Mat-Su College’s Refrigeration and Heating Technology Program

Refrigeration and Heating Program Meets Need in Hot Job Market

The job market is hot in Alaska’s heating, ventilation, air-conditioning and refrigeration (HVAC/R) industry – and a program at Matanuska-Susitna College is working hard to meet the workforce demand.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the HVAC/R industry will grow 24 percent between 1997 and 2007, and employment opportunities will continue to increase faster than average through 2014.

Mat-Su’s refrigeration and heating technology program, which is Alaska’s only accredited HVAC/R degree program, is in place to help meet the needs of this growing industry. Through the program, those interested in entering the industry can receive a two-year associate’s degree, an undergraduate certificate, or one of four occupational endorsement certificates.

Once they complete the program, graduates are qualified to work as technicians, installers, maintenance or service people in homes, office building, malls, food processing plants, restaurants, airplanes, cars, computer technology or medical facilities.

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“The program currently graduates six – 10 students per year. However, the need for qualified workers is so extreme that students are often offered jobs before they even complete the program, Mielke says.

This demand is not unique to Alaska; there is an on-going nationwide shortage, which is fueled by the fact that workers who entered the industry when it boomed in the 1970s are now starting to retire.

“So you have growth in the industry, plus the need to replace older workers who are retiring. That makes it really good for people going into the trade, but it makes it hard for employers to find enough people to hire,” Mielke says.

The high demand makes it critical for the program to be responsive to industry needs. Based on advisory committee recommendations and industry surveys, the program has been updated several times, and the two program instructors, Mielke and Jack Cypher, also remain closely connected to the industry.

“We monitor what the industry is looking for, and adapt our program to include those things,” Mielke says.

“We have a lot of connections in the industry. We’re part of a network that keeps us in tune with what the needs are.”

Every year, students in the program are also required to take a national exam, which compares their competency levels to students at 200 other HVAC schools around the country. In addition to providing employers with information to help evaluate potential hires, the exam results provide a benchmark for the program’s success.

“When we compare Mat-Su to the national average, we’ve been consistently above-average, which means we’re doing a good job delivering what the industry is looking for,” Mielke says.

In addition to graduating students through a traditional degree program, the program also welcomes those already in the field who are looking to sharpen their skills.

“Primarily, the program assumes no previous experience. However, we also encourage people to take a course or two, to get additional training,” Mielke says.

The program is also available to provide customized courses to companies, upon request.

“We strive to be flexible to accommodate specific needs,” Mielke says.

For more information on Mat-Su’s refrigeration and heating technology program, contact:

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