



FCTC helps jumpstart students' careers through partnerships with local companies

By Colleen Michele Jones
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Frank Harrington says the automotive technicians he's hired from First Coast Technical College are some of the best workers he's ever had at Fields Cadillac of St. Augustine.

Harrington, service manager for the automobile dealership, has been working with FCTC's automotive technology program for four years now, identifying good candidates for Fields' one-year internships, with most of them eventually being placed into full-time starting positions.

The students are part of the college's 1,800-hour certification program that trains them to become ASE (Automotive Service Excellence) Master Technicians working on foreign, domestic and alternative fuel vehicles. Another program offers training in preparation for a career as a diesel technician for commercial trucks and buses.

"They do a great job getting them ready," said Harrington, who currently has six techs from FCTC on his staff. "We just add the icing on the cake and polish them a bit."

Similar to a traditional apprenticeship, local businesses work with administrators and instructors across all the fields of training the college offers — from health care to landscape management — to ensure the programs FCTC offers include the most up-to-date education and expertise needed for the fields they'll go into.

"[Auto] dealers can almost 'design' the kind of technician they want," said Matthew Provost, an automotive instructor with FCTC. "They can show them the technology coming up and make sure the students who are interested in it specialize in it and get the right certifications."

Students receive classroom instruction as well as industry-level training in labs that simulate real working environments, in some cases using equipment that local businesses have donated, such as the engines and diagnostic systems that give FCTC students hands-on experience on par with industry automobile standards.

The college has a 95-percent average placement rate within a year after completion of its vocational programs, according to Arleen Dennison, coordinator of college advancement. Many students work part-time at area companies and institutions even as they work toward certification. That also helps give them the "soft" skills they need, such as how to communicate with supervisors and customers, according to Donna Gary-Donovan, vice principal of FCTC.

The partnerships the college has developed with area businesses over the years is a win-win for both the college and employers.

“The dealers come to us, or we take our students to them, so that relationship is so important,” said Dennison, adding that independent automobile shops have also recruited students from FCTC.

Hiring graduates right out of school to work in St. Augustine is a boon to the local economy, too.

Ed Roberts, service director at Bozard Ford Lincoln, said: “Experienced people don’t just grow on trees. So we provide a platform, by working with FCTC, that we can grow our own.”

Bozard Ford Lincoln currently has six auto technicians that have come up through the ranks of the college.

Harrington agrees, saying it can be difficult to fill positions in his service department, especially with workers whose background he doesn’t know as well.

“This way, you know what you’re getting,” Harrington said. “And I think most of our guys will be with us for awhile.”