During my final few months of high school, I decided I wanted to be a welder. As much as I felt pressured to follow the traditional four-year university path, I knew I wanted to do something different. I couldn’t understand why most people viewed tech schools, which tend to be much more affordable and offer direct programs of education, as less viable than four-year universities. I was all ready to go to a tech school when I found out about the apprentice- ship program at Buhler Inc., a family-owned company specializing in food production, die casting, innovation and sustainability.

The Buhler Apprenticeship Academy is open to six individuals each year. Upon starting the apprenticeship, apprentices begin receiving health and dental insurance, a 401K, work uniforms and tools. Most importantly, Buhler fully pays for a three-year education at Dunwoody College of Technology.

I began my Buhler apprenticeship in summer 2015, after graduating from high school. In the first year at Buhler as an apprentice, I started learning about the company by assisting wherever possible, learning about basic tools and skills and tackling small projects. Along with this hands-on experience, I began attending classes at Dunwoody.

During the second year I advanced my skills and knowledge in electronics, fabrication, engineering, machinist math, electrical theory and much more through continuing to work at the plant and attending classes. I started to really know the people at Buhler, make connections and learn about jobs I could possibly attain. I realized through this experience that there are so many more careers and job opportunities than I had envisioned as a high school student. The jobs I had envisioned were really only a small portion of the vast amount of actual opportunities.

In the third and final year, I honed my skills in areas that interested me and aligned with my talents while still assisting in the shop and on job sites. I kept learning, working with specialized engineers, troubleshooting and furthering my education.

“Apprentices are like technology; you never knew how much you needed them until you have them.”

Buhler gives people the opportunity to try out myriad jobs before committing to one. Not only do the apprentices benefit but the company gains dedicated employees who are well-educated and familiar with the company workings from the ground up.

When I began the apprenticeship I had to explain what it was over and over again to friends and family. Many Americans know little about this process and don’t realize a company would really invest so much into people it doesn’t know. What I have learned, however, is that this is an incredible way to hire. A company gives its employees the option to explore, to find what’s right for them and to love what they do. Instead of always hiring graduates from four-year colleges, the company is able to hire workers who know the company, its business and people. The Buhler apprentices gain all their knowledge from seeing the work done on Buhler-made machines. Instead of sitting in college classes for four years learning about Buhler machines, Buhler apprentices are troubleshooting the machines with trade experts and learning the ins and outs of the machines in person.

I like to quote one of my mentors at Buhler: “Apprentices are like technology; you never knew how much you needed them until you have them.” Although the program investment is huge, the return for the company is just as large.

At the end of my apprenticeship, I will have technical knowledge and, just as importantly, a great understanding of the company for which I will be working. I learn something new about the company and the people every day. I will have contacts. I’ll know where everything is, and I’ll know Buhler standards.

I was given so much from apprenticeships. The problem is I’m only one of only a few given this opportunity. I hope to help change our system so apprenticeship programs become more widespread and available. Through apprenticeship programs, others might get the chance to see their jobs and companies the way I see Buhler.

Isabel Brady graduates from Dunwoody College in 2018 and plans to continue working at Buhler after graduation. She can be reached at isabel.brady@buhler.com.