Automotive training at Orlando-area college on track with success

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The 40 service bays in Seminole Community College's state-of-the-art Professional Automotive Training Center are filled with the sort of vehicles you would expect to see in a school environment -- a faded Ford Taurus, a battered white Chevrolet pickup. There is also a vehicle you wouldn't expect: a bright blue locomotive engine.

Mark Davis, chairman of the automotive technology department, said the train belongs to Give Kids the World Village in Kissimmee, the nonprofit resort for children who have life-threatening illnesses. The engine pulls a train that carries the sick children and their families to lunch and dinner each day.

Or it did, until it broke down. The ancient, Italian-built locomotive, powered by an obsolete diesel engine from a boat, was in terrible shape when it came to the Training Center.

"Part of the traditional college experience, in my view, is giving back," Davis said. "And our students are going to fix this and put it back in service."

It's all part of a day's work at the $10.4 million facility jointly funded by the Central Florida Auto Dealers Association and Florida taxpayers.

The center has been a controversial, decade-long project that, says Barbara Miller, executive vice president of the dealers association, "will probably be the last of its kind. I don't think that given the current economic environment, we could build a place like this today."

Cost-effective training

It opened two years ago, offering a two-year program in automotive technology that includes an associate in science degree.

Total tuition: About $9,500, and that includes books and a set of tools that are worth about $4,000.

Davis says a dealership in Washington state totaled up what it would cost to train a mechanic from scratch, to the point where he or she would have the same industry certifications that SCC graduates get.
Total cost: $72,000 per trainee.

"So there's a real cost savings in hiring our graduates," Davis said.

So far, the school has graduated about 70 students with an associate's degree, plus dozens more who have earned certificates or have participated in dedicated programs the school teaches for General Motors, Ford and AC Delco.

The school has about 140 full-time students.

Service trumps sales

"Placement is tough," Davis said, "but people can't continue forever without servicing their vehicles. The emphasis from the manufacturers right now is to look toward service, because the sales end just isn't going to rebound as quickly as service is."

Indeed, according to the National Auto Dealers Association, total revenue for new and used vehicles at the average dealership dropped about 15 percent in 2008, but service and parts revenue rose 1.8 percent.

Davis said he expects a turnaround soon.

"In more than 30 years in this business, I've never seen a slump that has lasted this long," he said. "I'm seeing people driving around in vehicles that really shouldn't be on the road."

Graduates fare well

Even so, it is easier to place graduates of the center than those in many other professions, Davis said.

His top graduates, in their first year, can expect a starting salary of $35,000 to $40,000.

"It takes three years to really get situated," he said, "and at that point, the salary can rise to $70,000 or $80,000 a year."

About half the graduates so far are going to dealerships, the rest to private repair businesses.

The Central Florida Auto Dealers Association stepped in 12 years ago, raising some of the money from its members for a new school.

The original budget was $5 million, but it ended up costing $10.4 million for the 55,000-square-foot center. Of that, $7 million came from the Legislature.

"We didn't get everything we wanted, but we got what we needed," Davis said. "If anyone considering a career in automotive technology just comes in and sees what we have, we've got them. They'd be crazy to go anywhere else."

While the center was built from the ground up, an automotive curriculum is not new at SCC. The students were working in hand-me-down facilities in three buildings, yet still the school won national awards for its automotive training.
'A little jealous'

Michael Richardson, who works in the service department of Orange Buick-Pontiac-GMC in Orlando, graduated from the program eight years ago.

"I've seen the new facilities, and I'm a little jealous," he said. "It's really state-of-the-art."

Richardson said the school remains among the best in the country.

"They teach you exactly what you need to know," he said, and even in these "tough economic times, I'm doing really well. . . . If I had it to do over again, no question I would go back there."

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