

# Industry-Driven Training for Careers in Furniture

## TOGETHER, WE ALL WIN

In 2014, the furniture industry – which had practically defined the Catawba Valley region for generations – was experiencing a critical shortage of skilled workers. As many veteran employees retired, furniture manufacturers in Catawba and Alexander counties saw a need to change the public perception of careers in their industry and train students who could successfully fill their 3,000 open positions.

Faced with an aging workforce, with 28% of their skilled labor force aged 55 and over, and growth in the local furniture industry, business leaders began conversations with the career center and education programs to look for ways to address these challenges. Through these conversations, the partners developed a number of strategies to share information about furniture careers with students. Also, employers began working with Catawba Valley Community College (CVCC) to revamp their training program to start filling the skills gap.

### CATAWBA VALLEY FURNITURE ACADEMY



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(828) 327-7000, ext. 4294

[cvcc.edu/CCE/Workforce\\_Development/Industrial/furniture-Academy.cfm](http://cvcc.edu/CCE/Workforce_Development/Industrial/furniture-Academy.cfm)

### PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Low-cost training for high-demand careers in the furniture industry
- Designed by furniture manufacturers in collaboration with education and workforce partners to meet local employment needs
- Over 30 business, education, workforce, and community partners working together to solve a workforce challenge

Over a 14 month period, CVCC representatives collaborated with local furniture industry leaders to create industry-driven training to prepare students for jobs in high demand in their local area. Together, CVCC and employers developed training resources, found space, hired instructors, and purchased the necessary equipment and materials to address the problem. The Catawba Valley Furniture Academy was born, offering training in seven distinct career fields, with each discipline taking 8-11 months to complete.

Classes at the Furniture Academy are taught during the evening, for the convenience of working adult students. Experienced craftsman from the partner companies teach the classes in a simulated manufacturing facility, giving the program the flavor of on-the-job training.

The academy first opened in 2014 on the campus of CVCC, but the demand for the program was so high the college soon realized they needed additional space.

College staff found a larger facility and worked with Catawba County Commissioners to purchase the building. The program moved from a 6,000 square foot facility to a 38,000 square foot building, allowing the program to increase the number of students in the program to as many as 100.

The program was so successful that CVCC launched a similar effort, the Alexander Furniture Academy, in 2016 at the college's Alexander campus. The Alexander Furniture Academy has two training programs in sewing and upholstery. Each training program is 24 weeks long, has space for 15 students per semester, and is offered twice a year.

The Catawba Valley Furniture Academy continues to grow and has expanded to include over 30 partners. It has already become a model for other areas of the state. Western Piedmont Community College was inspired to start its own furniture academy in Morganton, where they are training local high school students in furniture manufacturing.

This program's success is the result of strong collaboration involving the private sector, education and government. Their focus was on the "big picture" of how the program would serve the industry, improve the lives of students, and benefit the region. The partners' attitude was "Together, we all win."

## PARTNERSHIPS

There are currently over 30 business, education, workforce, and community partners.



25+ LOCAL  
FURNITURE COMPANIES



CATAWBA VALLEY  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE



WESTERN PIEDMONT  
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD



CITY OF NEWTON,  
CATAWBA COUNTY

## STUDENTS AT THE ACADEMY RECEIVE:

**Exploration of Career Paths** – Plant tours, “Career Previews,” and assessments help students determine their career options. Training in core concepts such as math and measurements, teamwork and communications, safety, lean manufacturing, and problem-solving is also provided.

**Hands-on Training** – Students acquire critical skills through hands-on training in a simulated furniture manufacturing environment.

**Expert Instruction** – Students are provided quality instruction by experienced, local craftspeople employed at local furniture manufacturers.

**Career Opportunities** – Lucrative opportunities for high-paying and high-demand jobs await the students.

## PROGRAM FUNDING

The Catawba Valley Furniture Academy is a program of Catawba Valley Community College and supported through the college funding and tuition. Students pay \$425-600, depending on the discipline, for the program and scholarships are available from industry partners.

The community has been strong supporters of the program:

- Catawba County Commissioners provided funding for the expanded facility;
- equipment and materials are donated from industry partners;
- instructors are current employees in the furniture industry; and
- additional costs for equipment and program costs have been support through grants from AHFA Furniture Foundation, Golden LEAF, Unifor Foundation, and Bassett Furniture.

## PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The Catawba Furniture Academy is developing a sustainable talent pipeline for the furniture industry in North Carolina. The companies in the Hickory area were struggling to find the talent needed for their companies to be successful. Without this program, furniture companies were at risk of losing the knowledge and skills that exist in the current workforce. This program has created an opportunity to pass along the skills of the industry to the next generation. In addition, the perception of furniture as a dying industry has changed and now people see careers in this industry as a great opportunity.

This initiative provides great local jobs for people to earn a good living and thrive in their community.

- 227 students have enrolled, and there has been a 100% job placement rate for the 167 students who have received certifications.
- Salaries range from \$35,000 - \$60,000 per year for upholsterers and from \$30,000 - \$55,000 per year for sewing operators.

## ABOUT THE SERIES

Brought to you by the NCWorks Commission, the *Spotlight on Local Workforce Innovations* showcases local innovations in collaborative, employer-led workforce development partnerships across our state. The series will highlight promising practices that can be replicated across the state.

The NCWorks Commission is the state’s Workforce Development Board. Led by a private sector chair, the 33-member, Governor-appointed commission includes representatives from the business community, heads of state workforce agencies, educators, and community leaders. The commission is responsible for identifying and disseminating information on local innovations that include effective training programs.