

## Activity in oil, gas and construction results in demand for equipment training

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By James Neal, Staff Writer

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ENID — If you've driven much in north central Oklahoma in the last year, you've probably noticed an increased number of wide-load trucks hauling heavy-equipment to construction sites.

Increased activity in the oil and gas field, paired with a rebounding construction market, have led to a corresponding increase in demand for heavy equipment in the region, and for trained heavy equipment operators.

While there is no apparent shortage of available equipment, local and regional training centers are adding courses and increasing class sizes to meet the demand for heavy equipment operators.

"We believe there is a growing demand for heavy equipment operators," said Teri Holle, business and industry services director at Autry Technology Center.

Holle said Career Tech schools measure the need for professional training by polling companies across the state for number of job openings, starting salaries and skills needed to fill those positions. The surveys traditionally have been conducted annually, but due to recent expansion in the demand for oil field, jobs now are conducted quarterly.

The most recent survey indicated there are more than 50 job openings for heavy equipment operators in Garfield County.

"Some of those openings are for government contracts, like road construction, some are related to the oil and gas field, and some are with general construction companies," Holle said.

She said even more demand for equipment operators is expected as wind farm construction accelerates in the region.

"The wind industry also will be requiring heavy equipment operators, and those are relatively long-term, stable positions," Holle said.

Demand for operators may be increasing faster than new operators can be trained, partly because of the length of traditional operators' training courses.

Travis Perrin, heavy equipment operator and CDL training coordinator at Autry Tech, said the center's traditional operator course lasts 400 hours, stretched over 52 training days.



Jeremy Cowley (right) glances over his shoulder as he works on his heavy machinery backing with a CAT Simulator at Autry Technology Center. Also pictured are Wes Dotson and Travis Perrin. (Staff File Photo by BONNIE VCULEK)

The extensive course is based on a curriculum designed by the National Center for Construction Education and Research. Students learn a wide range of topics, including operator and job site safety, equipment maintenance, construction techniques and blueprint reading.

Perrin said students in the 400-hour NCCER course do not learn how to operate only one piece of equipment; they are trained in both simulators and hands-on equipment time to operate bulldozer, loaders, graders, scrapers, backhoes and excavators (also known as track hoes).

The course ends with an operators' certificate accredited by the NCCER.

"That course is really the top end of instruction, and it's full-blown from start to finish," Perrin said. "They can take their certificate from here to anyone who's familiar with NCCER, and it's recognized throughout the U. S."

While the NCCER course represents the top end of equipment operator training, the increased demand for operators has led to increased demand for shorter, equipment-specific classes.

"The demand for operators is getting high enough, now some companies are saying, 'We'll look at starting people who don't have much experience, then we'll worry about getting them trained,'" Perrin said.

He said Autry began offering short classes about a year ago, covering a variety of topics designed to give students an introduction to equipment operation, maintenance and safety.

"Sometimes, companies will send us new hires, and we're able to show them how to do walk-around inspections of the equipment, safety and basic maintenance," Perrin said.

From there, students receive instruction in simulators to become familiar with the controls on their specific piece of equipment, simulated driving and techniques such as bucket placement and loading.

"We want to get the new operators familiar with their equipment and up to speed on how to operate and be safe, and know the importance of maintenance," Perrin said.

Each short-term class lasts two to three hours per topic, and multiple levels of instruction are available.

The current short-term classes do not include hands-on experience with the equipment, only classroom and simulator time.

While the introductory classes do not include real operator time, Perrin said the simulators provide adequate familiarization to get operators started.

"Some of the simulations are so in-depth, I can set up a student and say, 'I want you to dig a 20-foot trench and have a two-to-one slope' ... it's very in-depth," Perrin said.

Simulators offer students the opportunity to learn the controls and construction techniques associated with large and small wheel loaders, graders, wheel scrapers and excavators.

Perrin said Autry is planning to add more "short, customized classes that focus on one type of equipment."

New intermediate level courses also are being planned that will go beyond classroom and simulator training to offer hands-on equipment operation.

"Now, we're in the process of making some shorter classes that also incorporate time on the equipment," Perrin said. "Those courses are going to be designed for someone who's needing to get really fine-tuned on one particular piece of equipment."

Perrin said the hands-on operator courses will run 20 to 30 hours in length.

"There's definitely some demand for more training, so we're putting together the new courses to meet that need," Perrin said.

For more information on business and industry services at Autry, contact Holle at 242-2750 or go to [www.autrytech.edu](http://www.autrytech.edu).