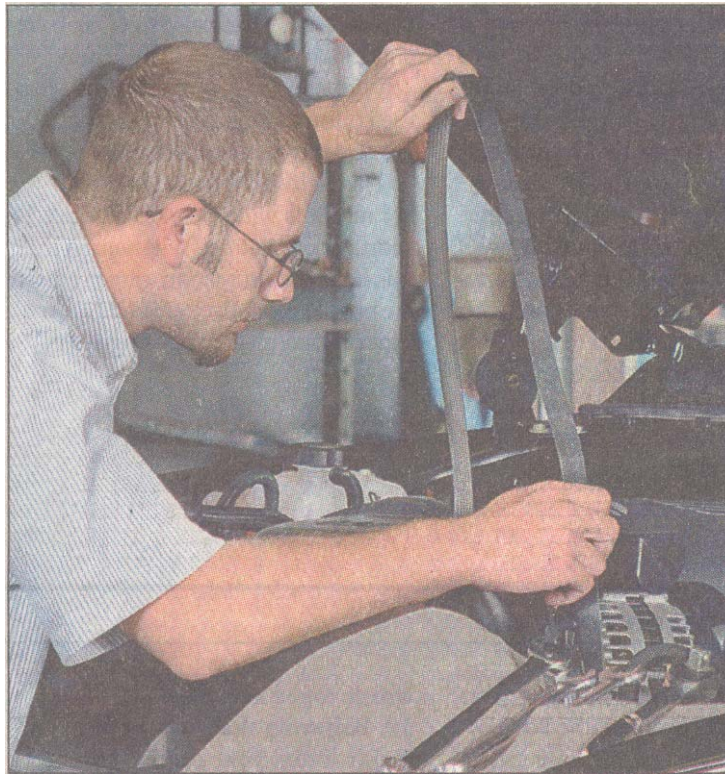


Shortage spells job security for auto techs

BY JEAN M. McLEAN
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Doug Melton's successful career change is a testimonial to the effectiveness of Lawson State Community College's Alabama Center for Automotive Excellence. Ten years ago, Melton, an Auburn University graduate, left a lucrative career as a mechanical engineer to enter the Bessemer State Technical College (now Lawson State) co-op program for automotive technicians.

Within two years, Melton was working for a local dealership. In that first year as a technician, he earned as much money as he made during his fifth year as a mechanical engineer. What's more, he increased his earnings potential without needing to relocate - an obstacle he encountered while trying to meet his engineering career goals.

Melton now owns his own firm, Melton Automotive in Alabaster, and supervises other technicians. He said the demand for auto professionals means that talented workers can earn \$40,000 a year as soon as they get out of school, building to \$80,000

with accrued experience. "What drew me in was that the harder you work, the more money you make," said Melton.

The Lawson program Melton enrolled in is the only one of its kind in the Southeast, according to director Tom Berryman. The school offers six automotive programs and a two-year degree, a one-year certificate and a two-semester certificate, each with a different certification.

Three of the programs are sponsored by General Motors, Ford and Toyota as co-op courses in partnership with dealers throughout the state. The remaining three — collision repair, medium and heavy truck service and a general auto tech program — are not manufacturer-sponsored.

Those who graduate from the two-year program can enter the field as master technicians, a designation that can otherwise take up to 10 years to earn, Berryman said.

The dealership-sponsored programs allow students to pay the \$8,500 tuition fee while working for their employer and gaining on-the-job experience. A school application, placement test and program coordinator review are required to qualify. Interviews are then set up with a dealership interested in student sponsorship.

Berryman said that after completing the program, which typically includes alternating eight weeks of work with eight weeks of classes, graduates can expect to qualify for first-year earnings ranging from \$35,000 to \$45,000.

Melton lists attention to detail as the most important quality required for success in this work. It also helps to be curious about how things work.

Melton considers the Lawson program a 'good way to explore the work,' with added benefits such as the opportunity to buy tools at a reduced price and to learn the basic skills of the occupation. Further mastery is acquired as technicians work on the job.

It takes more than technical skill, however, to be a top-dollar professional. When hiring his employees, Melton looks for those who not only have experience, but also a proven ability to be a team player, working well with coworkers. Initiative is also a key.

"You've got to be self-motivated," Melton said. "You need to work hard and follow the job to completion."

With shortages of mechanics across the country projected through 2010, job security is an added asset.

This field is attractive to many because it is wide-open to all ages. The shortage of qualified technicians makes this field a solid second-career option for people of all backgrounds — even experienced mechanical engineers.