

# Education pays off for auto specialists

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*These auto maintenance workers are much better equipped for the task at hand because of their education and training (left). Auto repair work is increasingly complex, often requiring computers operated by highly skilled technicians (right).*

It pays to go to school. That's the message automotive technician recruiters and educators seek to send teens, college graduates and those looking for a promising career change.

Auto technicians, formerly known as mechanics, are in high demand, said Paul Lee, state manager for Alabama's Automotive Youth Education Systems (AYES). AYES is a national partnership among participating auto manufacturers, dealers and selected schools. It is funded in this state by Alabama auto dealers.

Lee cited Bureau of Labor Statistics figures indicating that the auto industry will need 35,000 new technicians nationwide each year through 2010. There were more than 37,000 service vacancies in franchised new-car dealerships alone in February 2006, according to Automotive Retailing Today (ART).

Those openings are due in part to the increasing complexity of the work. 'Dealerships have become high-tech facilities requiring highly skilled staff and top-notch employees with computer and technical skills,' said the ART report.

Those who once relied on their own knowledge of the combustion engine or a neighboring shade-tree mechanic now find themselves seeking the help of professionals. More than ever, the industry relies on training in specific manufacturers' programs.

"It's no longer just handling a set of wrenches," said Lee, but now involves complex computer diagnostics and engineering skills.

Lawson State Community College is among 14 public school programs in the state offering training for this in-demand field. Lawson is the only program in the Southeast, according to its director, to have three major manufacturers as sponsors.

Tom Berryman, the school's chair of automotive programs and the director of Lawson's Alabama Center for Automotive Excellence, tells students that they can ensure getting a position on the leading edge of their profession by becoming qualified through a formal program.

Students who graduate from Lawson's two-year program can enter the field as senior master technicians, a designation that may otherwise take 15 years to earn, if taken while working through dealership training. In addition to the school's two-year degrees, one-year certificates are also available.

Students can select among six automotive programs. The three not sponsored by a particular manufacturer are the body shop, medium and heavy truck and generic auto tech programs. The remaining three are sponsored by General Motors, Ford and Toyota, and are offered as co-op courses.

Berryman said the dealership-sponsored programs are most desirable. Students can pay the \$8,500 tuition fee while working for their employer and gaining on-the-job experience. Those interested complete the school application, take a placement test and talk with the program coordinator. Candidates who qualify will be interviewed at a dealership interested in sponsoring a student.

Sponsored students typically alternate between working for the dealership for eight weeks and attending school for eight weeks. After two years, graduates are qualified as senior master technicians, with average starting salaries of \$23 to \$27 per hour.

Lee said experienced master technicians can make \$70,000 a year and more. Those who do an excellent job at a rapid pace earn the most rewards. Since technicians are paid a flat rate, with an estimated time/fee assigned to each task, those who accomplish the work fastest make the most money. Lee said graduates may have multiple job offers due to the shortage in the industry.

The field is not just for recent high school graduates. More than 30 percent of new techs have college degrees, Lee estimated. Others are new to the industry because they were downsized out of other occupations. He said both often make excellent candidates.

"It's really wide open," said Lee of job opportunities for qualified technicians. He added that the industry has placed special emphasis on recruiting qualified women.

Although Lee said that physical strength is not necessarily important, the willingness to work hard and to work with people are keys to success in this field.

Berryman lists good math skills, good communication skills and detail orientation as important to an auto technician's success.

Good record keeping is one of the communication requirements. Since warranty claims are legal documents that can be audited, writing skills are important to the work. Technicians must also be able to listen and speak well to work with customers and coworkers.

"They need to like a challenge," said Berryman. Each day is varied, providing new problems to solve, often under exacting time pressures.

But for those who enjoy solving problems and are willing to do the work necessary to prepare for the field, choices abound - at the rate of \$35,000 a year.