

# A Path to High Paying Jobs

## BTC Programs Lead to Higher Paying Jobs

DAVE GALLAGHER  
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM — When Satpal Sidhu hears someone talking about not being able to find a well-paying job in Whatcom County, he's ready to set them straight.

"There are very high-wage jobs out there, but it takes just a little bit of training," said Sidhu, dean of professional technical education at Bellingham Technical College. "When I tell people there are students who leave our school in two years with starting wages of \$50,000 a year, it gets their attention."

Last week BTC received a \$437,500 grant from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges that will let it add 50 full-time students to the process manufacturing programs. For this fall quarter, there are an estimated 129 openings for programs that train for high-demand jobs, including welding, process technology and ventilation systems, that are going unfilled. The grant was given to address labor shortages in targeted industries, such as refineries.

The challenge now is making people aware that there are openings for these high-demand programs. In the past these programs have been full, and people may not know there are openings, said Patricia McKeown, vice president of instruction at BTC.

"The process technology program is traditionally a popular one because it can translate into many other careers, including the refineries, food processing, at Alcoa (Intalco Works) and wastewater management," McKeown said. "These are careers that are looking for workers and are paying well."

In applying for the grant, BTC gathered data about the number of job openings expected at some local companies in the next five years, specifically in plant operations, instrumentation and maintenance. The refineries in Whatcom and Skagit counties expect to have the most, with 120 replacement and new positions open, followed by Intalco (110 openings), wood product manufacturers in Whatcom County (60 openings) and marine manufacturing companies (45 openings).

The school, which has the only state-funded process technology and instrumentation and control programs in Washington state, has been able to add more student capacity because of its new facility, completed in 2005.

McKeown said she sees three reasons why demand has increased for workers in these programs:

- Global competition for the talent.
- Oncoming retirement for so many people working in this field.
- Industry growth.

"The real challenge right now is there are these high-wage jobs available, but they need people with some high-tech training," McKeown said.



DANNY GAWLOWSKI FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

*Pankaj Gupta, a recent Bellingham Technical College graduate, calibrates a machine he helped modify to automatically keep liquid at a constant level in the BTC instrumentation lab on Tuesday. Bellingham Technical College recently received a grant of more than \$400,000 to expand its student capacity in several subject areas. Gupta, who graduated from the instrumentation program in June, has already secured a job at the Shell Martinez Refinery in California but is doing extra work at the college to keep his skills fresh as he waits for paperwork related to the new job to be completed.*

So why aren't there more people signing up for these programs?

McKeown suspects part of the problem is public perception. She noted that while there are plenty of openings in the process technology program, nursing programs are completely full.

"The medical industry has done a very good job getting the message out that they need workers. It is also an industry people can identify with; everyone sees what's happening in a doctor's office," McKeown said.

"The (refining) industry is just starting to get its message out, and it's more challenging for them because people rarely see the inside of a refinery. I think there is a perception that it's still the kind of job where it's dark and you get really dirty, but most of the positions require high-tech skills."

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#### WORK FORCE CONCERNS

BTC received the grant because of the demand for process technology in the region, not because there are students clamoring for the training. Sidhu said the proof is in the job placement rate, which was 95 percent for the 2005 graduates of the process technology program.

"The letters and comments we're getting from companies like Intalco, BP and Tesoro are driving these grants, not how many students we can get in," Sidhu said. "We're expanding programs that we know are skills that companies in this region need right now."

Dave Zepponi, president of the Northwest Food Processors Association, said the expansion of programs comes at a critical time for the industry.

In Washington, Oregon and Idaho, more than 55,000 people operate food manufacturing plants, including Bellingham Cold Storage. The industry went through a challenging time about 10 years ago, but has been strengthening recently, partially due to increased technology. However, the industry is concerned about its work force.

"The demographics are not in our favor right now, with the boomers retiring," Zepponi said. "We know we'll be looking for smart, trainable people in the coming years and a key is creating a pipeline of workers by developing a closer relationship with Bellingham Technical College and other schools. Our industry has a strong future, but we have a need for people who have technical training."

BTC is forecasting the increase in demand locally because of what the companies are saying. BP is spending more than \$1 billion in upgrades over the next five years, and Intalco plans to expand its production capacity by 30 percent, according to the grant proposal.

#### QUICK EDUCATION

Sidhu said another attraction for these programs is how quickly someone can get through it. The Processed Technology Program can be completed in two years, although many students need to spend between one to three quarters getting training to enter the program. BTC gives an assessment test to incoming students.

"Many people I talk to are surprised when I tell them how little time it takes to be qualified for these high-paying jobs," Sidhu said. "I believe the role of BTC is to make sure we're taking care of the middle class in this community, so we try our best to see where the demand for jobs will be and make sure we have programs in place so people here can get them."

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#### NOTE:

This article received over 2000 hits on the Herald's website and was one of the top 10 most popular articles of the week.

#### GET DETAILS ON OPENINGS

Bellingham Technical College has an estimated 129 openings, including 73 openings in the process manufacturing programs for the fall quarter, which starts Sept. 18.

BTC will take applications for these openings until school starts.

The tuition cost varies with each program, with Process Technology averaging about \$1,200 a quarter, not including books and equipment. Financial aid is available.

For more information, call the counseling and advising department at 752-8450 or visit [www.btc.ctc.edu](http://www.btc.ctc.edu).

#### SO HOW MUCH CAN YOU MAKE?

Here is a list of jobs and potential wages that can come from completing Bellingham Technical College programs, based on data from the Washington state Employment Security Department:

- Power plant operators: Average wage in Washington: \$36.35 an hour. Estimated average annual openings between 2008 and 2014: 18 to 38.
- Refinery operators: Average wage in Washington: \$29.93 an hour. Estimated average annual openings: 24 to 49.
- Electrical engineering technicians: Average wage in Washington: \$32.14 an hour. Estimated average annual openings: 18 to 38.
- Waste treatment operators: Average wage in Washington: \$24.02 an hour. Estimated average annual openings: 53 to 104.
- Maintenance and repair workers: Average wage in Washington: \$19.11 an hour. Estimated average annual openings: 155 to 854.