

Testing for the Best

Car dealers, vo-tech schools, and toolmakers put up \$1 million in scholarships and prizes to find future quality auto mechanics.

Auto mechanics have perhaps the one high-tech job that will never be outsourced overseas. Still, employers struggle to find qualified workers to fill all the available openings.

Philadelphia-area car dealers, vo-tech schools, and some national tool manufacturers are so desperate for new blood that last week, they lavished nearly \$1 million in scholarships and other prizes upon the region's top high-school-age, future auto mechanics.

Actually, many in the field these days prefer the term technicians, as the profession has metamorphosed into a skill set requiring vast knowledge of computers and electronics.

Industry insiders concede, though, that they still must overcome an image problem.

"Unfortunately," said Doug Will, the service manager for Keystone Motors in Doylestown, "the public perceives it as something you do when you can't do anything else."

That wasn't the case for Robert O'Dwyer and Ryan Lamb, seniors at Mercer County Technical School in Trenton. As the first-place winners Friday in a regional auto-repair contest with students from 11 other schools, the duo had their pick of post-high-school auto-training centers.

Both were offered full rides by Automotive Technical Center, Lincoln Tech, Pennco Tech and Universal Technical Institute, all of which have campuses in the area. The most expensive of the schools, ATC, charges \$31,000 for its full two-year program.

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"I'm not even sure," Lamb said, when asked what his plans were after graduating high school.

While many undecided university-bound seniors might be freaking out right about now, Lamb seemed quite calm as he held his thigh-high first-place trophy. "There's a lot of opportunity," he said. Kevin Mazzucola, executive director of the Automobile Dealers Association of Greater Philadelphia, which was host to the competition at its East Norriton headquarters, said auto-repair schools were willing to wave such huge enticements because good students were so hard to get. What's more, he said, there is a halo effect - the "cool kids" who go are likely to talk up the school to their friends.

For instance, both of the students representing West Philadelphia High School hope to join their former classmate attending Automotive Training Center's Warminster, Bucks County, campus.

That classmate, Devereaux Knight, had sat down with seniors Nkosi Harmon and Tyson Drummond earlier last week to give them pointers about the competition, since he had been in it last year. Harmon said he thought the preparation paid off; he was cruising - until one of the station guides presented an unfamiliar request.

"The tap and die station - I was killing it until the 'flare' part," Harmon said. Brake lines have flared ends for their connector fittings, and to make them requires skill with a special tool. Harmon said he had not learned how. Both are likely to find jobs easily if they stay in the field.

An automotive trade group estimated that 35,000 to 60,000 openings go unfilled at any given time in the auto-repair industry. The number is expected to hit 110,000 before the decade is out.

The Philadelphia dealers' group does not have an estimate of how many jobs are unfilled here, but says the average technician in this area makes more than \$54,000. Master technicians, who typically have 10 years of experience and advanced training, can make twice that.

Neil Bailey, director of the Automotive Youth Education Systems program for the Pennsylvania Automotive Association, a dealers' group, said in a phone interview that there might be plenty of mechanics to go around.

"There's the chance you can hire somebody, but do you want to hire them?... I would say, [the shortage is of] quality employees." It is not easy work.

The job involves occasionally carrying heavy parts, handling toxic fluids, and standing on concrete for extended periods.

Veterans say that, after years of fixing worn-out cars, a mechanic's body can wear out, too.

The job requires people to be smarter now, too.

"I was a technician for a good portion of my life," Bailey said. And "today, there's no comparison... . What we need is the college-qualified student who's not going to college."

The old thinking of " 'Billy's good with his hands, so let him work with cars' doesn't apply anymore," Bailey said. Last week's competition was an attempt to inject some respect into the profession.

For the students, just getting there was a feat: 110 took a written test in November on automotive

systems. The two highest scorers from 12 schools advanced to the hands-on contest Friday.

As the first-place winners, O'Dwyer and Lamb will compete at the national level next month, at the New York International Auto Show.

In their teams of two, the boots- and-work-pants-clad competitors shuttled among more than a dozen stations outfitted with technical challenges: wiring, soldering, replacing the timing belt on a stand-mounted engine, working a brake lathe, even some on-the-fly math.

In its 13th year, this has been the most elaborate "Tech Comp" to date. In something of a corporate-sponsor arms race, both the competitive task stations and the prizes have grown more impressive, attendees said.

Even students who did not place took home oversize plastic bins full of swag: Mechanix gloves, Snap-On hats and shirts, Matco Tools fender covers, and Saturday night race tickets, to name just a few items.

For the industry sponsors, their largesse could equate to self-preservation.

"The workforce has crossed over the line now," Bailey said.

"The retirement rate is going up, and some choose not to follow the technology and continue their employment. And the number of people coming in have not caught up."

Philadelphia Inquirer March 8, 2006 By Akweli Parker