

Ben Schears – Northwest Tech

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“There oughta be an app for that.” This statement is frequently heard as there is increasing demand for applications on our portable electronic devices. Today we'll learn about an innovative technical college which is helping students do the coding necessary to develop more software applications. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Ben Schears is president of Northwest Kansas Technical College – called Northwest Tech for short – in Goodland.

Ben grew up in rural Lyon County between the towns of Olpe, population 548, and Hartford, population 371 people. Now, that's rural.

“I admit, I was not the best student in high school and probably didn't show much promise,” Ben said. “I was more interested in sports and girls.” At the urging of his school counselor, he went to Flint Hills Technical College in Emporia during his last two years of high school where he learned heating and cooling technical skills.

“A couple of teachers really took an interest in me,” Ben said. With their encouragement, he went to Cowley College in Arkansas City and later Emporia State and got bachelors and masters degrees. He's now finishing a doctorate in education from Baker University.

Meanwhile, Ben went to work at Cowley College and worked his way up through the ranks. In July 2016, he took the position of President at Northwest Tech in Goodland.

Around his arrival time, two initiatives were launched. One was a precision agriculture program which began with seven students in fall 2016 and has nearly tripled in enrollment since that time. “The program is more about the technology of ag than the agronomy of crops,” Ben said. The curriculum covers unmanned aerial systems, water conservation, and guidance systems for farm equipment.

A second initiative has to do with coding of computer software. Coding is the term for development of the computer code which guides various kinds of applications, software, and websites on electronic devices. Northwest Tech was previously recognized by the Apple computer company as an Apple Distinguished Program because of the school's extensive, innovative use of Apple computers and integration of the Ipad into the curriculum. The Goodland school district received a similar designation.

“Apple came to us to see if we wanted to pursue this new coding initiative with the local school district,” Ben Schears said. “They told us, ‘We want you to be the first partnership like this in the country,’ and we jumped at the chance,” Ben said. This new educational initiative uses Apple's new Everyone Can Code curriculum and an app called Swift Playgrounds.

In fall 2017, the coding initiative will be launched with the Goodland schools and Northwest Tech. At the younger grades, students will be exposed to coding concepts. At the older grades, juniors and seniors at Goodland High School will have indepth learning experiences at Northwest Tech. Then they will be able to graduate from high school with both college credit and a technical certificate in Mobile App Development from the technical college. One additional year at Northwest Tech would earn the students an associate's degree in mobile app development and help enhance their career advancement.

Northwest Tech students teach the K-12 teachers about coding and mobile app development so the teachers can teach the younger kids in turn. This creates a powerful learning experience for everyone involved.

“In rural Kansas, we have to find ways to work with others,” Ben said. “Our school district and the college are working together for the benefit of the community and the region.”

Currently, much coding and app development is being outsourced overseas. “I would love to see this coding infrastructure take hold in rural Kansas,” Ben said. “Our hope would be to see mobile app developers helping solve many of the opportunities we see in rural America.”

For more information on Northwest Tech, go to www.nwktc.edu.

“There oughta be an app for that,” people say. Maybe there will be, as more students are trained in coding and mobile app development. We commend Ben Schears of Northwest Tech and the people at the Goodland schools for making a difference by encouraging this education in high-tech skills. After all, there oughta be a school for that.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.