

Washington Business

NEWS WITH A COMPETITIVE EDGE | Spring 2024

All Eyes On AI

Artificial intelligence has captured the world's attention.
How should policymakers respond?

Battery Boom in Moses Lake:
The future of electric vehicles is putting down roots in Grant County.

IN THEIR WORDS

A Q&A with J.T. Wilcox

Charging Up for Change

As demand for electric vehicle technicians grows, Washington's community and technical colleges are revising their automotive programs to meet it.

DEBBIE RITENOUR

Peninsula College and Spokane Community College recently began incorporating electric vehicles into the curriculum of their automotive programs to meet the industry's evolving needs.

At A Glance

Americans bought more electric vehicles in 2023 than ever before.

These vehicles require technicians with specialized training and expertise.

Community and technical colleges such as Peninsula College and Spokane Community College are updating their automotive programs to ensure students have the skills they need as they enter the workforce.

"As we were looking at ways to improve our program and better meet employer needs, EVs rose to the top of our radar."

— ASHLEY PURDIN, DEAN
OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION AT
SPOKANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Electric vehicles are more popular than ever. According to Kelley Blue Book, Americans bought a record-breaking 1.2 million electric cars, trucks and SUVs in 2023. That represents 7.6% of all vehicle sales, up from 5.9% in 2022.

Even with all their bells and whistles, electric vehicles are not without their issues. In fact, as the industry experiences growing pains and the kinks are being worked out, electric vehicle owners have been reporting more problems than owners of gas-powered or hybrid vehicles. That means electric vehicle technicians are also more popular than ever.

Washington's community and technical colleges have long partnered with employers to develop programs that meet their needs. Peninsula College and Spokane Community College are among the many colleges across the state that are updating, revising or overhauling their automotive programs to stay current with student and industry needs.

A COMPLETE OVERHAUL

In 2018, the automotive service technician certificate program at Port Angeles-based Peninsula College was going through a crisis. Enrollment was down — way down — and showed no signs of turning around. The college decided to sunset the program in its current format and rebuild it from scratch. The first task for Brian Kneidl, associate dean of workforce programs, was to reassemble the advisory committee and determine the best path forward.

“I spent a lot of time talking to local employers and discovered that for the most part, they weren’t concerned about somebody having a two-year degree,” Kneidl said. “What they were concerned about was somebody being able to diagnose a vehicle quickly and having strong fundamentals in basic electronics.”

Based on employer feedback, Kneidl revamped the curriculum. In the new program, students learn all about gas, diesel and electric vehicles, including diagnostics, preventative maintenance and repair. The two-quarter program is completed in six months.

“Employers are looking for a well-rounded mechanic who has experience with all kinds of vehicles,” Kneidl said. “Our program is designed to take someone from Johnny off the street to someone with skills who knows their way around a modern vehicle, including hybrid and electric vehicles.”

One of the most challenging tasks was finding the right instructor. After months of searching, Kneidl hired someone who came straight from the electric vehicle industry.

“It was really important to me to find an instructor who had a good background in electric vehicles because if our students can figure out electric vehicles, they’ll be able to figure out any other alternative fuel vehicles that are coming up,” Kneidl said. “We got lucky when we found our instructor, and thanks to his skills and knowledge, we have an amazing program.”

The new program launched in the winter quarter of 2024. Eight students are expected to graduate in the spring.

“So far it’s going great. The students are really enjoying it,” Kneidl said. “Employers are happy, too. We’re always communicating with the employers and with the students and getting feedback from both sides.”

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— ASHLEY PURDIN, DEAN OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION AT SPOKANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Spokane Community College (SCC) will begin offering an electric vehicle certificate through its automotive technology program in the summer of 2025. The addition is a natural fit for a program that strives to stay on top of emerging technologies and trends.

“There’s definitely a growing demand for electric vehicles globally, which is influenced by environmental concerns and advancements in EV technology as well as by government incentives for both manufacturers and consumers,” said Ashley Purdin, dean of technical education. “As we were looking at ways to improve our program and better meet employer needs, EVs rose to the top of our radar.”

SCC used a \$150,000 grant from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Workforce Development Fund to purchase a Tesla Model 3 that will be used in the program. The car is a specially designed training vehicle with portions cut away to allow students visual and physical access to all major components. LED light strips indicate paths of electrical energy and coolant flow, and the high-voltage system has been replaced with a simulated system to ensure student safety.

In addition to providing hands-on experience with one of the most popular electric vehicles in the world, the new certificate program will offer students a number of benefits, including a higher earning potential, more advancement opportunities, and more diverse career options. It also offers significant benefits to the employers who hire the students.

“Companies who employ certified EV technicians can bolster their brand reputation by demonstrating a commitment to sustainability and advanced technology. I also think this can enhance their market positioning as a forward-thinking and environmentally responsible company,” Purdin said.

As the electric vehicle landscape continues to evolve and new advancements such as the integration of artificial intelligence take hold, SCC’s automotive technology program will evolve right alongside it.

“This isn’t something that’s going to go away,” Purdin said. “This is the direction of the future.” ☰