



IN IT TO WIN IT

Female Enrollment on the Rise at SIAST

By Jillian Mitchell, staff writer, DEL Communications Inc.

Anna Kwasnica has landed the perfect job, interestingly with the intention of rendering it void.

"I am trying to work myself out of a job," admits the Women in Trades Provincial facilitator and coordinator at the Saskatchewan Institute for Applied Science and Technology (SIAST), Palliser Campus. "If we get enough women in the door, we won't have to be here – that's the goal."

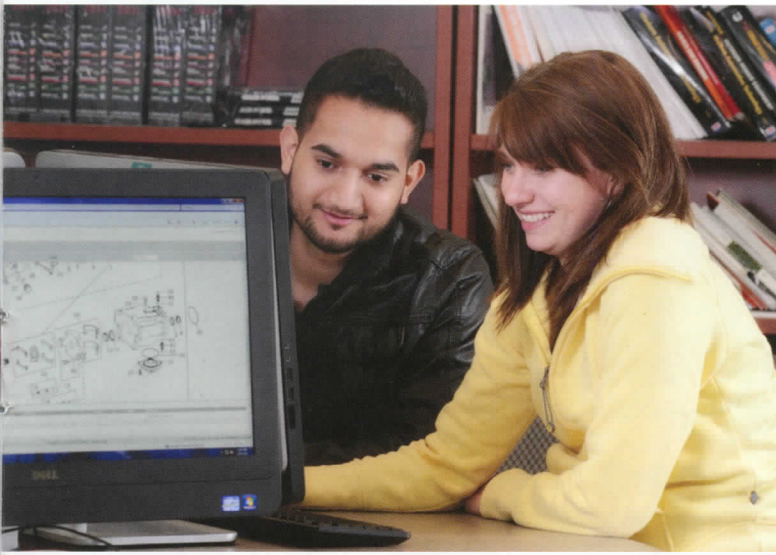
Though female enrollment in the construction trades programs at SIAST has indeed increased – doubled, in fact, from 1.3 per cent in 2008 to 3.3 per cent in 2013 – the team's

goal of recruiting females into "non-traditional" careers is far from complete.

"The number of females in non-traditional roles is increasing, maybe not at the rate that we would like to see it increasing, but it's a slow and steady pace," she says, noting that the post-secondary institute no longer has to save seats for females due to such high enrollment. "Obviously things are changing, but there's always room for improvement."

Kwasnica comes to the task with firsthand experience, as a woman actively working in the construction

industry for 13 years. Growing up, her father, an estimator, was a major influence in her decision to pursue a non-traditional career. Though initially attending university for biology, she ended up at SIAST for further education before taking a job as an environmental engineering technologist with Edmonton-based EBA Engineering before moving to Clifton Associates Ltd. in Regina. During her time in the field, she worked on many projects of note including the Edmonton International Airport's Central Hall where she was the sole female onsite.



“But I can’t say enough good stuff about the industry. You’re out there and you’re working. There isn’t really a difference. It’s not a girl or guy job; it’s an anybody job.”

“I know what it’s like to go on those jobsites and be the only woman – I didn’t even have a bathroom [on the airport job],” she says of the 2002 airport project. “But I can’t say enough good stuff about the industry. You’re out there and you’re working. There isn’t really a difference. It’s not a girl or guy job; it’s an anybody job.”

In 2007, Kwasnica transitioned from the field to the lab, accepting a job as a lab technician at SIAST. Working in an educational environment, she soon felt a calling into education and recruitment, trying her hand at teaching for a year before moving into her current position as provincial

facilitator/coordinator of women in trades. Not long after her move to SIAST, she joined the not-for-profit group Saskatchewan Women in Trades and Technology (SASK WITT), where she continues to be an active member.

At SIAST, the stats speak well of the efforts exerted by Kwasnica and her team. Female enrollment is high in technology (21 per cent) and electrical (25 per cent) courses, as well as in additional 20-week industrial certificate programs (14 per cent), some of which have one-to-two-year waiting lists. For women who are uncertain of what to take, SIAST

offers a six-week Women in Trades Exploratory course, one day a week, complete with hands-on experience in different trades areas. Twice a year, the course offered at both the Regina and Saskatoon campuses attracts approximately 15 students per class and is, as Kwasnica suggests, a “great support system for somebody who is trying to figure out what they want to do.”

As Kwasnica reveals, female enrolment is higher in courses whereby schooling precedes apprenticeships, as opposed to an all-in-one deal.

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"From a female standpoint, women can internalize and a lot of times we might have trepidation going into something we don't know. It's easier for us to have that knowledge – that first year of school complete – going in," she says. "At SIAST, you see a lot more women are going in for certificate programs because they want to step on the jobsite saying 'I know how to do that,' whereas as an apprentice, you're going in cold."

Of course, SIAST has additional recruitment initiatives that are well-supported by industry. For the past 15 years, the institute's GETT (Girls Exploring Trades and Technology) Camp has encouraged girls in grades six to eight in their exploration of the trades. Today, the program boasts much success and runs one a year at



each campus, with two running at the Wascana campus.

"You see girls amazed by what they can do. It's awesome," she says of the student program. "They're the ones in the shop; they're the ones that are using the jigsaws, the hammers

and the drills. This really challenges limited thinking and it's amazing to see the transformation over the five days."

Filling the gap between junior high and the workforce is the Young Women's Conference geared towards female high school students. This program is equally close to Kwasnica's heart.

"This is when girls are developing everything about themselves. As long as we get that little bug implanted that they can do whatever they want, it's not going to be a barrier for them," she adds.

Next on the list for Kwasnica is more of the same, as she continues SIAST's established recruitment initiatives. It's a plight well-assisted by industry, particularly by the Saskatchewan Construction Association (SCA) and fellow organizations.

"Obviously, Saskatchewan is in a big boom phase right now, so we're looking for a lot of skilled workers," she concludes. "I feel like women are very empowered in this area. The ones that are here are in it to win it. That's what we do and we love it. It begins with kids – teaching them to not see any difference." 🏠

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