Certificates Meet Industry Demand

Rick Posa, a student in Mike Weible's *Residential Wiring* class, is working on electrical switches in the bathroom of a new house, an opportunity Posa terms "real world experience."

Posa plans to spend two semesters earning an electrical technology certificate and then look for a job, hopefully in maintenance.

"Instead of going to school for two years for an associate's degree, I'll go two semesters for a certificate, then look for a job and go to school on top of that," Posa said.

Students like Posa are the reason industrial technology programs are repackaging coursework to offer incremental 8 to 23 credit-hour vocational certificates as well as a 64 credit-hour associate's degree.

"In today's market, industrial technology students want to come to JCCC, get trained and go make money," said Bill Brown, interim dean, business and technology division. "The employers, in turn, get employees with the skill sets their companies are looking for."

In the spring 2007 semester, Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning Technology is rolling out four new vocational certificates: General Basic HVAC; General Basic HVAC Installation and Duct Fabrication; General Basic HVAC Maintenance; and General Basic HVAC Sales, Design and Estimating.

As of fall semester 2005, metal fabrication/welding offers five vocational certificates, and as of spring 2006, electrical technology offers four vocational certificates. Automotive Technology will be the next program to seek Kansas Board of Regents approval for new certificates.

"Most skilled trades students are aware that a vocational certificate is as good as a bachelor's degree in another arena," Brown said. "We have students who believe that never in their lifetime will they have enough money or time to get an associate's degree. But they find they can get one comprehensive certificate, then another, and then with a couple of online general education classes, an associate's degree is obtainable."

Brown says certificates do three things for students: They are rewarded with a KBOR-approved certificate, gain employability right away and are encouraged by the certificate to continue their education.

"The typical industrial technology student starts at JCCC as a full-time student, working part time. But within three semesters, the student is working full time and going to school part time," Brown said. "Life gets in the way. The students are employed, and the associate's degree is an all-or-nothing proposition. The certificates are step-by-step."

Part of the reason for the change to short-term certificates is industry demand, and JCCC's ability to meet the demand in a timely manner. In metal fabrication/welding, for example, the program can't turn students out fast enough. Brown says people don't realize the demand for metal fabrication for everything from overhead door equipment to building bridges for the Kansas Department of Transportation.

Even though new construction may be down, there is a huge demand for retrofitting. In HVAC, workers are needed to do the duct work and installation for higher-efficiency furnaces, for which the federal government is giving tax credits.

"Students can earn $16-$18 an hour as soon as they complete a certificate in an industrial trade," said Brown, who also oversees automotive, civil engineering, drafting, electrical, electronics, HVAC, metal fabrication/welding, pre-engineering, railroad electronics, railroad industrial welding and railroad operations technology programs.

Mike Weible, professor, career program facilitator, electrical technology, instructs Ben Toplikar on the wiring of a ceiling box.