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Chesterfield students get hands-on computer network training

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Second-year students enrolled at the Cisco Networking Academy at the Chesterfield Technical Center are embarking on a hands-on project to address the technology network of a growing fictitious company.

About 25 students working in teams will be required to investigate the existing network of the company and design and prototype the upgrades necessary to support the network's growth.

The students will present their proposals in about three months to the Cisco Networking Academy's advisory board, made up of business and technology professionals, which will pick a winner.

"Although the business is fake, the demands are realistic," said Jon Garrett, a senior at Midlothian High School.

The Cisco academy is a two-year program in high schools and colleges across the nation and abroad in which students learn to design local and wide-area computer networks. Students also can earn Cisco networks certifications.

The program, which also is available on a smaller scale at four other Chesterfield high schools, offers internships for students with local businesses. Garrett interned at CXI, a technology information service company in Richmond.

"These are internships that you get hands-on experience and actually getting out of the classroom environment and getting into a corporate environment," Garrett said. "So you can't ask for a better double perk: In addition to getting hands-on experience, you get paid while you're doing it."

Last year, the Technical Center was chosen as the Cisco Regional Training Academy for Central Virginia to train teachers who teach technology information.

Students will be applying their textbook knowledge to put together a plan for the made-up company, which provides video services for a client that owns a stadium. The company has taken a new contract resulting in 70 percent growth and needs reliable networks to provide the client's Web site with high volumes of live and recorded video of sporting events.

Some students have been preparing for this project by leading other hands-on projects. Garrett and classmates Carter Horton, a senior at Cosby High School, and Andrew Adams, a senior at Midlothian

High School, recently organized a computer gaming tournament that brought in about 55 students and about \$1,000 for the program.

"These guys did everything," said teacher Linda Lester, adding that teachers try to give students a whole set of skills so they can do the technical work, memos and presentations.

"We try to teach kids all the skills so they can walk and talk at the same time," she said.

Students designed a network to accommodate all participants in the tournament, made sure systems ran smoothly, found sponsors and promoted the event.

"If one of us would not have done our job, we would either have a really bad tournament or we wouldn't have a game to play," Garrett said.

Maureen Noe, a teacher at the academy, said the skills that students used to organize the tournament and the current project are preparing them for jobs.

"That's what these guys have to do when they work in the real world," she said.

A number of graduates from the academy have landed technology jobs with prestigious companies, Noe said.

"This program was the impetus for a lot of their success stories."

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