

## The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)

Higher education: NAIT raises the bar through online instruction for crane operators

A lot of thought goes into a well-executed lift with a crane. Before an operator picks anything off the ground, there's much math to be done, says Matthew Woolsey, chair of Crane and Hoisting Operator programs at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT). Instructors teach students to calculate for a crane's capacity, the nature of the material to be lifted, and other factors that will ensure a load rises and moves safely.

"We want our students to be critical thinkers who understand the situation at hand and then act accordingly," says Woolsey.

To help make that happen, and meet industry demand, NAIT takes a considered approach to producing qualified operators of boom trucks and mobile cranes. As a student who attended the polytechnic to build on his experiences as an operator, Woolsey witnessed the origins of that approach – and the positive impact it would have – when instruction went virtual due to the pandemic.

"It offered an unexpected benefit," says Woolsey, who lived in Red Deer then, 170 kilometres south of NAIT's Spruce Grove Campus, where Crane and Hoisting is taught. "I didn't have to leave my wife for six weeks like I did during my first year of the program."

Previously, students had to be on campus for classroom instruction and time on the machines for six weeks straight in each of their first and third years. After seeing the effect of blended delivery, instructors stuck with it, alternating between one week on campus and one off, when they'd teach theory online.

"It improves quality of life for the students," says Woolsey.

While that's particularly true of those who attend from across Canada, blended delivery also has benefits in unprecedented times not involving a virus. During the recent record-setting wildfire season, one northern Alberta student enjoyed the relief of regularly heading back to make his home as ready as possible for an emergency, says Woolsey.

Overall, blended learning is proving essential to the accessibility to the program. Woolsey believes distance shouldn't be a barrier to education – a philosophy shared by all of NAIT's School of Skilled Trades.

"Our students have diverse backgrounds and learning needs," says dean Matthew Lindberg. "Providing learning opportunities that support them throughout their apprenticeship education not only benefits them but also benefits their employers, communities and loved ones. As we work to support greater diversity in our skilled trades, providing different learning modalities will enhance that experience for all learners."

Students have responded well to that philosophy, says Woolsey. Program fill rates are strong and attendees finish with high averages.

That NAIT is preparing students to be assets to any construction project is just one measure of success. Another strikes Woolsey as equally important: He's seen a lift in the spirits of students who now have the opportunity to strike a healthy balance.

"I want our students to be able to spend time with their children, to be with their families – but also get the education they need to succeed in their career of choice."

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