



Welder Shortage Requires New Thinking

The average welder in the United States is 54 years old. The baby boomer generation is causing a spike in the number retiring and, unfortunately, there are far fewer welding students coming in to replace them. The prediction is that if this situation continues, there could be a shortage of 200,000 skilled welders in 2010 — unless something is done now.

One problem faced by our industry is insufficient numbers of people willing to undertake the necessary training needed to be skilled welders. Faced with this situation, the welding program at Southeastern Institute of Manufacturing and Technology (SiMT) in Florence, S.C., took several steps. First, it expanded and modernized its welder training facility. With the support of ESAB Welding & Cutting, it installed more than \$1.5 million in new welding and cutting equipment. A “Women in Welding Program” was begun. Now this two-year technical college has 80 students compared to fewer than 12 when this modernization effort started. It has also graduated more than 300 women from its welding programs.

With only about 5% of welders in the USA being women, there is an untapped source of prospects who can be trained. Some may already be in the workplace employed at lower-paying service jobs. They can advance their educations and become skilled welders. The prospects for future growth are also encouraging. Skilled welders can become robotic welding technicians, welding inspectors, welding supervisors, or they may wish to start their own businesses. In addition, the advanced welder training facility at SiMT has brought a number of fabricators into the area to take advantage of their support. Several of these fabricators have commented about the high-quality work and dependability their women welders have brought to their companies. One manufacturer employing more than 200 GMA welders has more than 15% women welders — three times the national average.

What more is needed? Scholarships to help students obtain the required welding education. While working with representatives concerned about skilled trades in South Carolina, I learned that many high school students attend a four-year college because they can get scholarship money. However, a number graduate without specific skills that will help them get a good paying job. Some then enroll in a two-year technical college to learn a trade, frustrated by the expense and time spent obtaining a four-year degree. By providing students or someone who is employed in a lower-paying service job with the ability to obtain welding scholarship support, they can learn a meaningful and high-paying trade that provides long-term career potential.

The American Welding Society started an education foundation in 1989. The AWS Foundation gives hundreds of scholarships to welding students taking two-year technical degrees as well as to those seeking four-year and more advanced degrees in the welding field. However, to fill the growing shortage, our industry needs to give ten times that number of scholarships. How can you help? Fabricators who see the current or expected future need should seriously consider donating to the AWS Foundation. Scholarships can be earmarked to go to specific schools if that is desired. Call (800/305) 443-9353, ext. 212, for more information.



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