Brodie McKeown

Switching degree paths from construction management to renewable energy turned out to be the right move for Brodie McKeown.

As the plant manager overseeing the day-to-day operations at Heron Lake BioEnergy in Heron Lake, Minnesota, Brodie McKeown has achieved a level of success he’s been working toward for years. He hadn't planned on a career in renewable energy. He decided to go in that direction when his dad brought home information about the new biofuels technology program at Minnesota West's Granite Falls campus.

McKeown was already studying for a degree in construction management and playing on the basketball team at Minnesota West's Worthington campus. He opted to make the switch, in part because the college was offering a wide variety of financial incentives to students willing to give the new program a try. "I've always been mechanically inclined so I thought my skills fit well with the curriculum," he recalls. "So between that, the financial aid, and the fact that I saw the field as having good earning potential, I thought it would be a smart move for me."

He hit the ground running. McKeown, who graduated in 2001, knows he learned the fundamentals of ethanol production as well as "the ins and outs of industrial facilities" during his time at Minnesota West. "I feel like the college prepared me really well for what I do," he says. "We learned a lot about safety, environmental compliance, and regulatory issues, which I deal with on a regular basis."

His class was the first one to graduate from the program. Right out of college, McKeown got a job as an operator overseeing all aspects of the ethanol process at Poet Biorefining (formerly known as Ethanol 2000) in Bingham Lake, Minnesota. "I give credit for that to Minnesota West. They had us do several internship interviews that were great real-world experience," says McKeown, who also interned with Minnesota Energy in Buffalo Lake while in college.

From Poet Biorefining, McKeown went on to become a shift lead at Minnesota Soybean Processors in Brewster, Minnesota where he was promoted to manager of the biodiesel and refinery portions of the business. He then moved on to Heron Lake Bioenergy.
Now, he would like to help current students. "I've been talking with the college about it," says McKeown, who sits on Minnesota West's advisory board for the biofuels technology program. "I would be happy to help out by talking with students. Or maybe I could start an internship. It made an impact on my life, and I'd like to return the favor."