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Microsoft and Gateway Tech ramp up planning for Datacenter Academy

Microsoft has been working with Gateway Technical College, including holding a community open house earlier this year at Gateway's SC Johnson iMET Center.

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By Sean Ryan – Reporter, Milwaukee Business Journal
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Microsoft Corp. last week signed a memorandum with Gateway Technical College to open a Datacenter Academy that will train workers for the company's multibillion-dollar Mount Pleasant facilities.

The partnership is in the early stages, so timing, the number of students and other details are being worked out. However, a partnership with Microsoft represents a "great opportunity" to train students for data center jobs in Wisconsin, said Matt Janisin, Gateway Tech executive vice president of academic affairs.

The academy will mean courses or curriculum to prepare students for data center jobs. It also will include a demonstration lab in one of Gateway's buildings that will have data center equipment like that in Microsoft's future facilities, Janisin said. That would give residents and students the chance to see the inner workings of data centers, which operate under high security and are off-limits to the public.

That facility would also allow for hands-on learning as the Datacenter Academy begins to train students to work with Microsoft or other companies. Gateway Tech may have some of the needed equipment already in a glass-enclosed server room at its Racine campus, Janisin said.

"We are going to work with them to learn the skill sets and the knowledge needed to be a data center employee," Janisin said.

That would include jobs working directly with the data servers and information technology hardware, but also on the facility management of data centers, which require robust cooling systems and electricity.

Gaby DelaGarza, who leads Microsoft's community efforts relating to data centers, said the curriculum could be integrated into Gateway's offerings. Updates on that effort can be provided in the coming months.

"It helps us create a diverse and local talent pool of skilled information technology workers in the communities where we operate our data centers," DelaGarza said. "We are aiming to bridge the gap between education and our industry."

Microsoft last week announced plans to acquire 1,030 acres in Mount Pleasant for development into data center facilities. That is in addition to 315 acres the company bought earlier this year in Mount Pleasant for an estimated $1.4 billion data center project.

The Datacenter Academy is one way Microsoft gets involved in the local communities where it has a presence. The company's website shows nine such existing academies in the U.S., and nine more overseas.

The global tech giant has been publicly working with stakeholders in Wisconsin since its Mount Pleasant data center was announced earlier this year. Microsoft has also partnered with United Way of Racine County, as well as Gener8tor to support science, technology, engineering and math education in Wisconsin, DelaGarza said. Microsoft has also partnered with Root-Pike Watershed Initiative Network to restore about 100 acres of natural areas around Lamparek Creek as it runs through the site of its planned Mount Pleasant data center.