

Refining, chemical industries find workers through Pittsburg community college

By Hilary Costa
For the Contra Costa Times

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PITTSBURG — When Terri Crippen's job at Sandia National Laboratories was relocated to New Mexico, the veteran hazard control technician sought a new direction that would keep her securely employed in the East Bay.

Crippen found just that when she enrolled at Los Medanos College's process technology program, where students train for technical jobs in chemical and refining plants. Los Medanos is the only college in Northern California (and one of fewer than 50 in the United States) that offers this program, which was developed in partnership with the Bay Area companies eager to hire its graduates.

"Everyone in the industry is very positive, very supportive," said Crippen, who recently completed an internship-type stint at Tesoro's Golden Eagle refinery in Martinez that she found through the program. "The simulators here and working models are very hands-on, so not only do you get an understanding as far as the textbooks, but you can see it work."

The PTEC program began four years ago when representatives from local process technology

industries — oil refineries, water treatment facilities and beverage- and food-processing plants are just a sampling of those in the Bay Area — came to Los Medanos officials and asked for it.

Until then, companies had hired many of their employees. When Terri Crippen's job at Sandia National Laboratories was relocated to New Mexico, the veteran hazard control technician sought a new direction that would keep her securely employed in the East Bay. Crippen found just that when she enrolled at Los Medanos College's process technology program, where students train for technical jobs in chemical and refining plants. Los Medanos is the only college in Northern California (and one of fewer than 50 in the United States) that offers this program, which was developed in partnership with the Bay Area companies eager to hire its graduates. "Everyone in the industry is very positive, very supportive," said Crippen, who recently completed an internship-type stint at Tesoro's Golden Eagle refinery in Martinez that she found through the program. "The simulators here and working models are very hands-on, so not only do you get an understanding as far as the textbooks, but you can see it work." ut of training programs in the Gulf states and Midwest. But almost invariably, those workers, hit by Bay Area sticker and culture shock, went home after a couple years, said Chris Dooly, a training supervisor at the Shell refinery in Martinez.

"We said, 'We need to get something locally for California folks,' " Dooly said.

He said companies can and do put some untrained hires through apprenticeship programs but prefer to hire people who already have learned the fundamentals.

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Development Board, the Contra Costa County board of supervisors and some government grants, the program soon took shape. Many faculty are still in the industry, and so can teach the skills that are relevant now.

Some 200 students so far have graduated with associate's degrees or certificates, and 170 are currently enrolled, said David Kail, the program's director and a retired chemical engineer from Dow Chemical.

With jobs available now and a wave of baby boomers expected to retire in the next few years, Kale said his graduates have great odds of landing work right out of school. The process technology field pays pretty well, too: Starting salaries range between \$45,000 and \$65,000 a year, and can surpass \$100,000 when readily available overtime is added in, Kale said.

"To me, it's all about jobs," he said. "It's about having a career that you love, that pays well and does good for society."

An open house on Tuesday at Los Medanos will give the public and prospective students a chance to find out more about the program.

"Because of the partnership between education, industry and government, it was able to succeed," said Ed Diokno, policy analyst for Supervisor Federal Glover. "It's a win-win-win situation all the way through, especially for the East County area."

IF YOU GO WHAT: Open house for Los Medanos College's process technology program **WHEN:** 9 a. m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday **WHERE:** 2700 E. Leland Road, Pittsburg. A presentation in the library community room will begin at 9 a.m.; tours and demonstrations will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the PTEC

classrooms. INFO: For more information, go to www.losmedanos.edu/PTEC/openhouse.html or call 925-439-2181, ext. 3194

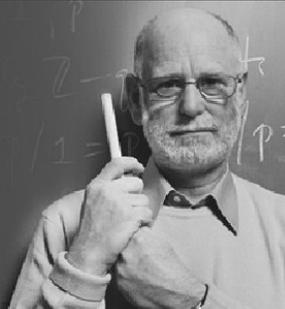
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