTE participation relates to postsecondary education and employment. Ecton and Dougherty find that outcomes differ substantially across career clusters, gender, and socioeconomic background. For instance, students in construction and transportation pathways tend to earn higher early-career wages, while those in health care and education are more likely to pursue additional schooling. Importantly, the study

shows that CTE participation yields the strongest benefits for historically marginalized groups, including low-income students and students of color, helping them avoid poverty and disengagement after graduation. This study emphasizes that not all CTE pathways lead to the same postsecondary or career outcomes. For West Branch, strengthening relationships with local business and healthcare providers could better align student training with regional workforce demand and increase students' sense of preparedness for life after graduation.

In "Framing Parents' Attitudes Toward Career and Technical Education," Ecton examines how different ways of framing CTE influence parents' support for CTE-related policies.[iv] Using a large survey-based experiment with nearly 2,000 parents, the study finds broad support for CTE across demographic groups. The only frame that produced a measurable change in parents' attitudes was the workforce alignment frame: parents were more willing to support tax increases to expand CTE when it was described as preparing students for in-demand jobs. Other frames around individualism, narrow skill preparation, or being competitive for college did not significantly shift their support. Ecton concludes that parents generally view CTE positively and that messages linking CTE to local labor markets is the most effective way to build support. For communities like West Branch, the findings suggest that emphasizing CTE's role in workforce development is the most persuasive strategy for strengthening parent engagement and support for expanded programming.

BACKGROUND

Across Iowa, students report feeling underprepared for life after graduation despite major statewide investment in CTE. Only 11% of Iowa high school students feel fully prepared to choose their postsecondary path,[v] even as the state allocates over $14.5 million in Perkins V funds[vi] and enrolls 156,342 students in CTE programs across 333 public high schools.[vii] Participation in work-based learning is growing. Across the state, 45% of high school seniors have now completed at least one experience, a 20-point increase in two years, showing that recent policy expansions are gaining traction.[viii] Statewide enrollment trends indicate that business management, human services, construction, and agriculture remain the most popular career clusters, and 38.9% of CTE students come from economically disadvantaged families, underscoring how these courses support access and opportunity.[ix] National research reinforces this: students in high-quality career readiness programs are 10 percentage points more likely to graduate, with even greater gains for low-income students.[x]

West Branch reflects many statewide strengths but also shows signs of misalignment between student interest and local labor market demand. The high school enrolls 273 students, with 19.8% qualifying for free or reduced lunch, far below the statewide average of 42.4%, indicating a smaller and less economically diverse student body.[xi] The local economy is concentrated in education, health care, and manufacturing, which together employ over 40% of residents.[xii] Enrollment data from 2024-26 shows that student participation does not align with West Branch's strongest labor sectors: while over 140 students enroll in agriculture and shop courses each year, only three to four students participate in the CNA program and fewer than five enroll in manufacturing academies, despite local demand being strongest in health care and manufacturing.[xiii] This mismatch suggests that students may lack information, exposure, or structured guidance connecting school initiatives to career opportunities. Strengthening

communication, employer partnerships, and career-aligned programming would help ensure that West Branch students can make informed choices that reflect both their interests and the region's employment landscape.

EVOLUTION OF THE ISSUE

CTE programs date back to post-World War I, when the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided federal funding for public schools to teach trades, agriculture, and home economics.[xiv] Those programs continued to grow in America, and with them came organizations dedicated to helping students immerse themselves deeper in industries. Future Farmers of America (FFA) was created in 1928 to help prepare high school students for careers in agriculture.[xv] In Iowa, CTE has been steadily gaining traction. Iowa's Future Ready Alliance was a state-sponsored initiative started by Governor Terry Branstad in 2016. The goal of this initiative was to have at least 70% of Iowans receive some form of post-high school education or training by 2025. This was achieved by providing grants, scholarships, and school-led initiatives. Many of these pathways start in high-school and provide Iowans with college-credit and trade certificates. Governor Kim Reynolds announced in 2024 that Iowa had met the 70% goal.[xvi] In 2025, the Iowa Department of Education reported that 43% of high school seniors have completed some form of work-based learning. This is an increase of almost twenty percentage points from 2023. Iowa is also set to introduce legislation requiring career exploration beginning in fifth grade.[xvii]

INVENTORY OF ACTIVITIES

West Branch has implemented a variety of workforce preparedness opportunities for students, ranging from one-day job shadows to semester long courses and community college partnerships. One annual program is J-Term, which is a 6.5-day session between the third and fourth quarters where students can learn about different career 'clusters' of their choosing. They can opt out of J-Term by doing a job-shadow or a weeklong internship.[xviii] An extended version of this is the Internship/Work-Based Learning course that is available to juniors and seniors. They must complete 65 hours of on-the-job training during the term to earn one elective credit.[xix] This option offers a more in-depth opportunity for a student to learn about a specific field. West Branch also partners with the Kirkwood Career Academies, which is designed for career exploration in high school that also allows students to earn college credits. West Branch partners with Kirkwood for their health, applied science, and agriculture classes.[xx] Another interesting aspect of West Branch's workforce preparedness programs is the Professional Learning Communities that run from PreK until 12th grade.[xxi] It is an extended learning opportunity for teachers to work with colleagues to see how other professionals are incorporating CTE and workforce skills into their classrooms. Each of these activities offers an opportunity for students to explore career options after graduation and to acquire skills and experiences that make them more employable in general.

BEST PRACTICES

1. Waukee Community School District's Aspiring Professional Experience (APEX) program expands student access to authentic work-based learning by offering semester long courses in 11 economic sectors[xxii]—primarily covering technology, business, and health sciences—where juniors and seniors can spend part of their school day learning at employer 'satellite' sites or at the Waukee Innovation and Learning Center (WILC).[xxiii] The program removes barriers to participation by having no GPA or prerequisite requirements, and business partners help shape curriculum, mentor students, and often contribute equipment or materials. Students complete authentic projects that organizations genuinely need, giving employers meaningful support while allowing students to build skills, gain industry exposure, and in some cases earn credentials—such as the Certified Nursing Assistant certification offered through the Health Sciences strand. Because partner organizations host students and supply many of the resources, district costs are limited largely to staffing and maintaining the WILC facility.
2. Germantown High School's Academic and Career Planning and Course Offerings and Selection[xxiv] pages on their website clearly display and provide all information necessary to aid students in selecting courses, understanding their career goals, and promotes course selection beyond the core courses, English, Science, History, and Math. Notably, the Career Pathways section highlights various career clusters that a student may find interest in, each including links to a Google Document with additional information. The document houses a table including resources on course recommendations, general recommendations that the students should consider, how students can become involved in clubs and organization, and work-based learning opportunities that specialize in this career focus. Further information regarding jobs in the selected field, their salaries, and degrees are available for student reference.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage Businesses

a. West Branch Business Database

We recommend that West Branch adopt and maintain a West Branch Business Database as a tool to organize and strengthen its community partnerships. We have created and shared a database of current West Branch businesses. We recommend assigning one staff member to maintain the database, tracking businesses partnerships and opportunities, and completing an annual update. Appendix 1 includes a brief guide explaining database maintenance. The budgetary costs of maintaining the database should be minimal, with the only ongoing expense being staff time.

b. Partnership Landing Page and Interest Survey

We recommend that West Branch include a landing page on their website that outlines community partnerships that will help expand WBCSD's career readiness programs. The page would include responsibilities, such as class visits, J-Term project advisors, internship placements, and the time commitment along with a form through which organizations can contact West Branch. Recommended language and examples from other districts are also included in Appendix 2.

The interest form (Appendix 3) collects contact information, industry, and desired partnership level. These resources could make J-Term student participation more impactful. West Branch currently employs a technology director who would be able to add this page to the website at no additional cost to the district. However, if that is not the case, contracting an external developer to add a new page would likely cost WBCSD between $200[xxv] and $2,000.[xxvi]

c. J-Term Showcase

We recommend that West Branch implement a showcase after J-Term finishes so that students can show their skills and projects to their parents and other students. The goal of the showcase would be to get students excited about their work and to show parents what students accomplish during J-Term. It would also be an opportunity for the district to display their programs to younger students and to garner more community partnerships. More details about the showcase's logistics are outlined in Appendix 4.

2. Gather Feedback

We recommend that West Branch distribute online surveys to student's 9th -12th grade at the end of each semester to gauge interest in CTE programs (Appendix 5). The survey would collect student data about why they are taking their courses and the motivations behind these decisions. This survey will offer better insight into what students are hoping to gain from their classes and on how West Branch can better communicate course selection moving forward. Additionally, the survey gives West Branch a way to gather feedback on how classes can be improved and what barriers face when selecting the classes they want. Lastly, West Branch can use the survey to gauge student interest in classes and interest in potential classes moving forward. This would be a low-cost initiative that could potentially lead to better allocation of class time or determining whether to add a class or cancel one. West Branch can then determine what other careers students are interested in and how they can incorporate them into the curriculum.

3. Student-Focused Marketing

a. Course Catalog Revisions

We recommend West Branch utilize an updated course catalog that omits any strikethroughs or highlights, as well as updates to the overall organization, with the goal to increase student usage and overall readability. The updated course catalog with the necessary revisions should be updated on the website. The revisions improve overall comprehension and student usage of the course catalog, since some students may find the current version confusing. West Branch currently employs a technology director who could revise the catalog to the Program of Studies page. This should come at no extra cost to the school district.

b. Course Flowcharts

We recommend that West Branch include flowcharts for their Career and Technical Education clusters in the Programs of Study page on their website. Appendix 6 illustrates how the flowcharts might appear. They show course progression, as well as degree programs offered at Kirkwood Community College. Each flowchart would include a key that shows the recommended year to take classes. Flowcharts will make the process of picking classes easier for students, as well as

help them think about their career plans earlier. The cost of updating the flowcharts would be minimal and would only have to be done when courses are changed.

c. Student-Aimed Flyers

We recommend that West Branch distribute career flyers that highlight CTE courses offered at West Branch as well as careers available with an associate's degree. Appendix 7 includes mockups of potential flyers. Flyers could be displayed on bulletin boards throughout the school as well as included in course-related emails to students and parents. These flyers are aimed at educating students on their options in higher education, as well as to get them thinking about career readiness early. The cost of this policy recommendation would be the costs associated with printing.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Business Database Maintenance Guide
Appendix 2 – Website Recommendations
Appendix 3 – Business Partner Interest Survey
Appendix 4 – J-Term “Showcase” Information
Appendix 5 – CTE Student Interest Survey
Appendix 6 – CTE Flowcharts
Appendix 7 – Career Flyers

Appendix 1 – Business database maintenance guide

The West Branch Business Database spreadsheet (provided directly to project partners) is a tool to help the district keep track of local employers, record which organizations have partnered with the school, and identify new opportunities for J-Term, internships, and other career-readiness activities.

Maintaining the database requires minimal staff time. The work can be incorporated into existing responsibilities for someone who already supports external-facing relations, such as CTE Programs, Work-Based Learning, J-Term community partnerships, or district communications.

To ensure the database remains accurate and useful over time, we recommend that WBCSD assign one staff member to maintain and update the database. This person would update the spreadsheet annually, track which businesses have partnered with the school, and monitor levels of engagement across J-Term, internships, class visits, and other career-readiness activities. The following steps are recommended for use and maintenance of the database:

1. **Annual Update**

   Annual updates will help ensure the database stays useful and reflects current community partners. Each year the assigned staff member should:

   - Review the list of business and confirm that the information is still accurate
   - Add any new business in the West Branch area that you become aware of
   - Remove businesses that have closed
   - Update the notes on which organization partnered with WBCSD during the year

2. **Keeping the Database Updated During the Year**

   Whenever a business interacts with the school, the staff member should briefly record it in the database. Examples include:

   - Hosting a J-Term intern
   - Doing a class visit or career talk
   - Participating in the career fair or showcase
   - Hosting a workplace tour

Appendix 2 – Website Recommendations

The language and roles outlined below are inspired by what we found while researching other school districts. They are meant to be a recommendation or a starting point to be edited and refined by West Branch administrative staff as they see fit. Please view the examples pages from these Iowa school districts:

- Cedar Rapids Community School District
  https://crschools.us/about/initiatives/community-partnerships/become-a-community-partner/#content
- Waukee Community School District
  https://www.waukeeschools.org/district/business-partnerships/
- Linn-Mar Community School District
  https://www.linnmar.k12.ia.us/venture-levels-of-engagement/#content

Recommend language for website page:

At West Branch School District, our goal is to help students explore and learn about many different career paths. Some of the opportunities available to students are most impactful when external organizations are involved. Partnering with local businesses strengthens students' workforce skills and shows them the plethora of career opportunities that exist in their backyard.

We understand that potential partners have different levels of availability, so we have outlined different roles with varying levels of commitment to appeal to all potential partners. Please read through the descriptions below and choose an option that works best for you. Then, complete the interest survey so we can collect your information, and our staff will contact you shortly.

Potential partnership roles:

- Class visit
  - Share experience with class(es) to give students an idea of what the path to that role is or what the position/industry does
  - One time visit
  - 1-2 hour commitment
- Workplace tour
  - Open the workplace so that students can visit and see what is done on site in real time
  - One time visit
  - 2–3 hour commitment
- Career fair participant
  - Attend career fair
  - One time visit
  - 2-3 hour commitment

- Volunteer event host
    - Host volunteer opportunities for the students when possible
    - Time commitment varies
- Internship placement
    - Works with WBSD to develop a semester long internship role for a student
    - Semester-long commitment
- Career mentor
    - Guide and assist students as they explore potential careers
- Curriculum Development
    - Collaborate with teachers and administrators to develop comprehensive curriculum that incorporates hard *and* soft skills necessary for success in today's professional world
- J-Term Project Advisor
    - Collaborate with staff and students during J-Term to complete skills-based projects that expose students to industry specific skills and techniques

Appendix 3 – Business Partner Interest Survey

West Branch Community Partner Interest Form

Thank you for your interest in partnering with West Branch School District! We appreciate your time and effort to help our students grow.

After the form is submitted, we will reach out to you to move forward.

* Indicates required question

1. First Name*
2. Last Name*
3. Business/Organization Name*
4. Role/Title*
5. Email*
6. Phone Number*
7. Sector*
    - Animal Services
    - Automotive Services
    - Education & Childcare
    - Food & Beverage
    - Health & Wellness
    - Hospitality & Tourism
    - Nonprofit & Community
    - Personal Services
    - Professional Services
    - Retail
    - Trades & Construction
    - Other:
8. How can you/your organization add value for the students?*
9. Which partnership are you interested in?*
    - Class visit
    - Workplace tour
    - Career fair participant
    - Volunteer event host
    - Internship Placement

- Career mentor
- J-Term Project Advisor
- Curriculum development
- I would like to be contacted by West Branch to further explore the options.
- Other:

10. Have you worked with the district before? If so, in what way?
11. Are there specific groups of students you are interested in supporting?

Appendix 4 – J-Term "Showcase" Information

We gathered this information from the Waukee Innovation and Learning Center Program Administrator, Kathleen Sender. Waukee's showcase event page is linked here.

The instructors should guide the conversations, but ultimately students should decide what they display during the showcase based on what they were most interested in and what they felt taught them the most. To maximize time and resources, this could be at the same time as the career fair. Having the showcase and career fair at the same time gives students an opportunity to engage with local employers they may not already be connected to, and perhaps more importantly it engages businesses with the school and shows them the benefits of strong partnerships.

Waukee has a registration form available on their website where business and academic partners can register to attend the fair. That information is stored in a Google form/spreadsheet. Waukee then creates a map of the tables for students and parents to see an overview of all the partners that are present and where each table is located.

Waukee incentivizes their students to see other booths by creating a passport where students can collect stickers/stamps from each of the programs on display and turn in their passports for a small prize – candy, fidgets, district swag, etc. This incentive and the map would not be necessary at first, as it is more important to establish the event and then work on developing it further after a successful event is hosted.

Since J-Term only happens once a year and WBCSD has other semester/year-long programs, there could be other showcases at the end of each semester or academic year that work similarly but highlight internships, students enrolled in Kirkwood's Career Academies, or students enrolled in West Branch CTE courses that are project focused. WBCSD could promote these events on their Facebook and website.

Appendix 5 – CTE Student Interest Survey

We recommend West Branch conduct a student-aimed survey that gives insight on student interests. The Survey would be distributed to 9^{th}-12^{th} grade students at the end of each semester. The survey would collect student data, particularly on how they are choosing their classes. This survey will hopefully offer better insight into what students are hoping to gain by taking particular classes. It can also help West Branch determine what other careers students are interested in and how they can incorporate them into the curriculum. This can be done at low to no cost depending on how West Branch chooses to conduct the survey.

Workforce Preparedness Student Survey

1.Grade
- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th

2. Gender
- Male
- Female
- Nonbinary/ other
- Prefer not to say

3. Which of the following types of class have you taken? (Check all that apply)
- Honors/Advanced
- AP
- Dual Enrollment (college credit)
- Career/Technical Education (CTE)
- Fine Arts/ Performing Arts

4. When choosing your classes, how important are the following factors to you?
(rate 1= not important, 5 = very important)
- Graduation requirements
- Personal interest in the subject
- How easy or hard the classes seem
- Teacher reputation or teaching style
- Friends are taking the class
- How grades in the class may impact GPA or class rank
- College admissions or resume value
- Parent or counselor recommendations
- Career goals/ future job interests
- Scheduling conflicts or class times

5. How do you usually learn about what classes are available? (Check all that apply)
- School Counselor

- Teachers
- Friends or classmates
- Parents
- School websites / course catalog
- Other:

6.Have you ever not taken a class you were interested in?
- Yes
- No

7.If yes, why not? (Check all that apply)
- Didn't fit in my schedule
- Didn't meet prerequisites
- Worried it would be too hard
- Heard bad things about the teacher or class
- Friends weren't taking it
- Parents or counselor discouraged it
- Didn't seem useful for my plans
- Other:

8. How confident do you feel choosing your classes each year?
- Not confident at all
- Not very confident
- Neutral
- Somewhat confident
- Very confident

9. What's the main reason you chose your favorite class?

10. What's one class you wish your school offered (or offered more often)?

11. What could the school do to make it easier or more appealing to take different types of classes?

12. What cluster do you feel most inclined to participate in?
- Agriculture
- ACE
- Business
- Health
- Other:

13. If West Branch offered Certified Nursing Assistant () classes at the main campus, would you take the classes?
- Yes

- No

14. If you are taking Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses, select which CTE cluster you would like more classes in?
    - Agriculture
    - Architecture, Construction, and Engineering (ACE)
    - Business
    - Health

15. If you have taken CTE courses, what was the reason why?

16. If you are thinking of taking CTE courses, what do you hope to gain?

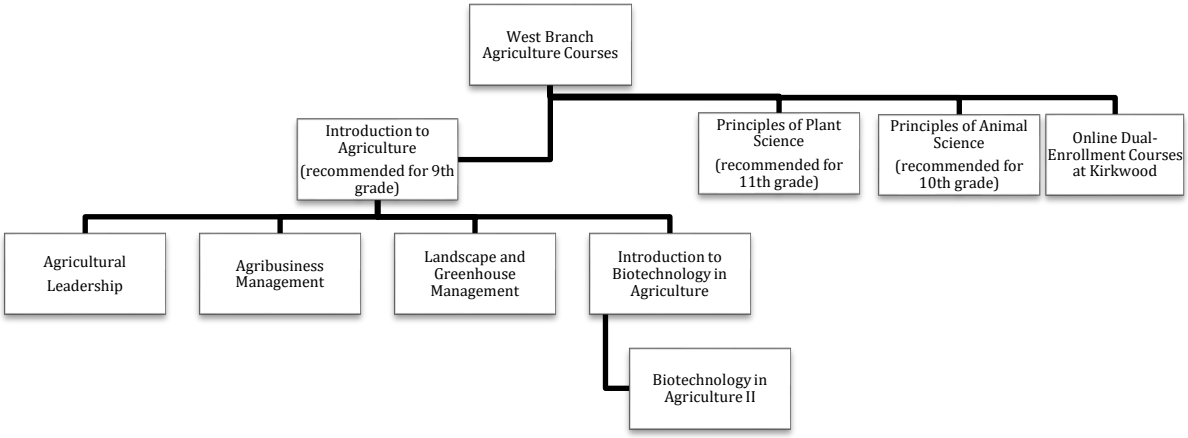
17. How prepared do you feel for after graduation?
    - Very prepared
    - Somewhat prepared
    - Somewhat unprepared
    - Very unprepared

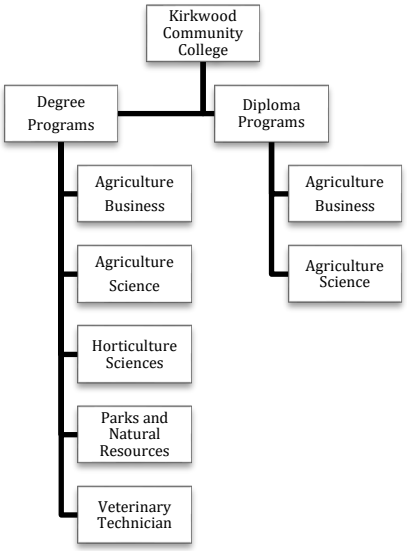
18. How can West Branch High School make you feel more prepared?

Appendix 6 – CTE Flowcharts

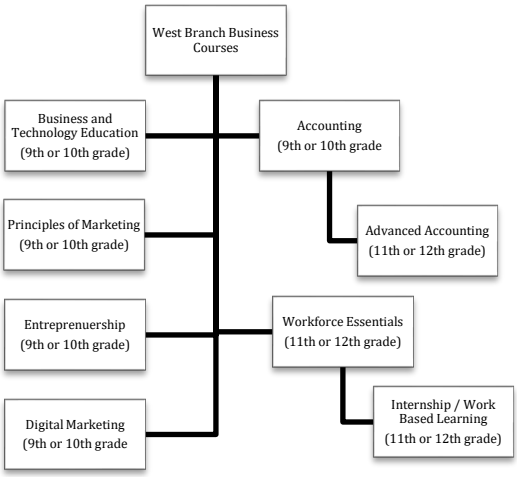
We recommend West Branch implement course flowcharts into their course catalog to improve readability as well as understanding of course progression. Using the free-version of a subscription based online app called Lucidchart, we designed flow chart examples, including an Agricultural Flowchart, Business Flowchart, and ACE Flowchart. An account is required to access the flowcharts. Additional examples using Microsoft Word are shown below.

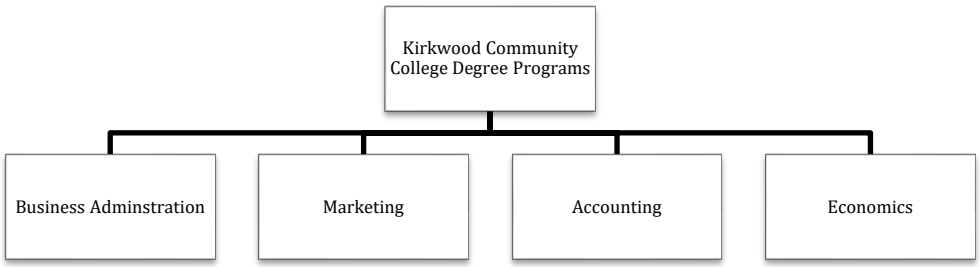
Agriculture Track Flowcharts



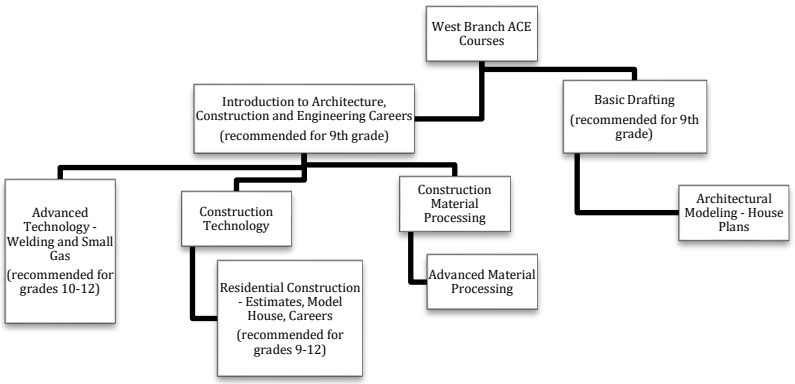


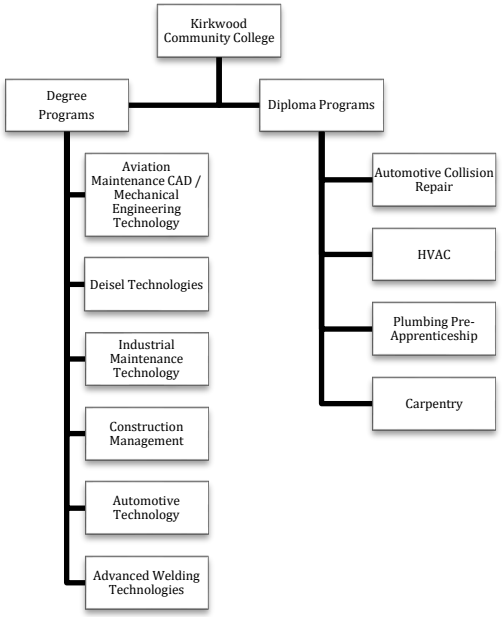
Business Track Flowcharts





Applied Science and Industrial Technology (ACE) Track Flowcharts





Appendix 7 – Career Flyers