

WITC program calls in the marines

BY RICK OLIVO
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It is an unusual problem for Todd Larson and Tim Edwards, marine repair technician instructors at the Ashland campus of Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College.

The two preside over a program that is unique among the 16 technical colleges in the state — the only course of study to repair marine engines in a state that is swarming with lakes and other boating opportunities.

Hundreds of marinas and boat dealers in the state have openings for qualified marine technicians, and Edwards said demand is so high that the course can't graduate enough technicians to meet it.

"The demand is such that even the dealers in our area could hire all of our students," he said. "There are probably 10 job openings for every student we graduate."

With such a demand for technicians in well-paying jobs, it would be easy to assume the WITC course is filled with a long waiting line. But Larson and Edwards can



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Marine repair technician instructor Todd Larson works with student Nathan Dykstra on an outboard motor. Instructors estimate there are 10 job openings for every graduate of the program.

train more students than now apply.

Edwards said a typical student has some experience with internal combustion engines, but the program is tailored to accept students who have little to no mechanical experience on entering the three-semester program.

"We pack a lot into the three semesters and we are enabling the people who graduate from the program to be able to step onto those entry-level jobs in the industry," he said.

Preparing people for

well-paying careers is something that WITC has done for a very long time. There has been a vocational and technical school presence in Ashland for 99 years, said Steve Bitzer, vice president of student affairs and Ashland campus administrator. He said the institution's goal was to support economic vitality through training the region's workforce.

"One of our big emphasis points is to work with business and industry to tailor our programs to their needs," Bitzer said.

To this end, each of the

programs has an advisory committee made up of business and industry owners and managers who help develop the curriculum for students.

"We want to make sure that we are teaching students what their employers are looking for," he said.

The marine repair program is a perfect example, Bitzer said. The field is becoming increasingly sophisticated and engine repairs today call for a lot more than the old shade-tree mechanic.

"One of the issues the marine industry has been challenged with is that when they hire someone

to do technical work and repairs, often that person does not have the base foundation and knowledge of engines, specifically marine engines," said Edwards. "One of our goals is to graduate a student with a good solid base knowledge, so when they go out into the work force, the employer has a much easier time building on to that the specific need they have."

The future for the industry increasingly will require a technical education, Larson said. Tougher air-quality reg-

ulations, for example, mean almost all new boat motors are fuel-injected and controlled by electronic systems that can only be serviced by a trained technician.

"The industry is only going to grow, and what we need to do is to bring awareness to the public that this industry exists, that it has a lot of viable employment paths to it and what is really neat is that this is a trade that can be practiced not only in northwest Wisconsin, but across the country," Larson said.

Key graduate Adam Paulson

Adam Paulson, 20, lives in Ashland and works for Pike's Bay Marina, south of Bayfield.

Graduating the WITC marine repair technician program less than a month ago, he was already working for Pike's Bay part-time before he graduated.

He was eager to make the commitment to leave his hometown of Holman and make the four-and-a-half hour trek to Ashland and attend WITC.

"It was either here or go to Florida," he said.

Paulson said he was willing to make the commitment to move north, find a place to live and get a part-time job, just to go to school because he knew the value of the training he would receive at WITC.

"The knowledge is worth it," he said. "The knowledge is huge, you get experience in the field, you are worth more, you get paid more."

He said the hands-on experience was priceless.

"There is only so much a classroom can teach you, you learn way more on the job; to have that alongside my schooling was even better," he said.



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About WITC Marine Repair Technician Program

Location: Ashland

Instructors: 2

Something to know: Although graduates of the marine repair technician program are highly sought after for good-paying jobs, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics reporting median salaries at \$17.82 an hour, there is no waiting line for the three-semester WITC course.



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Once work on marine engines is completed, students test their work on Chequamegon Bay — one of the perks of the program.