

Power industry seeks young talent

Santee Cooper offers scholarships at Trident Tech

By Diane Knich
The Post and Courier
Sunday, January 20, 2008



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The Post and Courier

Todd Lane, from Moncks Corner, works in the maintenance shop at Santee Cooper's Jefferies Generating Station Friday. Lane, a Trident Tech student, was offered a scholarship by Santee Cooper to learn about jobs in the power industry.

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For more information

Santee Cooper officials say high school seniors who are interested in the Power Associates scholarship program for the 2008-09 school year should talk to their guidance counselors.

The deadline to apply for a scholarship is March 14.

MONCKS CORNER - Todd Lane has always liked to work with both his hands and his mind.

When he was 16 years old, he built a six-foot half-pipe skateboard ramp in his backyard. The structure was so impressive that when his parents put the house up for sale, the new owner agreed to buy it only if the ramp was part of the deal.

Lane, 18, was exactly the kind of student Santee Cooper, South Carolina's state-owned electric and water utility, was looking for when he applied for the utility's Power

Associates scholarship program.

He earned good grades in high school, had mechanical skills and was interested in working in the power industry. And Lane, unlike many young people today, didn't mind putting aside the pursuit of a four-year college degree to work toward a two-year degree, a well-paying job and a clear career path into the power industry.

The scholarship program is an attempt to lure young people to jobs in the industry, said Wendy Cruce, Santee Cooper's senior employee relations representative. The demand for skilled power workers is huge in South Carolina and nationwide, she said. That's largely due to an increase in the demand for power and an aging workforce with many employees on the brink of retirement.

But few students today pursue such careers, Cruce said. "Basically, we're stocking our own pond."

Resistance to power and manufacturing careers comes especially from parents, who often prefer their children attend a four-year school and earn a bachelor's degree, Cruce said. Working in the power industry, she said, "is not high on the list of what parents want their kids to do."

Lane, however, thought the program was a good fit from the beginning, and his parents were supportive.

When he learned of the program when he was a senior in high school, "I thought it was a great opportunity to get an early start on my career," he said.

The scholarship program, which is in its first year and was awarded to four students, covers the cost of earning an associate's degree in occupational technology at Trident Technical College.

It also gives students paid, on-the-job training one day each week while they're in school, a weekly stipend and bonuses when they earn good grades. When they graduate, they will likely be hired in jobs with starting salaries of about \$40,000 a year and have the potential to move up in Santee Cooper's ranks.

John Autrey, director of apprenticeship programs at Trident Tech, oversees the students in the academic part of the program. Trident Tech designed a special program from among its existing course offerings that met the students', Trident's and Santee Cooper's needs, he said.

Students who are not part of the scholarship program are welcome to take that particular series of courses as well, he said.

Autrey said he hears from many industry representatives that they have problems finding workers in the skilled trades. "I constantly get calls from employers saying,

'Help, help, help.' "

Years ago, he said, students could land manufacturing jobs with only a high school diploma. But the industries have changed. Now, students need to attend training programs where they learn not only technical skills, but reasoning and problem solving skills.

Gwen Scarborough, a school-to-career coordinator with the Berkeley County school district, who recruited students for Santee Cooper, said students who want to participate in such programs must be "college ready." They must meet college-level English and math requirements, she said. Students who need remedial help aren't eligible.

Cruce said all students this year came from Berkeley County. The utility is accepting applications for next year's recipients, she said. The deadline is March 14. Students from anywhere can apply, she said, but the on-the-job part of the program takes place in Berkeley County.

Scarborough said when asked about their future plans, "high school students often give a conditioned response, and that's usually four years of college."

But, college isn't right for all students, she said.

She never discourages students from pursuing a four-year degree, she said. And she would never select a specific student and say about the Santee Cooper program, "this is for you."

But, she said, she wants students to understand all of their options and the implications of those choices. When they do, some choose paths other than landing a four-year degree, she said.

Jared Sherrow, 18, another one of the scholarship recipients this year, said he wasn't ready to go away to a four-year college. He's known many students who did that and ending up dropping out, he said. But he thinks he will likely want to earn a bachelor's degree some day.

Companies like Santee Cooper offer their employees education benefits, he said, and he thinks he'll take advantage of that for more education in the future.

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