

INTRODUCTION: Hi, I'm Dr. Carlos McCormick, and this is Collaborative Conversations with Carlos, a podcast where we discuss various aspects of Wake Technical Community College and the community college movement. If you want to find out more about the magnificent work Wake Tech is engaged in and also learn about the many facets of the community college movement, keep listening, as we will have a diverse collection of guests from students to community college presidents. Let's get started.

CARLOS MCCORMICK: Welcome to Collaborative Conversations with Carlos. Joining us today is Dr. Keith Babuszcak. The goal of today's conversation is to discuss Power Packs, an exciting and innovative IT program here at Wake Technical Community College. Keith, thank you for joining us today. We're really excited to, to, to have you here and to talk a little bit about information technology and Power Packs. But before we start, we like to take a moment to get to know our guests a little bit. So, I'm gonna ask you a, a couple of questions before we start delving into our Power Packs. The, the first question is what's your role here at the, at Wake Tech?

KEITH BABUSZCZAK: Sure. I'm glad to be on the podcast with you, and thanks for asking me to, to talk about our IT programs. So, I'm Keith Babuszcak. I am the provost of IT programs and the chief campus officer for the RTP Campus. What that means is that I supervise all of our IT programs, both degree and non-degree. We have over 5,300 students right now or active in the past year in our IT programs, and we have over 800 students active last year in our non-credit programs. So, we have a large and growing IT program here at Wake Tech, and I supervise all of those offerings, and I also serve as the lead for the RTP Campus. We've got, we're building our second building here on this campus. You'll have the college transfer courses, plus IT and business mostly, and then we will have biotechnology that will be added in the new building.

MCCORMICK: Wow, that's amazing. Take us back a little bit. IT, for you, where did you get the love? When I am in meetings with you and in conversation, I can hear the passion, not only for students success, but for information technology. Where did it begin for you?

BABUSZCZAK: Well, I remember back in, in my youth when I had my TI-99/4A computer, and I remember kind of programming and Basic back then, and I as a youth, I took a programming summer camp at a junior college out there. So, that's where I started doing that work. I graduated college with a degree in radio/television production, so I did kind of TV news editing and shooting for a couple of years. Then I moved into education, taught for a while, and then moved into educational administration after that.

MCCORMICK: Wow, didn't know that we have something similar. My undergrad degree was English with a concentration in, in news media and went to school to be a broadcast journalist. And I did that for us several years before I started in the community college. That's exciting.

Last informal question, when Keith is away and not thinking about student success, what do you like to do?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah, well, it's always on my mind, but, you know, I, I've, I've lived here for about three years now, and I love exploring what North Carolina has to offer. I was talking to a colleague the other day about I've lived in lots of places with beaches, but I really like going out to the beach or out to the

mountains. I, I love to cook and just kind of, you know, there's a lot going on, so sometimes it's good just to kind of be home and relax, too. So, there's a lot of that going on sometimes.

MCCORMICK: Wow, wow, another interest. I love the beach and looking forward to possibly having the opportunity this spring and summer to, to, one of my favorite beaches is Myrtle Beach down in South Carolina. So, let's dig in a little bit, talk a little bit about Power Packs. What's the vision for this program? How long has it been around here at the college?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah. Let me talk a little bit more about non-credit first, and then we'll dive into what we've done with Power Packs. So, at the college, we have a very strong offering in non-credit IT programs, and those programs, they are available to all kinds of different people. There might be people who are interested right out of school, maybe they're right out of high school. They don't necessarily wanna get a degree, but they wanna do some training and start working. Those kind of people can enroll in non-credit programs that lead toward certifications. We have people who are career changers or people that have gone through other degree programs and have kind of wanted to make a shift to IT. So, they could take some of those courses and non-credit. Also, people who are professionals. I have a person I've been talking to who has been doing helpdesk support for the past 10 years but hasn't actually ever earned the certifications around that. So, that person is a candidate for taking some of our non-credit courses.

So, so we have people, whether they're just starting out, whether they're career changers, whether they're getting some certifications for promotions, those are all opportunities for non-credit courses. Our credit courses can do that, too, but a lot of people respond well to how we do it. They just, they want that kind of training for non-credit.

So, what we created is, we created these things we're calling Power Packs now, which is a bundle of courses that aligns directly to a job outcome. So, in the past, if you're interested in working on a helpdesk, you might take A+ certifications – one of the biggest CompTIA A+ certifications, one of the biggest certifications – to help you get ready to work in those entry-level roles. You might take, like, the first part of A+ and then wait a while and take the second part. You might have done some other things around, what we did is we bundled it all together. If you wanna work as an IT support technician, the course that we now offer contains IT Fundamentals+, which is an entry-level certification, and A+.

The benefit for that is a couple of things. First of all, you, you get this chunk of training you can complete in four to six months, and at the end of it, there's a certification that will lead to hiring and promotion decisions to companies. So, so that that's good. You don't have to kind of take the first part and then wonder when we're gonna offer the second part or have to put it together yourself. We put it all together. The second thing is, is there's a huge tuition benefit because of how North Carolina funds the community colleges. There's a huge tuition benefit to bundle it all together.

So, we have right now five Power Packs. They, they range from web programming. We've got two that do web. One of them is basic HTML, CSS and JavaScript. Another one is Python and Django. We've got one that's software development using Python. So, someone that wants to come in, and it's not just about learning Python, it's also the software development lifecycle. And so, you learn about how to develop

software, how to work in teams as well as the functionalities within Python. And then we have the IT support technician and network technician, where again we bundled things together into one offering.

So, in four to six months, you get a very low-cost course that is led by an instructor that leads toward certifications that, that matter for hiring and promotion decisions, but also those certifications can be transferred to the degree programs for students who are interested in completing their degree after getting that training. So, it kind of ladders together in many ways.

MCCORMICK: What types of supports does your area or the college as a whole have for students once they enroll in one of the Power Pack courses?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah, I mean, so we have, kind of during the course, we have some career coaching that happens where, and just, just success coaching where people are checking in with you, making sure that you're doing all right, that you're getting, like you might not have taken a course in a while. This might be the first time you've taken an IT course, and you just have people that are checking in with you.

We do offer supports for, for people who are experiencing barriers, so if there's a transportation issue, if, you know, if there are, we have people who are food insecure, and we offer opportunities to help provide food to the families. We have opportunities that may be able to help out with childcare or technology access. So, we have those kind of resources that we call barrier removal that help to kind of help get rid of those little situations that pop up that might cause, might cause someone not to complete a course. And then we also have job boards and career assistance and things like that to help you, help you get a job and find out what jobs are there after you complete one of the courses.

MCCORMICK: You've talked a lot about certification, certification, certification. Can you kind of explain to the audience who may not be familiar with the importance of, of certification and perhaps a, an individual may be thinking what's more important as it relates to IT: Going to get an associate's [degree] leading to a bachelor's or a doctor's degree or getting a certification? If you could speak to that a little bit.

BABUSZCZAK: Sure, it's, it's both. Both are really important. The IT industry is, is really good because we have some certifications that are used commonly by companies to, to help identify that you know the knowledge and skills that are required. So, CompTIA has a large number of certifications. Cisco has a large number of notifications. There are also companies, Amazon has AWS certifications that we're looking at for cloud computing. There's, Microsoft has certifications. So, these certifications are assessments by third parties. Usually it's like, CompTIA is its own company, or, in the case of Amazon and Microsoft, they're testing it over their own things. And it's kind of a stamp that says, "Yep, you know what you're doing. You've demonstrated proficiency in these areas." And that's really important because, if you go through a training program that doesn't have a certification, then a company that's hiring you may not really know what you know.

If you think about, like, bachelor's degrees from all over the place, you know, a bachelor's degree from one college with the same name as another college's bachelor's degree, you may learn something completely different. So, to get those certifications, really, is an external person validating that you are

good at what you do, that you know what you're doing, and we're also able to use those in many cases to count for college credit. So, if someone comes in and they have 10 years' worth of work experience, they would actually need to start with our intro courses. But if they had work experience and certifications, then we can count some of those certifications for college credit, and they don't have to take some courses in our program.

So, I really think that certifications are important. I also think that degrees are important because you might just need a certification to get into that entry-level job. But if you wanna move up, that company may require a degree, and so don't just stop with certifications. Look for opportunities where people can earn certifications and that link to degree programs because you're not gonna stay in an entry-level job for your whole career.

MCCORMICK: If you're thinking about IT, you mention entry level. what advice would you give an individual who's never worked in IT, really, never really, outside of working on a laptop or their desktop computer, has any experience? How would you tell that person to assess their self and evaluate their self to see if an IT career's for them?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah, I, I think it's, it's, take a good hard look at your own experience with IT. I have some people come to me and say, "I heard I could earn a lot of money with IT, so I wanna do IT." Take a look at how much you really like to be in front of your computer, how much you really like to tinker and problem solve and, and do things? You know, you, you don't just sit at your computer and write code or fix, build networks or do cybersecurity or all of these things. You don't just do them, you do them to help the businesses with their products and making money, right? So, really think about what you like to do with IT, what you like to do with tech.

The other thing I like to say is that there's no reason not to try it. You know, there's no reason. I mean, our courses are relatively inexpensive, and there's a lot of ways to help pay for them, as well as that barrier removal, both in degree and non-degree. Just come try it. You know, I've, I've taken a lot of courses where I kind of get in excited and I'm like, "Oh, yikes, that's not what I wanted to know." Knowing what you don't wanna do is just as important as knowing what you might wanna do. So, give an IT course a try and see if you really like it. If you say, "Hmm, I really don't like that," then you know you don't like that, and you can focus on trying something else maybe.

MCCORMICK: Could you talk a little bit about the demand here locally and, and, and Wake County as it relates to IT careers and jobs.

BABUSZCZAK: It's huge. I mean, it's just huge, and, and it's growing. One thing to think about with, Burning Glass gave some data that's a couple years old, might be within the past year, that also, think about 90 percent of IT jobs are not with IT companies. You know, think about Wake Tech, right? We have a huge IT staff; we're not an IT company. You know, there's companies that I look around, and you drive around, everyone, every company is an IT company. Every company has computers, every company is using data to make decisions, every company needs to keep those computers secure. So, it's not just the big IT companies that we think about where the jobs are. There are a lot of companies, medium- and small-sized companies, that need an IT staff, and there are a lot of placement firms, too, placement

agencies that reach out, and companies whose first, whose first product isn't IT but need an IT staff reach out to placement firms to hire on the IT staff.

So, you know, our IT degree program student number in the past year, so last spring to this spring, we grew by 11 percent of seats filled, and that was even through the pandemic. Where the college itself saw between, depending on the semester, a very small decrease, we grew by 11 percent, and that shows that the students are interested, that, right now, the hot jobs really are around, programming is red hot, there's cloud, and cybersecurity is red hot, and there also are a lot of jobs in kind of the entry places, often in tech support. And there are jobs out there, plenty of jobs in kind of that entry-level tech support as well.

MCCORMICK: We talked a little bit about the, the current pandemic and the situation that we're in. Can you kind of explain the format of the, the courses at this time? Are they hybrid? Online? Are there multiple start dates? Can you walk us through that process?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah, I, I wanna mention, too, back to the jobs, one thing I wanted to mention is that we also, on our degree side, we also have a very strong Simulation and Game Development program. And we have Epic Games based right here in Cary, but we also have a lot of smaller game development programs around, too. So, so whether it's game development, graphics and web, cybersecurity, programming, data, hardware, [Microsoft] Office assistant, Office administration, there's, there's a lot of opportunities out there. So, there's a wide swath of jobs and careers available.

You asked about how the courses work, right? Right now, most of our courses are still fully online. We have some hybrid courses now where students are starting to come back onto campus. All of our noncredit are still completely online. None of our courses are self-paced; they're all instructor-led courses. So, if you take an online course in, you know, a non-credit course, you actually have a time in the evening or daytime where you're in front of the computer, in front of Zoom, or in front of [Microsoft] Teams actually, learning with an instructor. It's not kind of go-on-your-own.

Our degree programs are both synchronous and asynchronous. So, sometimes they're face-to-face with an instructor, whether that's over Teams or whether that's in the classroom. Or they could have what we call asynchronous where you have assignments due every week, but you can do them whenever you want to. But we don't have, it isn't kind of a throw-you-into-the-class-good-luck- muck-through-all-the-content. All of our stuff really is, all of our courses really are instructor-led with support and due dates throughout the course of a term, whether they're online or hybrid or face-to-face.

MCCORMICK: Earlier, we were talking about a, a resources available to help students, and you've been alluding to financial assistance. Are there any scholarships available or any opportunities for helping students with the funding for these courses?

BABUSZCZAK: All all kinds of it. You know, so if we're focusing specifically on the noncredit Power Packs, which is the new piece that we're bringing in, there is a couple of ways to fund it. They're, we're working with the Workforce Development, so people may be able to use those funds to help pay for courses. We have a scholarship opportunity that was through COVID relief, so from the federal government, through

the Governor's Office of North Carolina, out to the community college. We have funding for people who are experiencing economic difficulties to pay for those Power Pack courses, so that's available. There's also just other scholarships available. So, there's a lot of ways to help pay for it.

The tuition itself is also very low. So, people that may just decide to pay for it themselves, it's a few hundred dollars to take these courses. You know, I think we, we get toward \$700 or \$800 for some of them, but that includes all of the materials and exams. So, it's cost-effective, no matter how you paid for it. Another thing is a lot of times companies will have policies that will help employees pay for courses, so I always recommend checking with HR wherever anyone works because we have some great partnerships with companies that sponsor their students, their employees to take courses, and sometimes that can work as well.

MCCORMICK: You've got me fired up and, and wanting to sign up. Where can individuals go to get started out with the Power Pack courses?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah, you can go online. If you go to the Wake Tech website, and if you, you can navigate through noncredit over to our IT programs. There's also a search bar, and you type in Power Packs, then you'll be taken right directly to that link to see those courses.

We are going to be doing a redesign of the website because, you know, in the college we have combined, we're combining together credit and noncredit under the same leadership. IT was the first one. We're moving that throughout the college, and so we are going to be changing the website. So, the people, if someone comes in and says, "I want to learn more about being an IT professional," they go to the same page, and then we can look at all of the credit and noncredit offerings and help navigate to that. So, that'll take us a few months to get there, but right now, the best thing to do would either be, go to the website and click on How to Become a Student or search for Power Packs in the search tool, and you'll come directly to those.

MCCORMICK: You've kind of touched on it throughout, but I wanna give you opportunity to articulate it. Why should Wake Tech be an individual's number-one place to come to get IT training?

BABUSZCZAK: Yeah, I mean, we're awesome. So, I think that's, that's the reason. But beyond that, beyond how great I think we are, there's a few different reasons.

The first one is we have the supports. You know, we have the supports to help break down those barriers that would stop someone from, that would stop someone from learning with us, that would stop someone from being successful. We have the supports and connections to help people get their first or next jobs. We have those resources.

Also, we schedule in a way that let you, usually let people keep their own jobs. You know, a big model out there recently has been kind of boot camps, like, let's take a boot camp. Well, a boot camp is full-time study, and if someone is, has a job, they're thinking, "Well, gosh, do I wanna quit my job to go study three months, full time intense at a boot camp to hopefully get an IT job?" With us, you don't have to do that because it's, it's a lot, I mean, it's a lot to work and take a course, so that's where some of the help

with any struggles, you know, childcare, transportation, food, things like that, may help somebody. But our courses are part time study. You aren't done and kind of a full-time three months, so it takes you four to six months to complete those Power Packs. But I think it's really a model for people who can continue to work, for people who, you know, all of us live lives, all of us have lives, and I think that the reason Wake Tech should be the choice is we have a lot of supports.

We also have instructors who are both professional instructors and have a ton of industry experience. So, the quality of the instructors that we have and the supports and delivery method are all reasons why people really should consider Wake Tech as opposed to other competition out there. I'll also say that I'm a firm believer that a rising tide raises all boats. So, if someone is already an IT program somewhere else, that's fine. We're meeting the needs. They should also look at how they might be able to continue that training through us. So, I have a goal of really reaching out to provide IT training throughout the entire community. If someone finds a good fit with somebody else, they may, but there's no, there, there's many other reasons that they could start that training somewhere else and then move over to us for continued training or degrees or, or whatever.

MCCORMICK: Thank you. This has been an enlightening conversation. Do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

BABUSZCZAK: No, I, I think, I'd love, if anyone has more questions about our IT programs, they can go to the website. I also recommend people connect through LinkedIn. So, I have a LinkedIn profile, and I welcome people to follow on LinkedIn and kind of see what's going on. But I, I really, the, the key, I think, is really important is the demand's out there. Our programs are here to meet those demands, and we have so many supports and opportunities, there's, it kind of should help get rid of the fear and the reasons to not get started. Try it out. See if it's what you like, because you'll either find your next career or you'll find out that IT isn't what you wanna do, and you'll, you'll pick something else that's best aligned. So, I really think that we have the opportunities and the high-quality training to, to help everyone out with these programs.

MCCORMICK: Thank you, Keith. Thank you for what you do and your team does to promote student success. We'll talk to you soon.

BABUSZCZAK: Thanks so much, Carlos. Been a pleasure joining you today.

CONCLUSION: Thanks for listening to Collaborative Conversations with Carlos. If you like the show and you want to know more, be sure to visit us at waketech.edu. See you next time.