Students build careers at Solari Center

Registration underway for spring semester

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WATSONVILLE — Monica Ramirez, 16, thought about a career in construction after helping her father build stables.

After a visit to the Solari Green Technology Center at the Cabrillo College campus in downtown Watsonville on Wednesday, the high school junior is even more convinced it’s the right path for her.

“Looking at this building, I’m getting inspired to do construction,” she said.

The Solari center, a building filled with natural light and constructed to the highest environmental standards, opened in Fall 2012. Cabrillo officials hosted an open house at the center Wednesday to highlight the facility and courses available within its walls. The spring semester starts Jan. 27, and registration is underway.

Initially, officials planned to offer an array of vocational programs at the center, but they had to scale back due to budget considerations and the focus became green construction and energy management. The new semester will bring expanded offerings, such as accounting, criminal justice and introduction to human services.

“We’re staying career focused,” said Rachel Mayo, dean of the Watsonville and Scotts Valley education centers.

With its large shop area, in addition to classrooms and a computer lab, the construction program, which serves students looking at a career in the building industry as well as experienced workers updating skills, remains at its core.

Chuck Mornard, chair of the construction and energy management program, said he teaches students theory in a classroom, and then takes them into the shop for hands-on projects, from building foundations and framing to plumbing and electrical work.

Students can go on to become contractors, building inspectors, construction workers, project managers and estimators, he said.

Ramirez wasn’t the only one impressed. She toured the center with classmates from SOS, an alternative high school run by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education on Cabrillo’s Watsonville campus. Several of the SOS students said they liked the environmentally friendly nature of the center and the construction program it hosts. Some planned to enroll for the coming semester while finishing up their high school credits, a concurrent enrollment made possible by a partnership between SOS and Cabrillo.

Junior Jose Soto, 16, said he’s still thinking about his future career. He’s considering radiology, but his passion for drawing has him leaning toward architecture. It wouldn’t hurt to pick up some construction basics, he said.

“You have to start somewhere,” Soto said.

Senior Noe Rojas, 17, works with a relative in the construction business, and said he wants to learn more about using solar energy in buildings.

“It’s a better way to start building,” he said, “better for the environment.”