

Trying To Find A Good Mechanic

The auto industry faces trouble-filling spots for technicians. Programs seek to lure minorities.

By Greg Bluestein

ATLANTA - Latricea Mosley stands in an expansive auto technician's bay, confidently describing how to replace catalytic converters and tweak high-tech seat sensors. Acronyms dot the 22-year-old's explanations, indicative of the pages-long list of abbreviations she had to memorize for her latest test.

Mosley and six other students are about to graduate from MetroSTEP, a paid training program that alternates would-be technicians between the classroom and the service departments of Georgia BMW dealerships.

The program is one of several nationwide efforts, some aided by big-name athletes such as baseball Hall of Famer Hank Aaron and former Washington Redskins lineman George Starke, to steer minority-group members toward careers in the automotive industry.

For years, car manufacturers have offered months long unpaid training programs to recruit and retain some of the most talented mechanics in the field. The MetroSTEP program specifically targets minority students, offering paid internships to those who otherwise could not afford to take seven months off for intensive training. "I was just changing the oil, but I was pretty sure I could do something better," said Keenan Jones, Mosley's classmate and fellow intern at Hank Aaron BMW in Atlanta.

When the students graduate from the program Tuesday, they are guaranteed jobs at a dealership that can earn them almost \$40,000 a year. "It's not a career to sneeze at," said Russ Lucas, a BMW regional sales manager.

Motivated by the growing number of cars on American roads, the automotive industry is looking for ways to bolster the number of auto mechanics. The U.S. Labor Department says the number of graduates from automotive programs does not come close to meeting the growing demand for mechanics, while the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates dealers face an annual shortage of 35,000 technicians through 2010.

BMW alone expects to hire 1,500 technicians in the South over the next three years.

Lucas saw a lacking in recruitment, especially of minority mechanics. And Aaron, now a BMW dealer, said he was concerned with the lack of minorities in

the business before he encouraged BMW to start the MetroSTEP program in 2002.

"There was no black minority participation as far as technicians went," Aaron said.

Many of the jobs require extensive training. These days, technicians often double as computer programmers, and some cars pack many high-tech devices under the hood. Each new car model often requires additional classes so technicians are up to date with the latest sophisticated equipment.

"The job takes strong diagnostic skills, strong computer skills. You're really looking for an analytical student who can probe and dig and understand the functionality of the different aspects of a car," said Larry Cummings, the president of Automotive Youth Educational Systems. "The machines involved in reading the measurements of an engine are as complex as the engine itself."

Cummings' group, founded almost a decade ago to pad the thinning ranks of mechanics, sponsors internships for high school students to work as mechanics and awards 13 scholarships each year nationwide. The group, funded by 13 carmakers, has certified about 400 high school programs in 45 states that teach basic mechanic skills and serve as a pipeline to separate programs geared for specific car brands.

Car dealerships themselves also directly step in. Dealers in Virginia have donated more than \$4 million of new cars to Virginia high schools for mechanics classes.

Former Redskins lineman Starke started the Excel Institute in Washington to train students for careers in the automotive industry because his city lacked a trade school that developed good technicians.

"Even if we had a good tech school, they're not going to go into the ghetto and take a bunch of guys that got locked up," Starke said. "We do. We aggressively recruit people that other folks would say cannot become technicians."

The institute, with a \$1.6 million budget funded by donations and government grants, provides students a tuition-free two-year program. Daily classes end by 1 p.m., so the students are free to work part-time afternoon jobs, many of them progressing as they become more familiar with the technology.

Since its start in 1999, Starke said that his program had helped about half of its 400 students find jobs in the field and that the program was expecting 175 new students - many of them minorities - when class started Tuesday.

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