BLANDING, Utah # Justin Bergeman, director of professional career and technical education (PCTE) at Utah State University Eastern Blanding, was recently recognized for his work in promoting greater opportunities for underrepresented populations in southeastern Utah.

Bergeman received the faculty award from USU during the university’s 22nd Diversity Awards ceremony. The annual event recognizes individuals and organizations on campus and in communities served by USU who have made significant contributions to affirmative action, equal opportunity and diversity. Honors also went to an administrator, staff member, student and community member.

“I’m honored to have been chosen for this award,” Bergeman said. “I believe there is a significant responsibility to faculty to try and understand the challenges students have in learning. We can learn a lot from our students. Sometimes it’s the small things we realize that helps our students the most.”

Bergeman likes to mix it up. He spent 17 years of driving trucks and heavy equipment before going to college. Today, as director of a multi-faceted career-training program, he is immersed in a variety of offerings from driving trucks to building homes. Diversification is his modus operandi. The way he sees it, the more skills and aptitudes his students gain, the better off they are. The more opportunity to offer career and technical programs to even a more diverse audience, the better for the students and the institution.

Living and teaching in the Four-Corners region lines up well with Bergeman’s objectives. He draws heavily from the Native American populations that also makes up the majority of students attending the Blanding campus. Jobs are scarce for students who live on reservations. To help them acquire solid, marketable skills, he developed the Blanding campus Certified Technical Education (CTE) programs, as well as the Department Certificate/Applied Associates in trucking and heavy equipment. Jobs in trucking, heavy equipment and construction continue to expand and opportunities abound. Bergeman likes to look for gaps, and then step in and fill them.

And doing what it takes to help find financial help for students is equally important to him. His first big success in this area came in 2008 when he applied for and received $250,000 over a two-year period from the Navajo Department of Workforce Services. It was vital funding that not only helped enroll 32 Native Americans from the Navajo tribe, it also engendered trust in Blanding’s trucking and heavy equipment program. In the years since, hundreds of Navajo students have gone through the program with, at times, more than 90 percent graduating and finding jobs.

Guy Denton, vice chancellor over the Blanding campus, credits Bergeman’s passion and hard work in developing quality programs that make for successful students.

“Justin and his team always go well beyond the classroom to help students complete their educational goals,” Denton said. “The 90 percent student completion rate is strong evidence of Justin’s dedication to USU, CTE and his students.”

Key to the Blanding campus success has been keeping the lines of communication open with agencies on and off the reservation.

“We talk about our success stories, we show the quality of services we provide and how we care about our students,” he said. “We build our relationships based on our successes.”
It’s a bottom line approach that resonates with agencies, students and administrators.

Just as important as getting the students trained is making sure that they are by having skills the industry actually needs and wants. That means paying attention to the blind spots. Listening up, for example, when construction bosses complain that nobody wants to swing a hammer anymore, that everyone wants to be managers, he said.

Does that mean Bergeman is re-thinking the school’s associate of applied science degree that is designed to prepare students for construction management positions? Yes, it does, but not in a limited way.

“I can see adding things to our building program with opportunities to double and triple what we have now,” he said. “It’s something we can help with because building construction branches out in so many different areas.”

So when Bergeman hears from industry that it wants more workers than managers, he looks at what kind of workers are needed. One such area with promise is in the field of facility maintenance.

“As far as I know, no other school offers a facility maintenance program,” he said. “I see a gap that we can fill. We can be the niche and we can expand on that niche.” He hopes to have an associate degree with a facilities maintenance degree emphasis up and running by fall. There are other ideas that he and his colleagues have been mulling over, like paving the way for a bachelor’s degree path for Blanding students in these programs. One opportunity leads to another.

By providing the opportunity for education and skills training, Bergeman has tailored his programs so that Native American students coming from the varied and unique learning styles of the Ute, Navajo and Hopi tribes can flourish. To promote the opportunities that USU Eastern Blanding provides, Bergeman regularly attends job and career fairs and has also sponsored activities to recruit potential students from the area.