

## Career Series Articles

### Need for diesel technicians expected to grow

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As far back as Jacksonville's earliest days, shipping has played an important part in its growth and economy. As home to distribution centers for large grocers and retailers, as well as transportation companies that cover the country by rail and river and other parts of the globe by sea, the River city is a vital Southeast transportation hub. Heavy duty trucking, powered by diesel engines, is a central part of the equation.

"With the growth that Jacksonville is experiencing at JAXPORT and the distribution centers currently under construction on the Westside and at Cecil Commerce Center, the demand for well qualified diesel technicians in the logistics and distribution industries will obviously grow," said Donald Thompson, Florida Community College at Jacksonville Automotive Program manager.

Environmental Protection Agency requirements have brought dramatic changes to heavy duty trucking, requiring cleaner burning engines and reduced emissions. Some of those requirements, along with technological improvements, have made the task of the diesel technician more demanding, requiring formal training and very often Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certification. Computerized components make repairs more complex, and Thompson said some of this information is too detailed to learn on the job.

"Properly maintained, one of these vehicles will go about 1 million miles," said Gary Denton, with no exaggeration.

With about 20 years of diesel experience in the Navy behind him and as an ASE certified master truck technician, Denton would know. He is also FCCJ's professor of diesel technology.

FCCJ's revamped diesel technology program is geared to produce technicians who can pass ASE certification tests. At the state of the art heavy duty truck and bus facility at FCCJ's Downtown Campus, nearly two dozen students are enrolled in classes that are preparing them for a career in which they stand to make an average wage of \$20 hourly, or more with experience. They are learning by hands on experience, using two retired diesels, with about 1 million miles on them, donated by Cypress Truck Lines in 2005. Students tore apart vehicle engines, transmissions and exhaust systems and put them back together with state of art tools and diagnostic equipment. One is running and the other soon will be.

Denton points out the interesting backgrounds of his students. Most are working full time. Some hold unrelated jobs and are taking the program to enter the career field and make a better living. Adrian Rodriques drives flatbed trailers throughout Florida for RTT Trucking, and is enrolled in the program to gain a better understanding of the equipment he's driving. Plus, he's better prepared if he has an emergency on the road. Jermaine Hubbard is working for Kenworth Truck Company; John Heatherington works for Mike Shad Ford.

Not only commercial service facilities need trained diesel technicians. The knowledge is transferable to other heavy diesel powered equipment such as buses, bulldozers, cranes, road construction equipment and farm equipment. Student Craig Brinkle found his present job with Thompson Pump and Manufacturing Company through the program, which is not unusual. Denton gets calls on a regular basis from employers looking for trained technicians.

One employer of nearly 24 diesel technicians is the City of Jacksonville. Fleet Management Division Chief Sam Houston and his staff are responsible for the maintenance of about 5,000 vehicles and apparatus. This includes all of the diesel rolling stock, from garbage trucks, fire and rescue vehicles and off road diesel apparatus.

"There is a national shortage in diesel technicians," said Houston, who sees older technicians retiring but few younger technicians to replace them. He likes hiring trained technicians, but has hired technicians who lack training and experience but show aptitude.

"The supply doesn't match the demand," he said, pointing out that he can pay those with training better. Employees who pass the ASE certification tests are rewarded with pay increases for each qualifying test they pass, so there are incentives to getting additional training.

Diesel technicians in Jacksonville can expect starting pay of \$10 to \$13 an hour, or around \$28,000 to \$30,000 a year, with overtime. For information on a career in diesel technology, including FCCJ technical certificate program costs, contact Program Manager Donald Thompson at 904.633.8334.

\*Tuition and fees are subject to change by action of the College's District Board of Trustees. Current tuition and fees will be posted at the time of registration.