



# *Firing Up Careers*

PCC's longtime program trains welders and supports the local economy by putting people to work. The November bond measure would expand the program to the eastside of Portland

Shonda Yardley got over her fear of fire to train in a field where she knows jobs are plentiful.

"I wanted to learn the trade of welding because I want to find a job," said Yardley, who enrolled in PCC's program last year. "As I started researching the field, I was told over and over again to go to PCC. I'm glad I did because the instructors are great."

With a wave of recent reports showing a high demand for welders, PCC is answering the call – just as it has for decades – by training highly skilled workers for manufacturing and steel companies.

Nationally, the industry is bracing for a massive workforce shift as the average age of a welder is 54 and heading toward retirement. The American Welding Society predicts a shortage of 200,000 welders by 2010.

Each year, the facility at the Rock Creek Campus serves about 340 students, sending them through a rigorous schedule of classes where they learn about everything from basic fabrication to gas metal arc welding to oxy-acetylene cutting.

"The industry knows if the college can't put out welders then they're in trouble," said Scott Judy, an instructor and department chair. "As a welder, you can move anywhere and live anywhere with these skills and find work."

Locally, the salary for a beginning welder is about \$30,000 to \$40,000, rising to nearly \$70,000 with more experience.

And it's those living-wage salaries that appeal to many potential workers. In fact, demand is so high that, while PCC trains hundreds of would-be welders each year, about 90 students each term are placed on waiting lists.

If the November bond measure passes, the college would create career-training facilities for the welding program on the eastside of Portland and would renovate the welding labs at Rock Creek. This will ease the commute for eastside residents and free up space at Rock Creek.

In the meantime, Vigor Industrial and PCC have joined forces to open the Swan Island Training Center. The partners unveiled the new training center in May.

Located on a 64-acre industrial facility that includes 20 different companies, the center offers evening-shift classes that mirror those offered through the welding program at Rock Creek. Now, students can get training at the Swan Island site rather than travel across town. The classes are offered between 5 and 10 p.m. with an initial capacity of 20 students at a time.

Frank Foti, chief executive officer of Vigor Industrial, said they started a training program 10 years ago but the industry took a turn for the worse and had to close their Shipyard University. He added that his staff tried to be their own teachers, which he admitted was too much for them to handle.

"I appreciate (PCC's) effort. The employees we get from them, you can't get from job-placement people."

- Jeff VanRaden

"And our business crashed at the same time," Foti said. "But this is a rebirth for this place and we're so excited to see this happen again. This is totally not possible without Portland Community College. This time we were fortunate to find a partner that teaches for a living, and who teaches what a whole market needs, not just what we need. We are one customer for PCC and not the only one. Eight weeks ago, we sat down with PCC for the first time and today we have opened a 24-unit training facility for welders. That is awesome and is a testament to them."

While the Swan Island training facility helps, it's not enough to meet the area's demand for skilled welders. That's why the bond measure would allow for further expansion, paving the way for even more living-wage jobs.

Companies on the east side of the Willamette River, such as U.S. Barge, Vigor, Service Steel and Columbia Wire & Iron, have the potential to expand their workforce by taking advantage of the training opportunities that the Swan Island Training Center provides. U.S. Barge is sponsoring the first five students.

"This puts more people in position to develop their skills, which improves all of our businesses here as well as meets the great need for skilled employees in the Portland metro area," said Corey Yraguen, CEO of U.S. Barge.

PCC welding instructors have strong ties to the community and work closely with local industry leaders to keep up with the latest technology and trends. Corporate officials sit on the advisory board, offering everything from advice to in-kind donations. And companies often turn to the college to fill jobs.

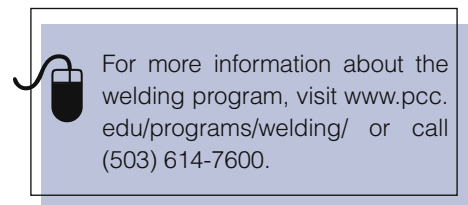
"PCC has a strong knowledge of manufacturing's needs," said Jeff VanRaden, a third-generation owner of Columbia Industries, which makes solid waste equipment and self-propelling systems for oilrigs. "I appreciate their effort. The employees we get from them, you can't get from job-placement people."

Students enrolled in the welding program run the gamut: second career seekers, high school graduates, current welders hoping to upgrade skills, laborers wanting to shift to a new field and out-of-work job searchers. About 5 percent of the students are female.

The college offers one-year and two-year certificates and an associate's degree. There are five full-time instructors and three part timers.

Mandi Hill took welding classes on a whim after realizing how many things in the world are welded.

"There are a lot of different ways to express yourself with fire. It's heat and you're in control of it and it's exciting when you get to the point when you can make things look really nice," said Hill, who works at Gunderson Marine Inc. and gives the welding test to new hires who work on the barges – a job she said PCC was instrumental in helping her land. ■



For more information about the welding program, visit [www.pcc.edu/programs/welding/](http://www.pcc.edu/programs/welding/) or call (503) 614-7600.