For 108 years, Ranken Technical College has prepared the next-generation workforce for employment in and near St. Louis. During that time, while the neighboring area changed dramatically, the college remained an economic and social anchor of the city’s northern section.

“It used to be somewhat of a depressed, even dangerous, area,” says Peter Murtaugh, Ranken’s vice president for finance and administration. “While there are still blighted parts, things have changed a lot—primarily because of how we have aided the community.”

Ranken students used to build one house—and then tear down another—every semester as part of their technical training. Decades ago, using its operating budget, the college started buying nearby lots from the city and to date has built about 60 three-bedroom houses, with garages, for sale. “We lose money on the houses, but we look at them as a lab for our carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and HVAC students,” says Murtaugh, who also serves as president of Ranken Community Development Corporation, the college’s homebuilding subsidiary. Designs for the houses come from the college’s architectural program.

He estimates the college has spent millions acquiring land and meeting EPA requirements alone.

A few years ago, to maintain the neighborhood’s historical style and value, Ranken purchased and rehabbed an abandoned dairy; the former loading dock now serves as an auditorium, while the old warehouse was transformed into a 200-bed dormitory. Some residents of the dormitory can’t afford to pay for room and board and would otherwise be homeless, so the college supports those students until they can complete their training and become employed.

The college has built a close relationship with St. Louis school officials, which has led to a dual-enrollment program for students in economically challenged areas. Seniors can attend Ranken for a free semester of technical training, right before they graduate from high school, which gives them a head start on a certificate or degree program. “We have a staff member who checks in with these students, to make sure they’re showing up for class and not struggling, and reports back to the schools,” says Murtaugh. “About 90 percent of the participants usually finish the program.”

More than city officials have taken notice of Ranken’s community-enhancement efforts. “The locals see us in a positive light, and new developers—who haven’t touched our area before—are now coming in,” Murtaugh reports. “We feel like we started a trend.”

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