

Proponent Testimony of SB44
For the Senate Education Committee
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Charles Friedrichs
Owner & Managing Director of Heartland Welding Academy

Why trades-based education matters:

According to the American Welding Society the welding industry will see a shortage of about 360,000 welders by 2027. This equates to roughly 90,000 welding jobs needing to be filled annually from 2023-2027. This is the result of a wave of coming retirements, as well as industry growth. (Source: <https://weldingworkforcedata.com/>)

Welding isn't the only trade experiencing a shortage of workers. Other examples include electrical and plumbing. There is an expected shortage of 550,000 plumbers by 2027; nearly 30% of union electricians are close to retirement; and more than 1 out of 5 construction workers are over the age of 55. (Source: <https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/education/labor-shortage/>)

HWA's Purpose:

The mission of Heartland Welding Academy is to meet the needs of the industrial welding space by going beyond teaching the fundamentals of the trade. HWA's education strategy is a two-part system. First, to instill welding fundamentals and the work ethic expected within various industries. Second, to emphasize professional development as a craftsman and beyond the welding hood.

The statistics listed above are why Heartland Welding Academy (HWA) was started. The concept of a privatized welding trade school is not unique, as schools such as Tulsa Welding have been around for over 40 years, but it is unique to Kansas. HWA is the only privatized pipe welding focused school in the state.

The shortage of trade workers is coming at a time when the perception of "blue collar" jobs is finely improving. Post secondary students want an alternative to the traditional college path. The days of telling students the only way to be successful is to get a college degree are over. Some students simply want a change from the regimented classroom environment, some students thrive in a more hands-on approach to learning, and some students do not want the debt of a four-year education with no guarantee of meaningful employment. In a study conducted by the Strada Institute for the Future of Work and the Burning Glass Institute 52% of recent college graduates were underemployed a year after they graduated, meaning that they were working in a job that did not require a college degree. A decade after graduation 45%

were still in jobs that did not require a college degree. (Source: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2024/02/22/more-half-recent-four-year-college-grads-underemployed#:~:text=Trust%20me:%20Your%20skills%20are,their%20peers%2C%20the%20report%20found.>)

Credentials:

HWA started its first class in September of 2018 with 4 students, in 7,500 sq ft in downtown Wichita. In just six years HWA has relocated to a 38,000 sq ft facility and is on track for 80 graduates this year. HWA has achieved multiple partnerships and approvals from the local to federal level including; licensed by the Kansas Board of Regents, Eligible Training Provider through Kansas Workforce Development, approved to accept VA Education Benefits (*Chapter 30, 33 & 35 Post 911 GI Bill & Montgomery GI Bill*), nationally accredited by the Council on Occupational Education, and approved to accept Federal Financial Aid through the US Department of Education (*Title IV*). HWA is also a member of the Wichita Manufacturers Association and an Educational Member of the American Welding Society.

HWA has done everything in the educational space to establish credibility, no different than any public or non-profit college, university, or tech school. Accreditation is a year-round process involving the participation of all staff, outside advisory committees, and financial, graduation, and job placement requirements.

The annual requirements from the US Department of Education for private for-profit schools include 90/10, Gainful Employment, Cohort Default Rate, and an extensive financial and compliance audit. These regulations ensure that for profit schools are not taking advantage of the ability to accept Federal Financial Aid, and that the student earnings to debt ratio are within a reasonable margin.

HWA must also meet compliance requirements and audits conducted by of the KBOR and the VA.

A summary of all compliance measures can be found on the last page of this document.

Teaching Methods:

Not only do private for-profit schools give students a viable alternative to traditional college, but they also bring value to the various industries they are training students for. “What makes Heartland different from any other school?” This is a question commonly asked by prospective students and/or their parents. Heartland does not believe in negative discourse about any other school, but we do welcome the opportunity to explain exactly what makes us different. How we teach and what is taught are the two main differences.

How HWA teaches is that we make every effort to teach in a work like environment. While HWA is a school we don’t want to look and feel like a school. Our weld lab looks like a well-

managed shop, and we train with equipment used in industry. Our days are structured like a workday, meaning that students physically weld 5-6 hours per day Monday through Friday. HWA also places a high importance on safety. HWA's motto is that safety isn't just something that is taught, it is a culture.

At a traditional college students might be in their welding class 2-3 days a week for a couple of hours at a time. They might not leave the classroom to weld for several months or an entire year. How long does it take for students to learn that welding is what they want to do? One, two semesters?

Heartland students physically weld for five plus hours a day, and this begins on their first day of class. They can decide very quickly if they are not cut out for this career path. HWA students have a strong understanding of what the work environment is like and what the physical expectations are.

Second, is what is taught. "Tech Schools" or collegiate based technical education is based on academic values, and the understanding of the technical trade in question. These schools are semester based, and each semester has a curriculum. An example of this would be Certificate A – Welding Technology (Cowley College). According to the course catalog students are expected to demonstrate understanding and mastery of skills needed for career readiness as they progress through program coursework. A minimum grade of C is required on all technical coursework for successful completion of the technical certificate or degree.

A grade of "C" may allow for the student to have a passing grade, but it does not mean the student can fundamentally perform or apply the welding skill sets to the Code of Construction the employer is working within (i.e., a weld procedure qualification of record or WPQR). Students spend a pre-determined amount of time on each skill or process, but that does not mean they become proficient.

Trade schools are simply the opposite. Programs are designed to work with the student on the fundamental skill sets required within the industry. To accomplish this the student's need constant weld time in a perpetual setting. The curriculum is set up in a progression of skill blocks, meaning that a student advances only as they master each skill block. There is no need to move on or attempt to learn a harder skill set if you have not mastered the previous. HWA's programs have requirements of graduation that are based on welding ability. For example, Student A meets all the requirements to pass the program and receives two Qualifications based on Code of Construction. Student B met all the requirements to pass the program but based on a higher ability Student B received 5 Qualifications based on Code of Construction. Student A and Student B both successfully completed the program, and both are fully employable in the welding industry, but based on the Code of Construction qualifications received, employers have definitive proof of the skill sets of each student, and the student has a sense of what jobs they are qualified for.

"We hired our first HWA graduate in 2020 and since then have hired 12-14 welders to work on various projects across multiple states. HWA is now one of our first calls when

we are looking to hire. I personally believe in what they are doing and how they instruct students...believe so much that I am proud to be a part of their Advisory Committee."

- Wes Tole, Operations Manager/Blackburn Construction in El Dorado

"As a Production Manager at ICM, I have consistently seen graduates from Heartland Welding Academy excel in their roles, demonstrating a strong foundation in various welding techniques, including MIG, TIG, and stick welding, alongside a keen understanding of safety protocols and blueprint reading. Their instructors are highly qualified professionals with extensive industry experience who have all come from the workforce. They are doing everything they can to ensure that their students receive personalized guidance and are well-prepared for the demands of the workforce. This commitment to quality education has consistently resulted in graduates who are not only technically skilled, but also adaptable and eager to contribute to their respective workplaces. I have hired students through many different schools throughout my career, but Heartland Welding Academy has become my go to school for kids I know will come out wanting to work. I receive emails or texts throughout the year from Chuck doing his best to find work for his students when they are done with their schooling. Heartland Welding Academy's dedication to their students schooling and preparation for entering the workforce is top notch." - **Justin Lies, Production Manager/ICM in Colwich**

Our Students:

Welding is a demanding, yet lucrative career. Our mission applies to all walks of life and our student base reflects this. The programs taught are designed to take students with zero welding experience and make them employable in 3-6 months.

Below is a sampling of who the HWA student is:

J.G – Formerly incarcerated, working at a meat processing facility while in school. Jose has almost perfect attendance.

S.E – 25 year old single Mom currently working as a pipe welder

W.S – came to HWA with a four year degree, but hadn't seen any potential for growth in that field of study, now working as a welder

C.E – 2024 high school graduate, raised by a single Mom, currently working in Kansas City as a welder

S.C – struggled in High School during Covid shutdowns, thrived at HWA and was one of the best welders in her class

E.I – 43, recently retired from the military, looking for a career to finish out his working years

The Kansas Promise Act Scholarship is for these students. HWA students are predominantly from Kansas, and most of them want to stay in Kansas. To say that because they are choosing

to go to a for-profit school, they do not deserve this funding, is not only hurting the students of Kansas, but the Kansas economy.

“My son graduated from Heartland Welding Academy, and it was one of the best decisions we could have made for his education and future. HWA provides a comprehensive, hands-on learning experience that is often lacking in traditional education settings. This kind of efficient, real-world training is invaluable, particularly for students like my son, who benefit from a more engaged and dynamic learning environment.” - Davie Hobbs/MSgt (USAF/Retired)

Student Outcomes:

A student attending HWA can spend six months in a hands-on welding program and go straight into the workforce. Examples of expected pay are Case New Holland in Wichita has a starting pay on third shift at \$27 per hour. Working a 40-hour week would equal a gross pay of **\$56,160**. This amount does not factor in the required overtime.

Another example is Blackburn Construction who has an average starting pay of \$32 per hour plus other compensation benefits such as travel time, mileage, etc.. That is gross annual earnings of **\$66,560** at 40 hours per week, but the average worker will typically work 50+ hours weekly bumping that gross earning up substantially.

In comparison to the average annual entry level wage in Kansas is **\$28,670** and the average median wage in Kansas is **\$45,250**.

(<https://www.klic.dol.ks.gov/vosnet/analyzer/resultsNew.aspx?enc=dTkmvkgGEL2blQpjB3ZCAerz8ejCpEVgtZZJ82GDP5c=>)

According to the US Career Institute, the average 25–34-year-old with an associate's degree makes **\$44,100**. The average salary for a bachelor's degree is **\$59,600**, and for a master's degree the average salary is **\$69,700**. (Source: <https://www.uscareerinstitute.edu/blog/how-much-more-high-school-graduates-earn-than-non-graduates>)

According to the stats above an HWA graduate working as a welder in state can earn more than the average income in Kansas, as well as out earn the national average of those with an associate or bachelor's degree and come to close to the national average of someone with a Master's.

As previously mentioned, HWA must meet graduation and placement rates annually to maintain accreditation with the Council on Occupational Education (COE). COE's requirements are 60% graduation rate, and of those graduates 70% must be placed in field related to instruction. Below are HWA's annual graduation and placement rates.

Heartland Welding Academy Graduation and Placement Rates

Dates	Graduation Rate	Placement Rate
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7/1/2019-6/30/2020	94%	86%
7/1/2020-6/30/2021	83%	89%
7/1/2021-6/30/2022	91%	89%
7/1/2022-6/30/2023	85%	85%

Grant funding in neighboring states:

Other states have recognized the need to provide funds to those seeking to attend for-profit schools, specializing in the trades. Neighboring states Missouri and Nebraska have specific grants available to those seeking non-degreed education. Missouri has the Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant., and in 2022 awarded 391 students, an average of \$4,100. (<https://dhewd.mo.gov/initiatives/fast-track-workforce-incentive-grant/students>)

Similarly, Nebraska has the Opportunity Grant which awarded over 13,000 students an average of \$1,800 each. (<https://ccpe.nebraska.gov/nebraska-opportunity-grant-nog>)

Not only does allowing Kansas students to use grant funds help students and the trade industries, it also helps the Kansas economy. In privatized welding education specifically, HWA is up against institutions in neighboring states, with long histories and impressive reputations. Tulsa Welding Institute has existed for 75 years and Missouri Welding Institute for 30 years. These are the 2 largest privatized welding schools in the country. According to American Welding Society (AWS) scholarship data from 2024 Academic Year 90 scholarships were granted to Kansas students to pursue welding. Out of those 90 recipients, 71 stated that they were leaving the state to attend a welding school.

Kansas Promise Act Scholarship:

Eligibility Requirements

- Be a United States citizen and Kansas resident; AND
- Have graduated from a secondary school within the preceding 12 months or have attended a secondary school and obtained an equivalent credential within the preceding 12 months; OR
- Be Kansas resident for the preceding three consecutive years; OR
- Be a dependent child of a military servicemember permanently stationed in another state and who, within the preceding 12 months, graduated from any out-of-state secondary school or obtained a high school equivalency; OR
- Was in the custody of the KS Department of Children and Families at any time during grades 9-12.

To be eligible, students must have a family household income of:

- \$100,000 or less for a family of two;

- \$150,000 or less for a family of three; and
- \$150,000 + \$4,800 per additional family member beyond three.

Students must:

- Complete the required online scholarship application;
- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
- Sign a Kansas promise scholarship agreement;
- Enroll in at least 6 hours per semester;
- Complete the program within 36 months from first Kansas Promise award.

Heartland Welding Academy meets all the needed requirements for students to use the Promise Act Scholarship. Welding is included in the Advanced Manufacturing & Building Trades eligible programs. All HWA students are required to have a High School Diploma or GED. Most HWA students have been Kansas residents for at least three years and would meet the household income requirements. All HWA students are considered full time and are enrolled in more than 6 hours per semester and are required to complete their program in 150% of the scheduled length.

The top schools that HWA is competing with for enrollment are privatized welding programs in other states such as Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Wyoming. Most of these programs are licensed by their state but they are NOT accredited. Some of these schools are what you would call “Influencers” as they are immensely popular on social media platforms and their enrollment is very high. Due to the standards set by the Department of Education and Accreditation, HWA must adhere to strict standards regarding advertising and recruiting methods. We believe in these high standards. We are however concerned by the number of students seeking welding who are leaving the state to attend some of these “flashier” schools. The below graph shows the Kansas students who received American Welding Society Scholarships last year, and where they intended to go to welding school.

American Welding Society Scholarship Winners	
State	Count of College/University Attending
⊕ Arkansas	4
⊕ Kansas	19
⊕ Missouri	65
⊕ Oklahoma	1
⊕ Texas	1
⊕ (blank)	
Grand Total	90

Let's give Kansas students an incentive to stay in Kansas. Additional grant funds could entice Kansas students who are pursuing a trade education to remain in the state. Students remaining in the state boosts revenue in several areas. HWA will continue to pay taxes on revenue generated, students will stay in Kansas, thus contributing to state income tax, and the dues paid to the KBOR will increase as HWA's enrollment increases.

In conclusion:

As a school who has spent considerable time and money to gain legitimacy from a regulatory perspective, we feel that any changes to current legislation should not be taken lightly and any school seeking to use state funds should have to indeed prove they are a credible institution. If done correctly, allowing Kansas students to use state grants to attend private for-profit schools would benefit Kansas students, Kansas employers, and the economy. Kansas needs skilled workers to build, maintain, and to grow this state. The demand for trades education is there, the need for skilled labor is high, and the interest and value in four-year degrees is on the decline. A change to grant funding legislation would be proof that Kansas recognizes these changes and chooses to be at the forefront of supporting the trades.

Requirements for institutions seeking accreditation

<https://council.org/achieving-accreditation/>

US Department of Education school participation requirements

<https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/fsa-handbook/new-school-guide/2022/appx-b-checklist-participation-requirements>

VA Educational Institution Requirements

https://www.knowva.ebenefits.va.gov/system/templates/selfservice/va_ssnew/help/customer/locale/en-US/portal/554400000001018/content/554400000149088/School-Certifying-Official-Handbook-On-line#SCHOOL%20AND%20STUDENT%20RESPONSIBILITIES

Kansas Board of Regents Licensing requirements for Private & out of state Institutions

<https://www.kansasregents.org/about/rules-regulations/private-postsecondary-rules-regulations?start=2>