**H-1B TechHire Partnership Grant**

**Participant Voices Podcast Series**

**Guest:** *Chris, Everett Community College – MechaWA Partnership Project (Everett, WA)*

**Intro:** Welcome to the *TechHire Participant Voices* podcast series. As part of the Department of Labor TechHire Partnership grant, 39 community colleges, workforce development boards, and nonprofits from across the country spent the last four years developing tech-focused training programs geared toward individuals with barriers to employment, including youth, returning citizens, and individuals with disabilities.

In this five-part podcast series, TechHire participants and alumni share their experiences with TechHire, and insights into what makes a quality workforce-training program.

**Krista:** I’m Krista Ford, and I’m here with my colleague Lee Domeika. We’re both JFF staffers and TechHire technical assistance team members. Today we’re speaking with Chris from Everett Community College.

Everett Community College’s TechHire program, the MechaWA Partnership Project, provides a competency-based career pathway to award TechHire participants with a mechatronics Associate of Technical Arts degree in order to jumpstart their career in local IT and aerospace industries.

So, Chris, welcome. Thank you so much for making the time. We’re really glad to be speaking with you today.

Could you maybe just tell us little bit about yourself and how you got involved with the TechHire program?

**Chris:** Yeah. Hi, my name is Chris. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm so glad to be a part of this podcast.

Actually, I started kind of—it was back in high school when I got introduced to EvCC’s mechatronics program. So it was a long time coming. And it just really interested me because it gave me an opportunity to just go from school right into a career. And so, yeah, that's kind of how the transition went in, from high school and then I just went full nosedive into it.

**Krista:** Excellent.

And so where are you now in your TechHire journey? Are you still working through curriculum, or have you completed?

**Chris:** No. Actually, I finished last year. This next year in March, I'll have made two years at the company that I actually interned at.

**Krista:** That's awesome. And what did you study in your TechHire program?

**Chris:** I studied a program called mechatronics. I don't believe it's unique to Washington, but everyone I tell about the program, they're like, “Mecha what?” because it's fairly new.

**Krista:** Yeah. That’s excellent. That's excellent.

And so tell me a little bit about what you were able to accomplish during your time in your TechHire program.

**Chris:** Oh, well, a couple of notable accomplishments that I really am proud of was I managed to get three internships while in the program. I got one right off the bat, like, you know, my first quarter into college, and then the following year and then the last year before I finished. And that's where I ended up getting hired.

**Krista:** That's awesome.

I'm going to pass it to you, Lee, to talk a little bit about recruitment and the recruitment process.

**Lee:** Awesome.

Chris, I know you mentioned you, sounds like you heard about TechHire and this mechatronics program through your time with EvCC. Can you talk just a little bit about the enrollment process in terms of getting involved with mechatronics through TechHire and with the ATA program, and what was that process like? Was it mostly in person or, at the time, was it also virtual? And give us a picture of what that looked like.

**Chris:** Well, originally, I was only going to go in for a certificate, but a lovely lady by the name of Leslie, she kind of was like, “You know what? You have more potential than that. You're going for an associates.” And so she put it all on me. And that's probably the best decision that she made for me. But that's kind of how I got enrolled and brought into it. You know, she walked me through all of it. So it was mostly in person, a couple of things that I had to do online, but it was all in person. It was really awesome.

**Lee:** Yeah. It sounds like having supportive staff to walk through the enrollment process really helped.

**Chris:** Oh, yeah. One hundred percent.

**Lee:** Yeah. Is that something that you would recommend to other workforce-training programs when thinking about enrollment? There are other training programs where enrollment might be pretty quick or maybe not as intensive or customized. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Chris:** Yeah. Honestly, I mean, I went in there right out of high school, and I had no idea what I wanted. And if it wasn't for just her taking an interest in my story and listening to me and really wanting the best for me, I wouldn't be where I am today. So I really think support is absolutely necessary for success.

**Lee:** Awesome.

In thinking about how workforce-training programs similar to TechHire can do a better job reaching younger individuals, folks who are in high school or about to graduate, what do you think are good or effective recruitment practices? I know that you heard about TechHire through another program you were involved with. But do you have any thoughts on what you might recommend to other recruiters out there who are looking to change up how they reach younger folks?

**Chris:** Oh, for sure. I was actually a part of another—it was kind of like bringing high school kids into the college and giving them a little field trip. And they brought me in as a speaker because I had finished and they wanted me to give my two cents on it. And I thought that was amazing because these kids came in still in high school, 11, 12th graders, and they were asking questions and really getting the real side of it, you know, not this kind of like, “Oh, it's so cool.” No. Like here, here's a student who graduated, and he did exceptionally well. And I got to make a couple of jokes on there too, which was super fun, because that connects me to them, so then we're not so distant. So really, field trips like that, that is exceptional. That's how I actually got into mechatronics was through a field trip.

**Lee:** That’s great.

All right, Krista. I’ll kick it back to you.

**Krista:** So, it sounds like the enrollment process was mostly in person, which makes me wonder a little bit about the actual training and the courses you took. Were they also mostly in person or online or was there a mix? And I also recognize that that may have changed, you know, as you went through the program, kind of due to the current situation.

**Chris:** Yeah. I was in the program three years ago, so it was before COVID hit. The majority of it was in person. Some of the classes that were engineering-tech based or more programing were done virtually. But a lot of it was, like, in person, in class, in a lab, working with these really neat kids that EvCC has that we got to experiment on.

**Krista:** Nice. Yeah. And so besides getting to be hands on with the equipment, would you say there were significant advantages to taking your classes in person, or did you actually find it easier to complete the online classes?

**Chris:** I've always been a hands-on learner. So getting into the classroom, having people that I can bounce ideas off, like, “Hey, is this right? Does this work?” that made it work really well for me, especially in the labs, when you need to get your hands on the machines or, you know, get your hands dirty in order for you to understand those concepts really well.

**Krista:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

And so for training providers who are kind of operating currently and navigating these current circumstances, do you have any advice for how to make virtual learning a little bit more engaging or a smoother process for other participants or learners who might prefer in-person learning and do a little bit better in that environment, kind of similarly to how you operate?

**Chris:** Well, if meeting in person is not an option, I definitely think kind of working with a presentation that shows in 3D what you're going to be working with, giving different perspectives on it, taking it apart, putting it back together, because people like me learn like that. We learn by taking things apart, seeing what works, putting it back together. So stuff like that, where it's not 2D, it's 3D, would definitely be in people's advantage.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's a great point.

And I'm kind of curious. Were there other things about the actual training itself, that training component of the program, that you feel were really critical to your success or that you would recommend that other training providers replicate in their job-training programs?

**Chris:** Oh, yeah. Number one was just the incredible support I got from everyone at EvCC. I remember I'd be up at nine doing homework, and I would email my professor with, like, this super-complicated question, to me at the time, right? And it's like, “Professor, what does this mean?” And he would get back to me as soon as possible. And then the following day, he would take me aside if there's time extra, and he would go over it in person and take the things apart with me or give me a real in-depth breakdown on it. So just that support was really no joke. It definitely helped.

I definitely think having an environment where people can ask those questions and not be afraid would also help out a lot, because I was the shy kid in class. So it was kind of nervous to bring up this question because I felt like it was a dumb question.

**Krista:** Yeah. I think that's great advice. And it also makes me wonder about kind of the flip side of that. Were there any characteristics of the classes or the training that made it a little bit difficult for you or that you maybe wish had been different?

**Chris:** That's a good question. A lot of the classes were really fast paced, which I enjoyed. I thrived on that because I remember one of my engineering-tech class, my professor was like, “We have three hours. Every minute is accounted for. We're going to be here, here, here at this minute. And if you're not there, catch up.” So I really enjoyed that. I know some people don't, but I enjoyed the fast pace and, like, them throwing challenges at me.

**Krista:** I kind of want to go back to this idea of virtual learning just because that's kind of the moment that we're in.

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Krista:** You talked about 3D simulations and how helpful that is. And I'm wondering if there's anything else that comes to mind that educators should be mindful of during this time of virtual learning or any advice for students of virtual learning.

**Chris:** That's a good question. For professors, I think, not so much what they could do in the classroom, but what they could do to support their students, because a lot of the times it's really stressful. Like, you aren't able to get into the class, so it really starts to weigh on you. So a little bit of patience on the student side. And then for the students to really get out there and try to do their best to replicate what they should be doing in the classroom in their own homes, even if it's, you know, with papier mâché or something.

I remember there was actually a lot of virtual reality integrated into the little conversation we have with the high school kids. Like, they had a virtual-reality welding kit that you could weld in virtual reality, which was super neat, and the kids loved it. So stuff like that, to get involved in that, that would be super cool.

**Krista:** Yeah. It sounds really cool. It sounds kind of like your key piece of advice here are a little bit of patience, a lot of creativity, and a whole lot of support.

**Chris:** Yeah, yeah. One hundred precent.

**Krista:** Excellent. Thank you so much.

I’m going to pass it back to you, Lee, to talk about student supports.

**Lee:** That's actually such a wonderful transition. Wanted to talk a little bit about student support because it's such an integral part of a lot of workforce-training programs, but in particular, TechHire. And Chris, we'd love to know from you—and you kind of touched on this a little bit in talking about how supportive your professors were in helping you think through complicated problems or questions related to your training—were there any pieces of the TechHire program related to student support that you found really helpful in particular? It could be academic support or coaching and advising or maybe the TechHire program helped you with challenges unrelated to your education and training that were really helpful in terms of your retention.

**Chris:** Yeah. Actually, I would remember that every quarter in every class an advisor would come in and say, “Hey, we're here to help you guys out with math,” because that's really important in the field that I’m in, math, “Hey, if anyone is done in math, you come to me, and it doesn't matter where you're at. We have all this help that we can give you.” Or they'd have people in class that were just there to help, and that was awesome because after the teacher was done giving out his presentation, you just run straight to them, and they'd give you all the time you need to work things out. So, yeah, that was definitely a big-plus side, that support from them, having people to help you.

**Lee:** Is there anything you would recommend to other training providers outside of TechHire who are thinking about starting their own advanced-manufacturing training program? What would you recommend to them as they think about good student support for their participants?

**Chris:** Firstly, I'd say to one hundred percent do it, because there was a lot of kids in the class that were like, “Oh, I'm so excited. The workforce is open. It's ready for us.” And a lot of kids these days are, man, they're bright. They're super smart. So getting in there and molding them when they're at this point in life, when they're super hungry, it's just a big benefit.

Advice for people that are going to start this. I would say, be open. Be open to creative solutions, especially in these times now, because when I was in, we had the ability to go and take apart a lathe or work with it and do some milling, stuff like that. We had the ability to go in and to do these things. But with COVID, it's a lot more difficult. So definitely getting more creative about how you approach these things.

**Lee:** Chris, I’m wondering if we could go just a little bit deeper in thinking about student support and also thinking about how the TechHire program, like across the country, really strives to recruit and support younger individuals who are interested in accessing the industry. And I'm wondering if there's any particular forms of support that are really pertinent to youth and younger individuals who are exploring TechHire programs or similar training programs. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Chris:** Well, when it comes to getting kids on board, I think that the kids are already really on board. There was a pretty strong support for the program when I was in. All the students from super young to super old were really excited that this was a possibility. And something that I would say to the people that are trying to hold or start their own programs, I would say be very patient and try to implement as many creative ways to get the in-classroom work to the student if they're in quarantine or if they're locked down or if they're inside their house. It’s very difficult with COVID right now. But at least when I was in, we had the ability and opportunity to go and take things apart or go into the lab, go into the machining room, going into the welding booths and putting in the work. So creativity is going to be needed 100 percent, and a lot of support and patience.

**Lee:** Definitely. All right. Thank you.

Krista. I will pass it over to you.

**Krista:** Perfect.

So, Chris, I wanted to talk a little bit about just the role of technology in the workplace. And we know that TechHire’s an IT-focused training program, and you kind of alluded to this a little bit earlier when you were talking about the cool VR welding technology. And I’d love to get your thoughts on just the overall rise of technology, especially now that we've all kind of switched to remote work. I'm curious about technology in your workplace and how it kind of shapes the work that you do.

**Chris:** Yeah. There was a lot of technology when I was in school, when I was doing all that, whether it was on the robotics table, using the pendants; or jumping into the PLC programing, hooking up with your computer; we had this neat little controller that we could connect to, and it'd have an Allen Bradley PLC that we would get to play with. And it was almost a spot-on transition into my job, at least, because I’d work in an automation field. A lot of the projects that I worked on were using automation at a more advanced level. So instead of using Allen Bradley, I jumped into Siemens and so forth.

I think it was a pretty good transfer. I felt pretty comfortable. Obviously, since I didn't understand the new system, I had to learn it, but I still felt like I wasn't completely dead in the water, I felt like. I had got a pretty good grasp with it.

But technology plays a huge part in my job and what I do. I always carry around a laptop, and my kit is mostly just laptop and a journal because a lot of work can be done is you log into a program and look at some stuff and mess with some parameters to get it to work.

**Krista:** Are there specific ways that you feel like your TechHire program prepares you to succeed in your kind of new tech-focused role?

**Chris:** I really like the approach that they took. It was a very crawl, walk, run type of approach. For the first couple of weeks, we’d go in and learn terminology and ideas. And then we would go into, like, you know, concepts and then, boom, they'd hand us the, what we would work on for those days. I definitely think it would have been a lot more beneficial if we had, like, a Siemens PLC and we were learning more of that, because going from one to another, it was similar, but they’re still different enough that I think it would warrant its own class.

**Krista:** So, it sounds like—I just want to make sure I'm understanding correctly because I'm not from the mechatronics world—but it sounds like your TechHire program did a really good job of preparing you, but maybe some more specific training that's kind of aligned with what employers are using nowadays would have been—

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Krista:** Okay. Yeah. That makes sense. Can you say a little bit more about that?

**Chris:** Yeah. All around, like I said, mechatronics is multidisciplined, but it's a very basic introduction to everyone, while also refining a maintenance background. And it did a very good job with every one of those introductions. I would have loved personally to see there be a little more involvement with stuff that is used in industry. Like, we used Allen Bradley; Siemens is what’s used mostly. I've talked to other colleagues of mine, that I went to school with, and they mentioned the same thing. Like, “Oh, this would have been cool.”

But aside from that, one little nitpick from me, it prepared me very well. I think during one of my internships, at the same time I was in class, I was learning about dial indicators and how to use them. And during my internship, my mentor, he told me, “Here, take this, and go figure this out,” and I already had that information from class. So I went right to it, and I even impressed him a little bit. So they did a pretty dang-good job with it.

**Krista:** Nice. Nice. That’s excellent.

Chris, is there anything else that you'd like to share, any other pieces of advice you have for training providers or for students, that we haven't touched on yet?

**Chris:** I would say take a real good look at your industry. Like for us, Boeing is big here. So taking a look at what their needs are. And not just the major, but all the players around, like, what their needs are and taking a look at the equipment that’s most common and then transforming that into a classroom or a curriculum that could—so it's even more effective for students.

I would say that there's plenty of resources online, not just in class, that you should definitely dive into. I know I didn't do the best in class, so I would put in extra work outside, and I would just dig around through multiple online sources to just try to find out answers. So don't be afraid to do that.

**Krista:** Yeah. That's excellent advice.

**Lee:** Chris, I have one more question. Maybe going actually back to, like, when you wrapped up your TechHire training, and you mentioned the internships that you were able to receive. And I'd love to hear a little bit more about your experience stepping into that workforce world and experiencing employers, having gone through this TechHire credential program. What are your thoughts on employers and what they should be mindful of as they think about recruiting other TechHire participants? Are there things that you feel they should keep in mind or maybe things that they aren't right now that they should be?

**Chris:** My first two internships were with Boeing, and my last one was with the company who hired me, which is [unclear 21:09] America. Every time I went in for an internship, I was super nervous because, like you said, it's a whole new world. You’re no longer in the classroom. You're in the real world. There’s no more control problems. It's like if something goes wrong, it goes wrong, the real way. But I think Boeing did a really good job with keeping us shadowing a person like a technician or a mechanic, and they would alternate. When I was there, certain interns had the opportunity to kind of do a little presentation—build up a PowerPoint of what they've learned throughout their time there and present it to the managers there— and then the managers, they would give them critiques on, “Oh, what can you do better for public speaking,” or “Oh, we really enjoyed this. Could you tell me more about it?” And so that's where the interns got their time to shine because they get to prove to them how much they paid attention, how interested they are in the work, and how passionate they are for it. So I think that, that would be super cool. You know, have a structure where there's certain goals to be met at specific weeks, and then have it all wrap up together so then it can be presented to the employers at the end so then they could gauge, like, “Dang, this kid, this kid knows everything about it. He put his nose to the ground, and he did not leave a single spot unchecked.”

**Lee:** Awesome. That is a perfect answer.

Chris, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us related to TechHire or even just your experience in general before we go?

**Chris:** Yeah. I mean, I just want to say that—it's going to sound a little corny—but TechHire really did change my life. If it wasn't for all of the opportunities I've had and all the support that I had with all the instructors and not just them, but the employers, too, who gave us the ability to come into the workplace and shadow people, I wouldn't be where I am today. It really had a fundamental impact on my life, and not just in my professional life, my personal one as well, because I've just been more driven to do things, to study more material, to really put the work in, to take it back. And I've even had opportunities to travel to different states. As you know, I was in California for some work, so I got to see some really, really neat things for someone my age. It's been a very incredible opportunity to be a part of TechHire.

**Lee:** Awesome, Chris. Well, I'm sure I can say that your program was very lucky to have you. Thank you. Thank you so much, Chris, for your time.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to the *TechHire Participant Voices* podcast series. Please be sure to check out our other podcast episodes found on WorkforceGPS. For more information on the TechHire Partnership grant, please visit www.doleta.gov.