MSADA Scholarships Help Auto Industry Meet the Growing Demand for New Breed of Technicians

In 2003, the Massachusetts State Auto Dealers Charitable Foundation began its Automotive Technician Scholarship Program. The Foundation is the charitable arm of the Massachusetts State Automobile Dealers Association. More than 200 students in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and New York have benefited from over $700,000 in scholarships.

Massachusetts Bay Community College (MassBay) has been a long-time partner and has the most extensive partnership with the Foundation in the state. Students from colleges including Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology, Springfield Technical Community College and Massasoit Community College have also received scholarships from the Foundation.

The Scholarship Program is competitive. A two-year scholarship ranges from $6,000 to $13,000. Less than 10% of the students who apply are accepted. Students must maintain a 3.0 average in their tech courses, and they must have secured a co-op appointment in a Massachusetts new car dealer repair shop. A co-op is technically an internship and students are paid, offsetting the cost of tuition of the program at MassBay. The tuition for the automotive technician program is $16,000.

This year the Foundation also sponsored a MassBay team to compete in a technician competition at the Auto Show in New York in April (see cover story on page 18). The team from Tri-County Regional Vocational Tech High School came in fifth place, working on a 2011 Toyota Camry. The competition is fierce and some 400-500 competitors statewide apply to be part of it.

Servicing cars is increasingly seen by a dealership as a profit center. And as smaller dealerships close, the future is in the mega-dealership that carries multiple automobile manufacturers. Bigger

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The field of auto mechanics is changing dramatically. Today's mechanic needs to know how to operate a keyboard as well as a stick shift. As cars with sophisticated onboard computers become the rule rather than the exception, the profession is becoming more white collar, and technicians now need to be computer- as well as mechanically-savvy.

Auto mechanics are now called technicians, and for good reason. While they may still sometimes get their hands dirty, more often than not, they turn to computers to help them diagnose a problem and perhaps even give them the repair instructions.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, "Computers are ... commonplace in modern repair shops. Extensive knowledge of computer controls, the ability to diagnose electrical and hydraulic problems, and other specialized skills are needed to work on these complex components, which employ some of the most sophisticated technology used in vehicles. They often use electronic testing equipment to isolate and adjust malfunctions in fuel, ignition, and emissions control systems."

MassBay, part of the state's community college system, is training this new breed of automotive technicians at its state-of-the-art automotive center in Ashland, MA, a suburb outside of Boston. MassBay's Automotive Center is known for having one of the best programs in the Northeast. Its strong partnerships with area dealers ensure that its students get to work and train on the latest models, such as the Toyota Prius. In addition to Toyota, MassBay has partnerships with BMW, General Motors, Chrysler, and Lexus.

Job prospects for automotive technicians are very optimistic. The pay is excellent, and there is a shortage of up-and-coming technicians. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the demand for auto technicians will have increased by almost 20 percent by 2014.

According to the "MechanicsSchools.US" website, major growth in demand for auto technicians is almost 4 percent more than most job categories. A large number of mechanics currently working in the field will be seeking retirement in coming years. Almost 110,000 new auto technician jobs will be created between now and 2016 in the U.S., in addition to the 700,000 that currently work in the field today.

This article was written by Howard W. Ferris, Dean-Transportation and Energy Division TREN at Massachusetts Bay Community College, and Robert F. O'Koniewski, Executive Vice President of the Massachusetts State Automobile Association.

MassBay Auto Students Have a Clear Advantage

For the second year in a row, Massachusetts Bay Community College won a School Recognition Award from Toyota for being among its top five highest performing Automotive Service Technology programs concentrating in Toyota “T-TEN” programs, in the U.S.

"We are the best kept secret in New England," said Professor George Panagiotou, one of the professors at MassBay's Automotive Center. "Our students come out fully prepared and can step right into a job in the work world," he added.

MassBay's automotive program includes not just academic time and hands-on training in the school's state of the art Automotive Center in Ashland, MA, but also requires the student do a five month co-op (similar to an internship) at a dealership. Automotive programs at other colleges only have class time, and do not require hands-on training or a co-op. Another added benefit for the students - many co-ops offer pay, which offsets the cost of the $16,000 tuition for the MassBay program.

MassBay students are trained on the latest models with new technology and computer science, making them very attractive to the dealership they are doing their co-op in if a position opens up. Also, the technician at the dealership the student is working with will, many times end up being their mentor.

In addition to Toyota, MassBay has relationships with BMW, Chrysler and GM both at the manufacturer as well as dealership level.

More than 1,000 students have graduated from MassBay’s automotive programs since it began in 1984. Given the shortage of automotive technicians, there is usually a 95 to 98% job placement rate for the students in the six months after graduation.