

Technical programs likely to grow if EITC converted to a community college

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Riley Cox, 25, builds a desk magnifier with a computer numerical controlled turning center during David Parsons' Advanced Machine Shop Lab II on Feb. 8 at Eastern Idaho Technical College. Taylor Carpenter / tcarpenter@postregister.com



Eastern Idaho Technical College Instructor David Parsons helps Cheyenne Lewis, 19, during Machine Shop Laboratory II, on Friday afternoon.



Ralph Sexton works on a project in the Advanced Machine Shop Laboratory II on Feb. 8 at Eastern Idaho Technical College.

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Three contraptions sit in the corner of Eastern Idaho Technical College's machine tool workshop.

One, a steel lathe, is covered in metal shavings. Knobs and hand wheels protrude from its face.

A nearby drill press features an rpm chart underneath the controls, while the milling machine next to it has an old, curved monitor connected to a yellowing, clacky keyboard.

None of them get much use in David Parson's machine tool class, though three modern computer numerical controlled devices across the shop do.

When students aren't using them, the CNC machines hum on standby. They're housed in clean, gray metal cabinets with flat-screen monitors and computer-controlled cutting arms.

EITC began its machine tool technology program in 2015. Like other two-year technical programs the college recently created, it churns out graduates in high demand among regional employers. The college hasn't graduated its first class yet, but students are already accepting job offers with starting wages of about \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year, Parsons said. The national average starting salary is about \$37,000, according to [Payscale](#).

Also like other two-year technical programs, the machine tool program would likely expand if EITC were converted to a community college.

"I guarantee that next year at this time our career technical enrollments will be stronger if we are converted. There would be more interest on us,

so we can better attract and retain students,” EITC President Rick Aman said. “The simple concept is our infrastructure would become larger too because we’re serving more students.”

Increased funding

Bonneville County residents will decide May 16 whether to convert EITC to a community college.

If converted, EITC would offer general education courses transferable to four-year universities.

But its technical programs would remain a strong focus, Aman said, and with more students comes more money and opportunity for expansion in academic and technical programs alike.

A July report by the Community College Citizen Study Panel found that EITC’s enrollment would grow from 700 students to 1,500 students in its first year as a community college. That number would balloon to 4,400 students by year six.

Tuition would increase from \$109 to \$125 per credit for Bonneville County residents, Aman said. Noncounty residents would pay \$175 per credit.

EITC’s state funding mechanism also would change.

Currently, the college receives about \$8,425,000 in general annual funding from Idaho Career and Technical Education and federal sources, Chief Financial Officer Kathleen Watkins said.

A community college would receive additional funding from the state’s general budget: \$5 million that Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter promised last year to a hypothetical conversion, then about \$2 million the year after, nearly \$3 million the year after, and so on, the study projected based on recent Idaho community college funding.

The college’s taxing district also would open a new revenue stream of about \$800,000 per year in local property taxes.

Altogether, the college’s annual revenue is projected to grow from about \$8.4 million currently to more than \$25.5 million by year six as a community college, the study found.

Additionally, the college could make line item requests with the state Legislature instead of Career and Technical Education.

“As a community college they’d have greater access to state resources,” Career and Technical Education State Administrator Dwight Johnson said.

There’s a precedent for Idaho community colleges using general funds to bolster trade programs, Johnson said.

The College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls expanded its programs in 2015 with a new building, and North Idaho College in Coeur d’Alene opened the Parker Technical Education Center in the fall using a combination of general college capital and private donations.

“We strongly believe having that technical component embedded within a larger community college is of great benefit to technical programs and students. You can leverage greater funding,” Johnson said.

EITC would use a large portion of additional funding for faculty hires. The college’s full- and part-time teaching staff of 66 would likely double within three years, Aman said.

The campus is already large enough to accommodate program growth for at least 5 years, Aman said.

“I think taxpayers worry they would approve a bond for the college conversion and then find out they would be immediately on the hook for a new building. I wouldn’t envision that for quite some time,” he said.

Filling a need

Aman already has an eye on several additions to EITC’s technical offerings.

Software programming is in demand — cybersecurity in particular.

A cybersecurity graduate from the hypothetical College of Eastern Idaho could find work at a place such as Idaho National Laboratory, Aman said.

“And it would easily be in the realm of what we’d call a family-wage job, well above minimum wage. A very well-compensated position, especially with the potential for advancement,” Aman said.

The cybersecurity firm Sentinel One reports that by 2019, there will be 6 million job openings for information security professionals but just 4.5 million qualified professionals to fill those roles, according to CSOonline.com.

There's also demand for other trade positions.

INL, with about 4,100 employees, has hired more than 500 people over the last two years, Partnerships, Engagement and Technology Deployment Director Amy Lientz said.

Not all of those hires are from site growth, she said, citing the "silver tsunami" of retiring baby boomers.

"And the positions we're filling aren't just what people would think of as the rocket scientist, Ph.D. types," Lientz said. "We're hiring in the programs that require certifications, including everything from drafting personnel to radiological control specialists, to lab technicians. Those are all really important to us, and if we're able to find that talent locally it's certainly a win."

A community college associate degree — unlike a technical college certificate — can go toward the acquisition of a bachelor's degree.

Some employers such as Blackfoot-based Premier Technology and INL have programs to help pay for their employees' further education.

"If we hire a draftsman, and that individual wanted an engineering degree from University of Idaho or Idaho State University, we may help pay for them to get that bachelor's. And that person benefits because they have credits that can already transfer," Lientz said.

Nimble by nature

Two-year colleges can quickly respond to developing regional employer demands, Aman said.

"That's probably one of the hallmarks of a two-year college, that ability to move quickly to where the economy is going," he said. "The radiation technician program we brought up in about nine months. Drafting, we discovered there weren't enough drafters in the area so we moved into that in about four months."

EITC's new machine tool technology program was created in response to a nationwide employee shortage felt locally by employers such as Premier, Idaho Falls-based Idaho Steel, Rexburg-based Matrix Drilling Products and INL.

Programs like those would be more easily expanded with the additional resources provided by a community college transition, Aman said.

Parsons teaches two machine tool classes, each with eight students.

Instead of teaching his students primarily how to use milling machines and lathes, which are falling out of favor in the production world, he teaches them to use modern CNC machines, which take cutting directions from computer-made designs.

Parsons has worked with CNC machines for almost two decades, and he worked with conventional machines before that.

CNC machines allow machinists to make a wider variety of products more quickly and more accurately, Parsons said.

"We're not teaching them yesterday's technology for today; we're teaching them today's technology for tomorrow."

INL employs about 50 CNC machinists, Sitewide Facilities and Operations Division Director Rod Bitsoi said, and it recognizes the need for more as current employees retire.

Future workers for future jobs

The machine tool program's students are in their second year.

Chris Haack, 26, expects to finish the program in May.

He attended Bonneville High School, but didn't graduate. Haack worked fast food jobs until he thought he'd try something else at EITC.

One of his siblings is a pharmacist, another has an engineering master's and another is a tax law Ph.D. The specialized and extended nature of their educations creates a limited employment niche, Haack said. A two-year degree doesn't require the same commitment.

"Their struggle to get a job that works well for them has been harder, even though they have this great knowledge and capability. With a trades

job it doesn't take as long to get good at something, so I could change my situation faster going here, for much less money," Haack said.

He wants to open a machine shop after he finishes the program. A place where he can manufacture gun parts — a process expedited by CNC machines.

"I can write my program, set everything up, turn it on and go home for the night. Make muzzle breaks, and make money while I sleep. It's lights-out machining, and you can't do that with the old machines," he said.

EITC could enroll more classes if additional resources were diverted to the machine tool program; Parsons would also purchase more machines. More of what the shop already has — to create additional hands-on time for students — and different ones so students can learn new skills.

His class toured Matrix Drilling recently. Haack remembers a sand-blaster-type device that cuts threads into metal pieces, something that would be useful for making gun barrels, for example.

"I had no idea something like that existed. I want the most exposure to all ways of doing things, though; if we could open up the next door and have more big machines over there — that would be great," he said.

Machinist demand is expected to continue upward, Parsons said.

"The rest of the country is begging for machinists. A company in Minnesota wanted to hire me after I came here; they had 700 machines and 400 machinists. I told them I couldn't fix that," Parsons said.

He expects his program to grow as well.

"It's taken me a lifetime to be as good as I am. It'll take them 10 years to be better than me at what I do," Parsons said. "There won't be conventional machines much longer. This is the new technology, and they need people to run it."