By Rachael Pierce

Summertime may mean ‘livin’ easy’ for a lot of teenagers, but for students enrolled in Alamo Colleges’ Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Academy (ATMA) it’s an opportunity to gain knowledge about potentially lucrative careers in the skilled trades. For eight 40-hour weeks, ATMA students are laying the groundwork for their futures in the manufacturing industry.

Ricky Aguilar is one of these students. During the traditional school year, Aguilar attends high school classes while also taking college courses every morning at ATMA, such as robotics, manufacturing processes, and the fundamentals of electricity.

“I got to do a lot of things that most 16-year-olds don’t get to do,” said Aguilar. “I can say that I built a truck.”

Last summer, as Aguilar completed his internship at Toyota he realized he had a unique experience as an ATMA student, something most of his peers haven’t obtained.

Over the course of the two-year program, ATMA students earn between 27 and 35 hours of college credit, in addition to work experience received during the paid internships. Currently, 56 high school seniors and juniors are enrolled at ATMA.

Established in 2004 and designed as an industry-driven program, the manufacturing academy gives high school students a unique opportunity to gain authentic work experience through a curriculum designed around skills currently demanded by manufacturing companies. ATMA’s programs help prepare students for both higher education and entry into the workforce, where they may hold well-paying jobs as maintenance technicians, team assemblers and operators, or manufacturing technologists, to name a few.

“We have college-proven, career-ready students when they walk out of high school,” said Gene Bowman, executive director for Alamo Area Academies. “Our students are high-tech, high-skilled talent at 18 years old.”

Students are immersed in contextual learning at ATMA, where they receive a mixture of lecture and lab experience. Bowman noted ATMA students reinforce what they learn during labs in school through their internships at manufacturing companies.

“ATMA’s program is helping meet the demand in the workforce by developing students’ skills and experience,” said Bowman.

For ATMA student Jahvon Holmes, his internship at ITM (Instruments Technology Machinery) in Schertz gave him a bounty of rewards, including an advantage in college.

“My internship gave me a great job and I’m getting college credit, so it’s double success,” said Holmes.

Toyota is among ATMA’s corporate partners that provide students hands-on experience through internships.

“The education model of the academy is very sound, and combined with the certification programs, it gives students a good foundation for basic technical skills as interns and as they move forward into the workforce,” said Eric Barnett, manager of Toyota Production System (TPS) and Kaizen Group for Toyota.

At Toyota, interns partner with trainers, participate in safety trainings, and visit each of five major manufacturing shops at the plant where actual time is spent on the manufacturing line.

For Bruno Garcia, assistant manager of TPS and Kaizen Group for Toyota, the most rewarding part of working with ATMA students is seeing them ready and ahead of schedule to grasp hold of their futures.

“To be able to show students what the work looks like and to help them look at their options is the most gratifying part of working with them,” said Garcia.