

2013 CTE Program Review – Auto Collision Repair/Painting

1. Occupational Demand

Local shop owners and industry professionals on the El Camino College ACR/P Advisory Board agree that the local collision repair industry has recovered from the recent nationwide economic recession but is not yet ready to resume growth. During the recession collision repair shops downsized their technicians and staff, keeping only their best people. Many experienced technicians were laid off and continue to look for steady employment due to careless or outdated technical skills and/or poor work ethics. Unfortunately for ACR/P graduates seeking work, competing against these technicians has been very difficult due to the disparity of experience.

Shop owners and managers throughout the recession and now complain that it is very difficult to find skilled, dedicated technicians. Shop owners interviewed recently are tired of being disappointed by experienced techs they can't rely on and are ready to 'try something different' by hiring interns and young part-time techs. This changing mindset is great news for ACR/P and its graduates, and presents an immediate need to efficiently connect students and graduates with employers.

As for the experienced technicians unable to find steady work, ACR/P is working with the Advisory Committee to plan retraining and skills update courses. Years ago, collision repair shops employed technicians and assistants. The assistants were young apprentices gaining the experience they needed to become technicians. Technicians earned a comfortable living wage. Now, shops are transitioning into a three-level system of technicians, installers and assistants. Assistants are paid at or near minimum wage, perform grunt work, and rarely receive professional training through the shop. Installers are service people with experience, but little or no professional training, and are paid a very modest wage. Technicians, on the other hand, are very well-paid experts and are expected to constantly update their training and skills. They are the 'surgical specialists' of the collision repair industry, and with one of them in charge, a shop can save a lot of money on personnel. Clearly, anyone wishing to become a new technician will need specialized and professional training from an institution like El Camino ACR/P.

2-3. State and District Need

Southern Californians love their cars. Locally, Torrance is an area densely populated with collision repair centers, and is located in the heart of Southern California's car culture history. Within a ten mile radius of campus, over 200 auto collision repair and customization shops currently exist. Southern California is the birthplace of the auto customization craze in the 1950s, and Southern Californians of all ages and automotive preferences are still passionate about their cars as an extension of their personality.

Desire for collision repair services has remained steady over the last five years, although vehicle owners' budgets did not keep up during the recession. A glut of collision repair work is expected in shops as the

economy improves over the next few years according to Advisory Board predictions, and the shops that can best serve these customers with high-quality and speedy repairs will thrive. To better their chance of success, collision repair centers are watching budgets and merging into large chains that serve multiple vehicle dealerships. Dealerships in 'auto malls' now prefer to have one large independent collision repair shop handling repairs than to each have their own collision repair shop in-house. The workload remains constant, but the number of shops decreases. I predict the competition between these growing chains will become more aggressive in the immediate future.

4. *The Competition (Similar Programs)*

Five other Los Angeles and Orange County community colleges offer collision repair courses: Cerritos College, Cypress College, Compton College, Los Angeles Trade Tech College and Rio Hondo College. Again this year, auto collision repair classes at all of these schools were overfull and had to turn some students away. Independent institutions such as WyoTech and regional occupational programs (ROPs) do exist and compete for student enrollment, but demand currently outweighs supply. El Camino ACR/P currently distinguishes itself by offering its accident reconstruction and investigation classes, a growing program that is unique in the area.

Currently, relations between the six local schools are friendly and the focus of instructors is on student training and success. New construction and remodeling of the shop areas at Rio Hondo, Cerritos and Compton Colleges is underway or recently completed. El Camino's new Shops building is under construction and will help keep ACR/P's image current in the community.

5. *Student Satisfaction*

ACR/P students are predominantly young (18-21 yrs.), undecided or unknown majors, and attend El Camino part-time. Most students enroll in ACR/P classes with the desire to learn how to repair their own vehicles instead of embarking on an educational journey to a career. By graduation however, many students have 'caught the bug' and enthusiastically pursue a career in auto collision repair. Currently, no organized post-graduation employment tracking system exists, but the creation of a student/alumni resume website has begun and Advisory Board members are excited to see it branded as El Camino's own.

From a small number of face-to-face student interviews, students do indeed value their ACR/P education and feel optimistic and confident that they have chosen a career in which they will find enjoyment and success. Many ACR/P students become long-term friends and express regret that the same camaraderie is rare in professional shops. Graduates often drop by or send an email to say hello and to report finding work or that they are looking for work.

Most ACR/P instructors have been designated by students to receive awards of thanks and praise, and this semester each instructor was singled out by at least one graduate as having made a positive impression on their education. Faculty evaluation statistics show high levels of student satisfaction with ACR/P instructors.

6. Completion and Success Rates

The completion and success rates for ACR/P in Spring, 2013, were the highest on record at 92.0% and 77.9% respectively. The total number of degrees and certificates awarded also increased, including a big jump in the number of AS Degrees awarded. I am proud that ACR/P students are starting to value higher education in general since they will need English, math and business skills to succeed at the highest level in their field.

In 2011, course grade data showed a divide between students who earned A and B grades and those who failed or withdrew from the course. New grade data shows fewer D and F grades and more B and C grades. Campus pressure on students not to rely on being able to repeat a class has reinforced the message instructors have expressed for years. Most students know the job market is difficult and are beginning to take responsibility for their education in larger numbers in order to find work.

7. Advisory Board

Board members consist of shop owners/managers, paint and tool representatives, educators at the high school and college level, and of course, industry technicians. Board requests for training in 'soft skills' and more emphasis on students' basic technical skills proficiency have been the most common. Specific requests for more training in painting and blending were received, answered by the reinstatement of ACR/P 2B and 2C into our curriculum mix. Complaints about the severe lack of speed in ECC certificate processing have been received from adult students attempting to obtain professional training or re-enter the industry. Existing curriculum has been amended to include professional skills, and complaints regarding certificate processing have been routed to the correct contacts. Overall, the advisory board supports the efforts and changes ACR/P has made, and has expressed interest in actively participating in the plans made for the near future.