

Career Education Review

A Publication of CECU, the Voice of Career Education



YOUR FUTURE STARTS HERE

TRADE & CAREER
SCHOOLS VS.
TRADITIONAL COLLEGE

EXPLORE CAREERS
IN WELDING,
HVAC, ELECTRICAL,
AUTOMOTIVE, BEAUTY,
AND HEALTHCARE

STUDENT STORIES

Julia Estrada, Graduate of Tulsa Welding School

Summer 2026

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CHANGES
LIVES**



Editor

Jenny Faubert

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A FASTER PATH TO A MEANINGFUL CAREER

Trade and career schools prepare students for in-demand jobs and long-term success.



For generations, students were told that a successful career depended on earning a traditional four-year college degree. Today, that conversation is changing. Rising student debt, growing demand for skilled workers, and shifting attitudes about higher education are leading more students to consider a different path: private trade and career schools.

Across the country, employers are struggling to fill jobs in industries such as construction, healthcare, transportation, manufacturing, information technology, and skilled trades. At the same time, many students are seeking faster, more flexible ways to prepare for meaningful careers without spending years in a traditional academic setting.

Television host and skilled trades advocate Mike Rowe has frequently pointed out that millions of jobs remain open in fields that do not require a bachelor's degree. Industries such as manufacturing and construction are facing a major workforce shortage as experienced workers retire, and fewer young people enter the trades. According to the Associated Builders and Contractors, the construction industry is expected to need nearly half a million new workers in 2026 to keep pace with demand.

Healthcare is also one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy, with demand for healthcare professionals continuing to rise as the population ages and the need for medical services expands. Between 2020 and 2030, the United States is

expected to have an average of 194,500 annual openings for registered nurses, with employment projected to grow 9 percent, according to the American Association of Nursing. At the same time, more than one-fifth of nurses report plans to retire within the next five years, creating an urgent need for new talent.

Trade and career schools have long provided career-focused training that helps students build practical skills and enter the workforce quickly. So, what sets trade and career schools apart, and why are so many students choosing this path? The answer begins with how these schools approach career training.

CAREER TRAINING BUILT AROUND REAL JOBS

One of the biggest differences between trade and career schools and traditional colleges is the focus on practical, career-specific education. Instead of spending years completing broad general education requirements, students can begin learning the skills directly related to their future careers much earlier.

Programs are designed around hands-on learning. Students often spend significant time in labs, workshops, simulation environments, externships, and clinical settings that mirror real workplaces. Faculty members are often industry professionals who bring current, real-world experience into the classroom.

Many programs also prepare students for the

certifications and licensure exams required to enter the workforce. Nursing students may prepare for the NCLEX exam. HVAC students may earn EPA certifications. Aviation students may pursue Airframe and Powerplant certifications, while automotive students may work toward Automotive Service Excellence credentials.

FASTER PATHS INTO THE WORKFORCE

Another major advantage of career schools is the ability to enter the workforce more quickly. Traditional bachelor's degree programs typically require four years or more to complete. Many career school programs can be completed in a fraction of that time.

Some certificate programs can be completed in less than a year. Associate degree programs are often completed in under two years, while some bachelor's degree pathways can be finished in as little as three years through accelerated scheduling and year-round classes.

Flexible scheduling is another reason many students choose career schools. Programs may offer morning, evening, and weekend options. Many schools offer hybrid learning options, allowing students to complete part of their coursework online while gaining hands-on experience through in-person training. Multiple start dates throughout the year allow students to begin training without waiting for a traditional semester schedule. This flexibility can be especially important for working adults, parents, career changers, and students balancing other responsibilities.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Many students are drawn to the smaller, more personal learning environments often found at career schools. Smaller class sizes can make it easier

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**Evening
Classes**



**Hybrid
Learning**



**Multiple
Start
Dates**



**Adult
Learners**

for students to receive one-on-one attention, ask questions, troubleshoot technical skills, and build relationships with instructors and classmates.

Support services are also a major focus. Many schools provide tutoring, career coaching, resume assistance, interview preparation, childcare referrals, food pantries, and job placement support. Schools often emphasize a close-knit, family-like atmosphere that helps students stay connected and motivated throughout their programs.

Career services teams frequently work directly with employers to help students transition into the workforce. Schools may host career fairs where




SCAN ME 

LOOKING FOR SCHOLARSHIPS?

To explore scholarship opportunities and learn more about available resources, visit CECU's Scholarships for Students Pursuing Career Education page at <https://link.career.org/scholarships>. The page features scholarship opportunities from organizations, foundations, and industry partners supporting students pursuing careers in healthcare, skilled trades, technology, transportation, and other high-demand fields.

local and national employers recruit students directly on campus. In some industries, employers are so eager to hire qualified workers that students receive job offers before they even complete their programs.

Some programs also include apprenticeships, externships, or clinical experiences that allow students to gain valuable on-the-job training before graduation. These opportunities help students build confidence, strengthen professional networks, and gain experience that employers value.

STRONG INDUSTRY CONNECTIONS

Trade and career schools often maintain close relationships with employers and industry leaders. Many schools use advisory boards composed of local employers to help ensure that programs remain aligned with workforce needs and evolving technologies.

This employer involvement can help schools adapt quickly to changes in the job market and prepare students with immediately relevant skills. Whether it is advanced manufacturing technology, cybersecurity tools, healthcare equipment, or modern construction techniques, students often train on the same equipment and systems they will encounter in the workplace.

Many schools are also deeply connected to their communities. Students may participate in community service projects such as providing free haircuts, low-cost dental services, or assisting with local construction and repair projects. These experiences allow students to apply their skills while making a meaningful impact in their communities.

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Students may participate in community service projects such as providing free haircuts, low-cost dental services, or assisting with local construction and repair projects.

WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD LOOK FOR IN A SCHOOL

As students explore their options, it is important to research schools carefully. Accreditation is one of the most important factors to consider, as it helps ensure the school meets recognized standards of quality. Students should also ask about financial aid opportunities, scholarships, licensure preparation, and employer partnerships.

Students pursuing careers that require certification or licensing should ask how programs prepare graduates for those exams and what kind of support is available throughout the process.

For many students, trade and career schools offer something increasingly valuable: a direct connection between education and employment. In a rapidly changing economy where skilled workers are in high demand, these schools are helping students build practical skills, enter the workforce faster, and pursue careers that offer stability, opportunity, and purpose.

To find a trade or career school by program or location, visit <https://link.career.org/tradeschool>.

FIND A TRADE OR CAREER COLLEGE

Search by program or location

From welding to mechatronics, unlock a hands-on career in carpentry, plumbing, electrical, trucking, masonry, or automotive tech—where your skills shape the world.



SCAN ME 



TRADE & CAREER SCHOOLS VS. TRADITIONAL COLLEGE

TRADE & CAREER SCHOOLS



TRAINING FOCUS

Career-specific skills



LEARNING STYLE

Hands-on labs and training



TIME TO COMPLETION

Many programs in less than 2 years



SCHEDULING

- Multiple start dates
- Evening and weekend options
- Hybrid learning available



CLASS SIZE

Smaller learning environments



WORKFORCE PREPARATION

- Industry certifications
- Employer partnerships



CAREER SERVICES

- Resume assistance
- Interview preparation
- Job placement support



VS.

TRADITIONAL COLLEGE



TRAINING FOCUS

Broad academic curriculum



LEARNING STYLE

Lecture-based coursework



TIME TO COMPLETION

Typically 4+ years



SCHEDULING

Semester-based calendar



CLASS SIZE

Larger classes



WORKFORCE PREPARATION

General education requirements



CAREER SERVICES

Varies by institution



CAREER OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS A WIDE RANGE OF INDUSTRIES



AUTOMOTIVE &
DIESEL TECHNOLOGY



AVIATION
MAINTENANCE



TRUCK DRIVING &
CDL TRAINING



ELECTRICAL &
CONSTRUCTION TRADES



WELDING &
FABRICATION



HVAC &
REFRIGERATION



HEALTHCARE SUPPORT
& NURSING



IT &
CYBERSECURITY



CULINARY ARTS &
HOSPITALITY



BEAUTY &
WELLNESS PROGRAMS



BUSINESS, LEGAL &
OFFICE PROFESSIONS



GRAPHIC DESIGN &
CREATIVE MEDIA



FILM PRODUCTION &
RECORDING ARTS



COMMERCIAL DRONE
TECHNOLOGY



HEAVY EQUIPMENT
OPERATION



LINEWORKER &
UTILITY TECHNOLOGY



MANUFACTURING
TECHNOLOGY



AND MANY MORE!



BUILD PRACTICAL SKILLS

Gain hands-on experience that employers value.



ENTER THE WORKFORCE FASTER

Shorter programs mean less time in school and more time earning.



PREPARE FOR IN-DEMAND CAREERS

Train for high-growth fields with strong job prospects.



CONNECT EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

Real-world training and employer connections open doors.



Erika Johnson

How One Woman Broke Barriers and Built a Career Offshore

From working behind a desk to becoming a trailblazer offshore, Erika Johnson built a career defined by determination, leadership, and breaking barriers.

Erika Johnson, affectionately known as EJ, is a graduate of the Instrument and Control Systems Technology program at [ITI Technical College](#) in Baton Rouge, LA. Today, as the Gulf of America Internal Trainer at BP, she brings a journey marked by grit, faith, and a fierce determination to lead with purpose and help others do the same.

Her career began in distribution and logistics, working for powerhouse companies like FedEx, UPS, John Deere, and Georgia-Pacific LLC. But Erika wasn't content to stay behind the desk. She felt called to do more with her hands, to make a tangible impact, and to take "the path less taken."

That path became clear when Erika made the bold decision to return to school full-time for instrumentation, having already earned one degree several years prior. While raising a family and working in the plants full-time, which meant sometimes 14 to 16-hour days, she pursued a new direction, one that wasn't just underrepresented by women, but especially by Black women.

"There were many times I thought about throwing in the towel," Erika recalls, "but my 'why' was greater than the pain I was going through. At times, I did not sleep for days. My family was key."

That persistence paid off in a historic way. Erika became the first Black woman to hold a technical specialist role on a BP rig in the Gulf, a moment that brought both pressure and pride. She knew the microscope would be on her, but that only fueled her fire.

"I knew at that point I was not only doing this to represent women, but African American women at that," she says. "That motivated me to present the best version of myself I possibly could. I placed more stress on myself than anything to just be great. But I also learned quickly that I work for

" I knew at that point I was not only doing this to represent women, but African American women at that, she says. That motivated me to present the best version of myself I possibly could. I placed more stress on myself than anything to just be great. But I also learned quickly that I work for a company that's truly supportive of employee growth. "

a company that's truly supportive of employee growth."

Through it all, Erika leaned on a mindset rooted in discipline, mental strength, and belief in her purpose. "I've always had that Heart of a Lion mentality," she says. "Whatever the mind believes, the body will follow. You must know your value and be willing to go the extra mile."

She's also not afraid of the fight — literally. Erika's passion and resilience were shaped in part by her athletic background, including basketball, track, cross country, and softball, and later by training in MMA, boxing, and women's professional tackle football. "I'm no pushover," she jokes. "I'm just a small-town country girl from St. Francisville, LA, looking to make an impact on the younger generations to come."

Before joining BP, Erika worked as an Electrical Submersible Pump Technician with SLB in North Dakota and has since grown into a respected



trainer and keynote speaker. You may have even seen her featured in ITI Technical College's latest commercial, representing her alma mater and sharing what it means to thrive in the trades.

Erika has been part of the Women Offshore community for years and took the stage as a keynote speaker at the Annual Conference last year. Women Offshore quoted, "Her remarks connected across the room, direct, honest, and rooted in real experience offshore. She spoke about the responsibility to bring others along, and the room responded with a standing ovation."

"I'm a very motivating person," Erika shares. "When I left, I hope that those ladies knew and understood just how valuable, powerful, and deserving they are."

She believes spaces like Women Offshore are vital for the future of the industry. "It provides a safe space where like-minded individuals can share their experiences, both good and bad, and thrive from the support of a community of strong and powerful women. No one gatekeeps here."

Women Offshore is a nonprofit that supports mariners at every stage of their careers. Through conferences, mentorship, and resources, including a Sexual Assault and Violence Eradication Resource Guide, they work to create safer, more supportive pathways on the water.

This work continues at the 9th Annual Women Offshore Conference, October 1–2, 2026, at the LyondellBasell Center for Petrochemical, Energy, & Technology in Pasadena, TX. Over two days, mariners and industry professionals come together to talk through licenses, leadership, career progression, and the realities of working offshore.

Erika's story is a powerful reminder that success is not defined by a straight path, but by the courage to take a different one. For students, career changers, and anyone considering a future in the skilled trades, her journey proves that with determination and the right support, there are no limits to what you can achieve.

Erika lives by the words of Galatians 6:9: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

ERIKA'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

Know your value, trust your purpose, and never give up when the path becomes difficult.



What Kept Her Going

Her faith, family, and determination to create opportunities for those who follow behind her.



Advice for Future Students

"Whatever the mind believes, the body will follow. You must know your value and be willing to go the extra mile."

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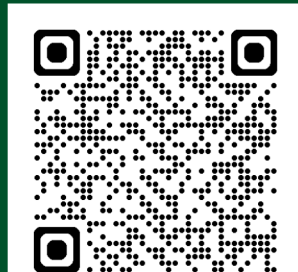
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SKILLED WELDERS ARE NEEDED ACROSS NEARLY EVERY INDUSTRY

From construction and manufacturing to energy and transportation, welders play a vital role in building and maintaining the infrastructure that keeps America moving.

From bridges and pipelines to manufacturing equipment and skyscrapers, welders help build the structures and systems people rely on every day. For students who enjoy working with their hands and creating something tangible, welding offers a career focused on skill, precision, and problem-solving. With opportunities across industries like construction, manufacturing, energy, and transportation, welding continues to attract students looking for a practical career path with strong long-term demand.

A CAREER BUILT ON HANDS-ON WORK

A career in welding centers on practical skills, problem-solving, and creating tangible results. Tulsa Welding School explained that a typical day for a welder is hands-on and goal oriented. Depending on the role, welders may begin by reviewing blueprints or project specifications before preparing materials and setting up equipment. From there, they cut, fit, and weld metal components using a variety of techniques depending on the job.

[Tulsa Welding School](#) noted that projects can range from building structural steel for construction to repairing equipment or performing precision work in industries such as aerospace and manufacturing.

WHAT A TYPICAL DAY LOOKS LIKE

One of the biggest advantages of the profession is that no two days are exactly the same. Projects vary by industry and employer, giving welders the opportunity to continuously learn and apply new skills. The work is rooted in building, fixing,

and creating, making it especially appealing for students who enjoy working with their hands and seeing the direct results of their efforts.

THE SKILLS THAT HELP WELDERS SUCCEED

Tulsa Welding School explained that successful welders tend to be detail-oriented, dependable, and enjoy working with their hands. Problem-solving is key, as is the ability to focus and follow safety procedures.

Students do not need prior welding experience to enter the field. Instead, employers and instructors often look for individuals with a strong work ethic, a willingness to learn, and pride in their work. Tulsa Welding School shared that those qualities can go a long way in helping students succeed during training and later in the workforce.

TRAINING FOR THE REAL WORLD

Training programs are designed to prepare students quickly for real-world job environments. According to Tulsa Welding School, welding programs can be completed in as little as seven months. During training, students learn core welding processes such as MIG, TIG, and stick welding. Programs also cover blueprint reading, safety practices, and hands-on fabrication skills that mirror what students will encounter in the field.

The emphasis on hands-on learning is one reason many students are drawn to welding education. Rather than spending years in a classroom before entering the workforce, students begin practicing industry skills early in their training. This allows them to build confidence while

preparing for employer expectations from day one.

WHY CERTIFICATIONS MATTER

Certifications can also play an important role in career advancement. Tulsa Welding School shared that while certifications are not always required, they are highly valuable and often expected by employers. Industry-recognized credentials, including certifications from the American Welding Society, can help graduates stand out and qualify for higher-paying opportunities and specialized positions.

Many employers also conduct their own weld tests as part of the hiring process to evaluate a candidate's technical skills.

CAREER PATHS ACROSS MULTIPLE INDUSTRIES

One reason welding continues to attract students is the wide variety of industries and career paths available. Tulsa Welding School explained that graduates may pursue roles such as structural welder, pipe welder, fabrication welder, or maintenance technician. Welders are needed in industries including construction, manufacturing, energy, aerospace, transportation, and infrastructure.

Because welding skills can apply across so many industries, students often have flexibility when deciding where they want to work and what type of projects they want to pursue. Some welders may prefer large-scale construction projects, while others may enjoy the precision and technical nature of manufacturing or aerospace work. The versatility of welding creates opportunities for individuals with different interests and long-term career goals.

STRONG DEMAND AND LONG-TERM STABILITY

The demand for skilled welders also remains strong across the United States. Tulsa Welding School emphasized that infrastructure projects, manufacturing needs, and an aging workforce are all contributing to the growing need for trained welding professionals. As experienced welders retire, employers are searching for the next generation of skilled workers to step into those roles.

This demand has helped position welding as a stable career option for students looking for long-term opportunities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 2024 median pay for welders, cutters, solderers, and brazers was approximately \$51,000 per year, or \$24.52 per hour.¹

Welding JOB OUTLOOK



2024 MEDIAN PAY

\$51,000 per year

\$24.52 per hour



JOB OUTLOOK, 2024-34

2%



ANNUAL OPENINGS

45,600



TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

High school diploma or equivalent and technical training

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Occupational Outlook Handbook

Tulsa Welding School also noted that entry-level welders typically begin below the median wage, but there is strong potential to increase earnings through experience, certifications, and specialization.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND ADVANCEMENT

Career advancement opportunities are another important aspect of the profession. Tulsa Welding School explained that welders can specialize in areas such as pipe welding, structural welding, or inspection. With experience, many move into



leadership positions, including welding inspector, supervisor, foreman, or even business ownership.

Additional certifications and technical expertise can help accelerate career growth and open the door to more advanced roles.

WHY STUDENTS ARE CHOOSING WELDING CAREERS

For students exploring alternatives to a traditional four-year degree, welding can provide a pathway into a career that combines hands-on work, earning potential, and long-term stability. Tulsa Welding School encourages students considering the field to take the first step by pursuing training, staying consistent, and remaining open to learning new skills throughout their careers.

Welding is more than just a job focused on metal and machinery. It is a career built on skill, craftsmanship, and the ability to create something lasting. For students who enjoy active work environments and want to enter a field where their work has a visible impact, welding offers opportunities to build both structures and a future.

RESOURCE: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/production/welders-cutters-solderers-and-brazers.htm>

CAREER PATHS IN WELDING



- Structural Welder
- Pipe Welder
- Fabricator
- Welding Inspector
- Maintenance Welder
- Underwater Welder
- Robotic Welding Technician
- Welding Engineer

ABOUT TULSA WELDING SCHOOL

Tulsa Welding School (TWS) was founded in 1949 in Tulsa, Oklahoma by two welders to meet the demand for skilled tradespeople in the welding industry. Since then, TWS has become a multi-campus institution that trains students in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for entry-level positions in the skilled trades.

Learn more about Tulsa Welding School at <https://www.tws.edu/>.



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Julia Estrada

Following Her Grandfather's Legacy Through Welding and Hard Work

From a small Texas town to a career in welding, Julia Estrada's journey is a testament to resilience, hard work, and honoring her grandfather's legacy.



For Julia Estrada, welding is more than a career. It is a connection to family, hard work, and the values she grew up admiring most.

Originally from Perryton, TX, a small town north of Amarillo, Julia grew up surrounded by people who believed in working with their hands and taking pride in honest labor. Her grandfather, a farmer, played a particularly important role in shaping her outlook on life.

"My grandpa did just about everything," Julia shared. "My grandpa and my dad are the same person. Grandpa really pushed my dad to go out there and work with his hands. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to work as hard as him."

That mindset stayed with Julia throughout high school, where she balanced sports like basketball while discovering a passion for welding during her freshman year welding classes.

"High school welding was pretty fun," she said. "I really got into it my freshman year."

Her future path became clearer after attending a college fair at her high school, where she first learned about [Tulsa Welding School](#).

"I'd heard good stuff about y'all," Julia recalled. "I was like, all right, kind of cool. Let's try this out and see how it goes."

She signed up for the Professional Welder program on the spot.

Shortly after graduating high school, Julia packed up and moved from Texas to Tulsa to attend Tulsa Welding School, arriving just days before her 19th birthday. Living away from home for the first time was a major adjustment, but it quickly became one of the most memorable experiences of her life.

"The school stuck three random girls and me all in an apartment," she laughed. "Probably the best nine months that I had there. We had so much fun."

While Julia found friendship, independence, and a sense of community at Tulsa Welding School,

her time there was also marked by profound personal loss.

During her first Halloween away from home, Julia received a phone call from her mother while at school. Her grandfather had passed away.

"I just didn't know what to do," Julia said. "I go back to my booth, and I'm trying not to make it noticeable that I'm upset, and I just start crying."

As she gathered her things to leave, classmates stepped in to help pack up her booth and support her. Then her instructor, Garrett Ellis, noticed something was wrong.

"He said, 'Go do what you've got to do. Take as much time as you want. I'll be here whenever you come back.'"

That moment left a lasting impact on Julia. The support she received from both her classmates and instructors at Tulsa Welding School helped her feel seen, supported, and able to properly grieve.

"It meant so much," she said. "Honestly, I felt like I could breathe and be able to mourn properly."

Looking back, Julia says the support system around her made all the difference.

"I'm glad that I pushed through it," she shared. "I'm very, very grateful that I had the amazing support team that I had because if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here."

After graduating from Tulsa Welding School in February 2024, Julia quickly transitioned into the workforce. Just one week after graduation, she was hired by Cust O Fab, where she now works on large-scale fabrication and refinery repair projects.

Her work includes pressure vessels, towers, and heat exchangers, all projects that require precision and skill. Among the many areas of welding she has explored, tube welding quickly became one of her favorites.

"I really love tube welding because I can just sit there and be in my own little world," Julia said. "It's



very relaxing. I love it here.”

The career has also brought financial independence and a sense of accomplishment that Julia worked hard to achieve. While attending Tulsa Welding School, she worked as a lifeguard, making \$12 an hour. Seeing her first welding paycheck felt like proof that her sacrifices and hard work were paying off.

“Seeing my first big girl paycheck was amazing,” she said. “I felt really accomplished, like I did that.”

Today, Julia sees her career as part of something larger than herself. Welding has allowed her to carry forward the lessons and work ethic passed down from her grandfather while building a future she is proud of.

“I feel very proud that I get to carry on the tradition and carry on my grandpa’s legacy,” she said.

One day, she hopes to pass those same skills on to her future children.

“My kids are going to learn how to weld,” Julia said with a smile.

Julia Estrada’s story is one of resilience, independence, and determination. Through personal loss, major life transitions, and the challenge of stepping out on her own, she built a future grounded in hard work and purpose. With the support of Tulsa Welding School and the inspiration of her family, she transformed her passion into a career that continues to shape her future every day.

JULIA'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

The right support system can help you overcome even the most difficult challenges and keep moving forward.



What Kept Her Going

The example set by her grandfather and the encouragement she received from family, classmates, and instructors.



Advice for Future Students

“I’m glad that I pushed through it,” she shared. “I’m very, very grateful that I had the amazing support team that I had because if it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be here.”



Jonathan Christian

From Loss and Uncertainty to SpaceX: One Graduate's Journey Through the Skilled Trades



Jonathan Christian's journey is a testament to perseverance, self-belief, and finding purpose through the skilled trades.

For Jonathan Christian, enrolling at [Tulsa Welding School](#) in Houston, TX, was more than a career decision. It was the turning point that helped him rebuild his confidence, rediscover purpose, and create a future he once struggled to imagine.

Today, Jonathan works in the aerospace industry at SpaceX, helping build massive machines designed to launch into space. But only a few years earlier, his life looked very different.

Growing up, Jonathan was active and competitive. In high school, he participated in football, rugby, track, and wrestling, always pushing himself and staying involved. But everything changed when his mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

After losing his mother, Jonathan struggled deeply with grief and isolation. For several years after high school, he withdrew from the world around him and found himself stuck emotionally and mentally.

"I just kind of fell into a rut and sheltered myself in my home," he said. "I was scared to just walk out of my house."

During that difficult period, Jonathan felt as though he was losing valuable time and falling behind in life. Then one day, everything shifted when he saw a commercial for Tulsa Welding School.

Curious, he decided to call the school and schedule a tour.

The moment he stepped onto the shop floor, something clicked.

"This is it," Jonathan remembered thinking. "This is where I'm supposed to be."

At Tulsa Welding School, Jonathan discovered far more than technical training. He found

instructors who believed in him and pushed him to recognize his own potential.

"The instructors weren't just there to teach me welding," he explained. "They were there to show me how to be the person they saw in me and that I saw in myself."

Jonathan quickly immersed himself in the program, drawn to the fast-paced hands-on learning environment and the opportunity to develop skills that challenged him both mentally and physically. In only seven months, he had transformed not only his technical abilities, but also his confidence and sense of self.

"I genuinely couldn't believe what I had accomplished in just seven months," he said. "Not only had I learned a new skill, but I had also become a person I was proud to be."

Originally, Jonathan expected to pursue a career in pipe welding after graduation. But before long, an unexpected opportunity changed the course of his future.

One day, Tulsa Welding School contacted him with exciting news. SpaceX was looking to test select welding students for potential employment opportunities.

For Jonathan, it felt almost impossible to believe.

"That's just something I never thought possible," he said.

Determined to give himself every possible advantage, Jonathan immediately returned to the welding lab to practice. He spent countless hours preparing for the weld test, refining his technique and pushing himself to improve.

"I was doing everything and anything that I could to try and get a leg up on everybody else to



land that job at SpaceX," he said.

His hard work paid off.

Today, Jonathan describes working at SpaceX as "mind blowing" and unlike anything he ever imagined possible.

"It really does just feel like the future," he said.

One of the proudest moments of his career came just months after starting the job, when a launch involving work he helped build was scheduled to go into space. Jonathan rushed home after work and called his family, asking them to watch the livestream together.

"I wanted them to see my hard work go up and out into space," he shared. "It was a surreal moment for me."

Family remains at the center of Jonathan's life and motivation. Whether spending time with his brother, playing games, golfing, or simply being together, he says those relationships helped him through some of the darkest moments in his life.

"I think my family seeing the drastic change in my life happen so quickly and only for the better really made them proud," he said.

Looking back, Jonathan hopes his story encourages others who may feel stuck or uncertain about their future.

"The best advice I can give to anybody is just go for it," he said. "There's nothing you can't accomplish if you believe in yourself. And having a community of people that believe in you makes it all the easier."

For Jonathan, the support system he found at Tulsa Welding School helped him move beyond grief and toward a future filled with purpose and possibility.

Today, as he helps build technology designed to leave Earth's atmosphere, Jonathan still reflects on how far he has come.

"Working in the aerospace industry and helping things fly and build these enormous machines is quite literally out of this world," he said.

JONATHAN'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

Believing in yourself can change the direction of your life, especially when others believe in you too.



What Kept Him Going

His family, supportive instructors, and a renewed sense of purpose.



Advice for Future Students

"The best advice I can give to anybody is just go for it. There's nothing you can't accomplish if you believe in yourself."



HVAC CAREERS OFFER STABILITY, DEMAND, AND GROWTH

HVAC technicians keep homes, businesses, and critical facilities comfortable and running year-round.

When heating stops during winter or air conditioning fails in the middle of summer, HVAC technicians are the professionals people rely on to solve the problem. Their work helps keep homes, schools, hospitals, businesses, and industrial facilities comfortable and operating properly year-round. For students interested in a hands-on career that combines mechanical knowledge, troubleshooting, and customer service, HVAC offers a field with strong demand and opportunities for long-term growth.

A CAREER BUILT AROUND PROBLEM SOLVING

According to Eddie Barakat from [Dorsey College](#) in Wayne, MI, a typical day for an HVAC technician involves a mix of troubleshooting, maintenance, and installation work. Technicians may begin the day reviewing service calls before traveling to residential or commercial locations to diagnose issues with heating, cooling, or refrigeration systems.

The work itself can include checking electrical components, testing refrigerant levels, inspecting airflow, and ensuring systems are operating efficiently. Because every job site and customer issue can be different, technicians must think critically, adapt quickly, and apply both mechanical and electrical knowledge to solve problems in real-world situations.

For many students, one of the biggest appeals of the HVAC field is that no two days are exactly the same. The career combines active, hands-on work with technical thinking, creating an environment

where technicians constantly learn and apply new skills.



For many students, one of the biggest appeals of the HVAC field is that no two days are exactly the same. The career combines active, hands-on work with technical thinking, creating an environment where technicians constantly learn and apply new skills.

TRAINING FOR THE HVAC INDUSTRY

Training programs are designed to prepare students for the technical and practical demands of the field. Dorsey's HVAC program can be completed in approximately nine months. During training, students learn both the theory behind HVAC systems and the hands-on skills needed to work in the industry.

Students develop technical knowledge in areas such as electrical systems, refrigeration cycles, system diagnostics, installation procedures, and safety practices. In addition to technical instruction, programs also help students strengthen communication skills, professional habits, and problem-solving abilities that are important when

working with customers and employers.

The combination of classroom learning and practical application helps students prepare for the day-to-day realities of HVAC work while building confidence in their skills before entering the workforce.

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS MULTIPLE INDUSTRIES

One of the strengths of HVAC training is the wide variety of career opportunities available after graduation. HVAC graduates may work as service technicians, installers, maintenance technicians, or specialize in areas such as refrigeration or controls.

Industries hiring HVAC professionals include residential service companies, commercial facilities, hospitals, schools, manufacturing plants, property management companies, and unions. Because heating and cooling systems are essential across nearly every type of building and facility, the demand for trained technicians continues across multiple sectors of the economy.

This variety allows students to explore different work environments and specialties throughout their careers. Some technicians may prefer working directly with homeowners in residential settings, while others may enjoy working with larger commercial systems or in industrial environments.

STRONG DEMAND AND LONG-TERM STABILITY

The HVAC industry continues to experience strong demand for skilled workers. As HVAC systems become more advanced and energy efficient, employers need trained technicians who can install, maintain, and repair increasingly complex systems.

At the same time, many experienced HVAC technicians are retiring, creating additional opportunities for new professionals entering the field. According to Barakat, HVAC is considered a stable, recession-resistant career with strong long-term growth potential.

For students considering career options, this demand can translate into strong employment opportunities and long-term career stability. HVAC systems remain essential in homes, businesses, healthcare facilities, schools, and industrial operations, making the profession an important part of modern infrastructure.

EARNINGS POTENTIAL AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

HVAC careers also offer opportunities for earnings growth over time. Entry-level HVAC

HVAC JOB OUTLOOK



2024 MEDIAN PAY

\$59,810 per year

\$28.75 per hour



JOB OUTLOOK, 2024-34

8% (Much faster than average)



ANNUAL OPENINGS

40,100



TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

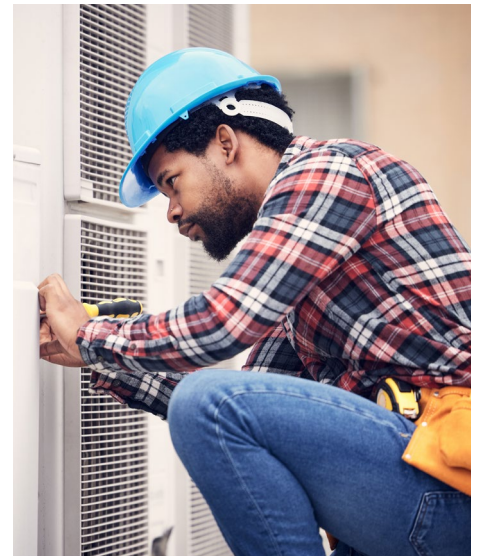
**Postsecondary
nondegree award**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Occupational Outlook Handbook

technicians may earn between \$37,000 and \$59,000 annually, depending on factors such as location and experience.

As technicians gain additional experience, certifications, and specialized skills, their earning potential can continue to increase. Some move into management or sales roles, while others pursue opportunities in business ownership. According to Barakat, the field rewards individuals who are motivated and committed to continuous improvement.

Advancement opportunities also exist for technicians who want to specialize in areas such as refrigeration or controls. Others may become supervisors, managers, or instructors who help train the next generation of HVAC professionals.



CERTIFICATIONS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Certifications play an important role in the HVAC industry. One of the most essential credentials is the EPA 608 certification, which allows technicians to legally handle refrigerants. Additional certifications, including NATE certifications and manufacturer-specific training, can help technicians expand their skills and improve employability.

Barakat emphasized that HVAC is an industry where learning never stops. As technology continues evolving, technicians must continue developing new skills and staying current with industry standards and equipment.

THE QUALITIES THAT HELP HVAC TECHNICIANS SUCCEED

According to Barakat, successful HVAC technicians are dependable, willing to learn, and comfortable working with their hands. Strong problem-solving abilities, attention to detail, and communication skills are also important in the field.

The best technicians take pride in their work and recognize the direct impact they have on customers' comfort and safety. HVAC work often involves helping people solve urgent problems, especially during extreme weather conditions when heating or cooling systems fail.

WHY STUDENTS ARE EXPLORING HVAC CAREERS

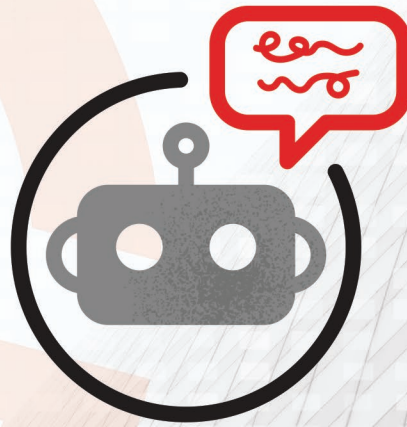
For students interested in a hands-on career with strong demand and opportunities for growth, HVAC offers a pathway into a profession that combines technical skill with practical problem-solving. The field allows technicians to work across a variety of industries while continuing to grow their expertise.

Barakat encourages students considering the field to stay committed to learning, ask questions, and not become discouraged by early challenges. He noted that while developing HVAC skills takes time, it can be rewarding to know you have solved a customer's problem and improved their day.

ABOUT DORSEY COLLEGE

Founded in 1934, Dorsey College has a long history of providing career-focused education to students across Michigan. Today, the college offers training in healthcare, nursing, emergency medical services, culinary arts, skilled trades, beauty, and other in-demand fields through its campuses and hybrid learning options. With tens of thousands of graduates, Dorsey College remains committed to helping students gain the skills and confidence needed to pursue rewarding careers and meet the workforce needs of local communities.

Learn more about Dorsey College at <https://www.dorsey.edu/>.



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ELECTRICIANS HELP POWER AMERICA'S GROWING INFRASTRUCTURE

Electricians keep homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure powered and running safely.



Every home, business, hospital, industrial facility, and growing network of data centers depends on electrical systems to operate safely and efficiently. Electricians are the professionals who install, maintain, and troubleshoot those systems, helping power everything from lighting and security systems to advanced technology, automation, and digital infrastructure. For students interested in a career that combines technical knowledge, hands-on work, and problem-solving, the electrical field offers a pathway into an essential and growing profession.

A CAREER THAT POWERS EVERYDAY LIFE

Electricians work on a wide variety of systems that keep modern life running. According to Shelby Obermann, Electrician Program Director and Instructor at [Midwest Technical Institute](#) in Springfield, MO, electricians may work on power distribution systems, lighting, energy management systems, security and fire protection systems, communication and data systems, and control and automation systems.

The work itself can vary significantly from day to day. Some electricians spend their time working on new construction projects, while others troubleshoot and repair issues in existing buildings. A typical day often includes a combination of planning, physical labor, and problem-solving as electricians move through different phases of a project.

Because of the variety of projects and environments, electricians rarely experience the same workday twice. For many students, that

variety is one of the most appealing aspects of the profession. The work is active, hands-on, and constantly evolving as new technologies and changing infrastructure needs emerge.

TRAINING THAT COMBINES CLASSROOM AND HANDS-ON LEARNING

Training for a career as an electrician can take several forms depending on the program and career path a student chooses. Obermann explained that apprenticeship programs can range from seven months to four or five years, depending on the level of training and hands-on experience involved.

Students entering electrical training programs learn a combination of technical knowledge and practical skills. Classroom instruction often includes electrical theory, circuitry, blueprint reading, wiring schematics and diagrams, electrical codes from the National Electrical Code®, safety standards from the National Fire Protection Association, conduit bending, and troubleshooting.

Hands-on learning plays an equally significant role in training. Students apply what they learn in the classroom through practical exercises and real-world scenarios that help prepare them for job site expectations. This combination of technical instruction and applied learning helps students build both confidence and experience before entering the workforce.

CAREER PATHS ACROSS MULTIPLE INDUSTRIES

One of the advantages of electrical training



is the flexibility it provides after graduation. Electrical knowledge can lead to opportunities across a wide range of industries and specialties. According to Obermann, graduates may pursue careers in industrial maintenance, residential wiring, commercial wiring, substation work, low voltage technology, renewable energy installation, manufacturing, and many other areas.

The demand for electricians continues to expand alongside advancements in technology and infrastructure. As industries modernize and new systems are introduced, employers continue searching for trained professionals who can install, maintain, and troubleshoot electrical systems.

This versatility allows students to explore different specialties throughout their careers. Some electricians may prefer residential projects that involve working directly with homeowners, while others may enjoy the complexity of industrial systems or the innovation involved in renewable energy technology.

STRONG DEMAND AND LONG-TERM OPPORTUNITY

The electrical field is also facing a growing need for skilled workers. Obermann noted that nearly 30 percent of electricians are nearing retirement age,

“Obermann noted that nearly 30 percent of electricians are nearing retirement age, creating significant workforce shortages across the industry.”

creating significant workforce shortages across the industry.

At the same time, the demand for electricians continues to increase. According to projections from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 81,000 new electrical openings are expected to develop each year between 2024 and 2034.

For students exploring stable career options, this demand can translate into strong long-term employment opportunities. As experienced electricians retire and industries continue expanding their electrical infrastructure, employers are actively looking for the next generation of trained professionals to enter the field.

UNDERSTANDING EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Electrical careers also offer opportunities for earnings growth over time. Obermann shared that entry-level apprentices may earn between \$17 and \$29 per hour, while licensed journeyman electricians can earn between \$28 and \$60 per hour, depending on location and specialization. Licensed master electricians may earn upwards of \$75 per hour.

As electricians gain experience and additional credentials, they may pursue higher-level licensure and more specialized roles. The electrical trade offers multiple licensure pathways, including General Journeyman, Limited Residential, and Master Electrician. In many cases, apprentices work under the supervision of licensed journeymen or master electricians while gaining the required experience hours needed for advancement.

These advancement opportunities allow electricians to continue growing professionally throughout their careers. Some may choose

Electrician JOB OUTLOOK



2024 MEDIAN PAY

\$62,350 per year

\$29.98 per hour



JOB OUTLOOK, 2024-34

9% (Much faster than average)



ANNUAL OPENINGS

81,000



TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

High school diploma or equivalent and technical training

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook

leadership positions, while others may specialize in technical areas or eventually start their own businesses.

THE QUALITIES THAT HELP ELECTRICIANS SUCCEED

According to Obermann, reliability and attitude are some of the most important qualities for success in the field. Showing up on time, being prepared, asking questions, and being willing to learn are all traits that can help apprentices stand out early in their careers.

She also emphasized the importance of initiative and openness to feedback. Electrical work requires both technical skill and continuous learning, especially as technology and industry standards evolve.

The job itself can also be physically and mentally demanding. Electricians spend much of the day on their feet, working with tools and sometimes operating in tight or uncomfortable spaces. At the same time, they must think critically, follow safety procedures carefully, and pay close attention to detail.

WHY STUDENTS ARE CHOOSING ELECTRICAL CAREERS

For students who enjoy working with their hands while solving problems and learning technical skills, the electrical field can provide a rewarding career path. The profession offers opportunities to work in many different industries, build specialized expertise, and continue advancing over time.

As demand for skilled electricians continues to grow, more students are exploring electrical training as a practical pathway into a stable and essential profession. Whether working on homes, commercial systems, industrial facilities, or emerging technologies, electricians help power the systems people rely on every day.

ABOUT MIDWEST TECHNICAL INSTITUTE

Midwest Technical Institute (MTI) is a trade school that offers hands-on training in a variety of skilled trades programs, including welding, HVAC/R, medical assisting, dental assisting, trucking, and cosmetology.

MTI's mission is to change lives by providing students a set of skills they can utilize to pursue a rewarding career path.

Learn more about Midwest Technical Institute at <https://www.midwesttech.edu/>.



Jacob King

From the Kitchen to the Trades: One Student's Journey to Becoming an Electrician

After more than a decade in the restaurant industry, Jacob King found a new sense of purpose by pursuing a career in the skilled trades.

After spending more than a decade working in restaurants, Jacob King reached a point many working adults eventually face: he could no longer picture himself staying in the same career for the next 20 years.

For years, Jacob worked as a chef, building a career in an industry he once loved. What started as a temporary job eventually became a 14-year career. But over time, the passion that once drove him began to fade, and after losing his position at the restaurant where he worked, he decided it was time for a change.

Instead of settling for another job that left him feeling unfulfilled, Jacob chose a different path. He enrolled in the Electrical program at [Midwest Technical Institute](#) in East Peoria, IL, with the goal of building a stable future doing work he genuinely enjoyed.

"When I first got into the restaurant industry, it was never something I planned to do long term," said Jacob. "By the end of that time, I had kind of lost my passion for cooking and couldn't see myself doing it for another 20 or 25 years until retirement."

As he began exploring new career options, Jacob found himself drawn toward the skilled trades. He had always enjoyed working with his hands and figuring out how things worked, interests that made electrical work feel like a natural fit.

"When I was younger, my brother had the opportunity to become a carpenter's apprentice, and I always wished I had an opportunity like that," Jacob said. "I wanted a career where I could use my hands and do something I would actually enjoy."

Originally, Jacob considered pursuing HVAC training, but everything changed when he learned that Midwest Technical Institute was launching its Electrical program. The opportunity immediately stood out.

"There weren't many schools around here offering electrical training," he said. "The union was really the only option I could think of before that, and it can be hard to get into. Once I found out MTI was starting the program, I knew that was the direction I wanted to go."

“There weren't many schools around here offering electrical training, he said. The union was really the only option I could think of before that, and it can be hard to get into. Once I found out MTI was starting the program, I knew that was the direction I wanted to go.”

Before enrolling, Jacob took the process seriously. He researched the field extensively by reading books, watching videos from electricians, and learning more about the realities of the profession. He wanted to make sure the work aligned with both his interests and long-term goals.

That preparation helped him succeed in what he describes as an intense but rewarding program. At Midwest Technical Institute, students move through an accelerated seven-month program that condenses roughly two years of information into a fast-paced learning environment.

"There's a lot to learn and take in on the fly," Jacob said. "You're learning a completely different subject every week."

The program combines classroom instruction with extensive hands-on training in the lab, where students put theory into practice. Through the program, Jacob has learned everything from reading electrical schematics and wiring systems to bending conduit and understanding three phase motor systems.

"When I first started, I had no idea what I was looking at when it came to schematics," he admitted. "Now I can trace a three-phase motor schematic and understand where every wire goes and why it's wired that way."

Balancing school with work and personal responsibilities has not been easy. Jacob attends school during the day and works nights and weekends to help support himself while completing the program.

"It's been a balancing act trying to keep everything going and not lose focus or motivation," he shared.

Despite the demanding schedule, Jacob has excelled academically and become one of the top students in the class, maintaining a 4.0 GPA while

naturally stepping into a leadership role among his classmates. Instructors at Midwest Technical Institute have noticed his willingness to help others succeed, whether by staying after class, assisting classmates with labs, or explaining difficult concepts in simpler terms.

"Everybody learns differently," Jacob said. "If I see someone trying and struggling, I'll go out of my way to help them understand it."

As graduation approaches, Jacob feels confident about the future. His long-term goal is to become a journeyman electrician and eventually gain experience across residential, commercial, and industrial electrical work. One day, he hopes those skills will help him achieve an even more personal dream: building a home for himself and his wife with his own hands.

For Jacob, attending Midwest Technical Institute was more than a career change. It was an opportunity to rediscover purpose, stability, and pride in his work.

His story is a reminder that it is never too late to pursue a new direction and build a future that feels meaningful.

Despite the demanding schedule, Jacob has excelled academically and become one of the top students in the class, maintaining a 4.0 GPA while naturally stepping into a leadership role among his classmates.

“Everybody learns differently, Jacob said. If I see someone trying and struggling, I'll go out of my way to help them understand it.”

JACOB'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

It's never too late to pursue a new direction and build a future that feels meaningful.



What Kept Him Going

A desire to build a better future and find a career he genuinely enjoyed.



Advice for Future Students

Do your research, stay committed to the process, and remember that the hard work you put in today will pay off in the future.



AUTOMOTIVE TECHNICIANS KEEP AMERICA MOVING

Modern vehicles rely on advanced technology, creating strong demand for skilled technicians who can keep them running safely and efficiently.

Modern vehicles rely on far more than engines and mechanical parts. Today's cars and trucks include advanced electronics, computer systems, diagnostics, and complex technology that require skilled professionals to maintain and repair them. For students who enjoy problem-solving, hands-on work, and learning how systems operate, automotive careers offer a pathway into a fast-moving and essential industry.

According to Jenna Arbeit, Director of Career Services at [Lincoln Tech](#) in East Windsor, CT, automotive training can prepare students for a variety of career opportunities in approximately one year.

For many students, that shorter timeline is part of the appeal. Rather than spending years in traditional lecture-based classrooms, automotive students develop practical skills that directly prepare them for the workforce.

For many students, that shorter timeline is part of the appeal. Rather than spending years in traditional lecture-based classrooms, automotive students develop practical skills that directly prepare them for the workforce.

LEARNING THROUGH HANDS-ON TRAINING

Automotive training focuses heavily on practical experience and technical problem-solving. Students learn how to test, diagnose, replace, repair, and adjust the mechanical, electronic, hydraulic, and accessory systems found in modern vehicles.

Because today's vehicles rely on advanced electrical and computerized systems, technicians must understand more than traditional mechanical repair. The work often requires troubleshooting complex issues, using diagnostic equipment, and adapting to constantly evolving technology.

For students who prefer active learning environments where they can work directly with tools, systems, and equipment, automotive programs offer a hands-on approach that mirrors real workplace conditions.

A WIDE VARIETY OF CAREER PATHS

One of the strengths of automotive education is the variety of career opportunities available after graduation. Graduates may pursue careers as automotive service technicians and mechanics, electronic equipment installers and repairers, lube technicians, outdoor power equipment mechanics, installation and repair workers, or parts sales professionals, said Arbeit.

Students may also work toward positions such as automotive technician, diagnostic technician, heavy line technician, quick service technician, service technician, parts advisor, shop mechanic, or small engine technician.

This flexibility allows students to explore different specialties and career directions as they



gain experience. Some technicians may enjoy diagnostics and advanced repair work, while others may prefer customer focused roles such as parts advising or service support.

EMPLOYERS ACROSS THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Automotive professionals are needed across many different types of workplaces. According to Arbeit, graduates may find opportunities with franchised dealerships, independent repair shops, national service chains, fleet maintenance companies, government and municipal fleets, tire and parts retailers, specialty shops, and collision repair facilities.

Because vehicles remain essential for transportation and daily life, employers continue searching for skilled technicians who can maintain and repair increasingly advanced systems.

The versatility of automotive skills also allows technicians to work in different environments throughout their careers, creating opportunities to continue growing and adapting as the industry changes.

STABILITY AND LONG-TERM CAREER GROWTH

One of the biggest advantages of the automotive field is long-term stability. Vehicles continue to play an essential role in communities, businesses, and transportation systems, creating ongoing demand for trained technicians.

Technicians who gain experience and pursue certifications often see increased opportunities for advancement and higher earning potential, noted Arbeit. Certifications from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence, commonly

Automotive Technicians JOB OUTLOOK



2024 MEDIAN PAY

\$49,670 per year

\$23.88 per hour



JOB OUTLOOK, 2024-34

4% (As fast as average)



ANNUAL OPENINGS

70,000



TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

**Postsecondary
nondegree award**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Occupational Outlook Handbook

known as ASE certifications, may help strengthen a candidate's appeal to employers.

As technicians build expertise, they may advance into positions such as shop foreman, lead technician, service manager, master technician, or diagnostic specialist. Others pursue field service positions, manufacturer roles, or eventually open their own repair businesses.

The field offers both technical and leadership growth opportunities, allowing students to shape careers that align with their strengths and interests over time.

THE QUALITIES THAT HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED

Students who thrive in automotive programs often share a natural curiosity about how vehicles work and a desire to figure out how to repair them.

The field is also well suited for students who prefer learning by doing rather than sitting in traditional classroom environments all day. Automotive careers reward individuals who enjoy solving problems, working with tools, and continuously building new technical skills.

Because automotive technology continues evolving, successful technicians are often those who remain adaptable and willing to continue learning throughout their careers.

A CAREER THAT KEEPS COMMUNITIES MOVING

Automotive careers involve much more than simply repairing vehicles. Technicians help families stay safe on the road, support businesses that rely on transportation, and keep communities functioning every day.

For students looking for a career that combines hands-on learning, technology, and long-term opportunity, automotive training offers a direct pathway into an industry where skilled professionals are in demand.

AUTOMOTIVE CAREER PATHWAYS



- Automotive Service Technician
- Diagnostic Specialist
- Electric Vehicle (EV) Technician
- Diesel Technician
- Performance & Customization Technician
- Service Advisor
- Parts Specialist
- Service Manager

ABOUT LINCOLN TECH

Since opening its first campus in Newark, NJ, in 1946 to provide career training for returning World War II veterans, Lincoln Tech has continued to evolve as a leader in postsecondary education. Today, with a network of 22 campuses across 12 states, Lincoln Tech offers diploma, degree, and certificate programs that emphasize hands-on learning and career readiness. Its faculty and staff are dedicated to helping students achieve personal and professional success by providing the skills, support, and resources needed to thrive in today's workforce.

Lincoln's approach to education is to provide hands-on training, focusing on career-specific technical skills – whether it's fixing cars, clinical medical procedures, troubleshooting the latest technology or learning new software. Lincoln accomplishes this through a quality, student-focused education that empowers each student to reach his or her highest potential. Inside our classrooms, set up to mimic real-world working environments, you'll get a sense of what your future career will look like, as instructors with relevant experience in the field share their knowledge with you.

Learn more about Lincoln Tech at <https://www.lincolntech.edu/>.

THE PHCP INDUSTRY'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SUPPORT OUR TRADESPEOPLE

By Nicole Meyer, Editor-In-Chief,
RUGGED Mind and Body magazine



For more than 35 years, one of the mission statements of [PHCProPros](#), our B2B multimedia company for the plumbing, heating, cooling and piping industry, was to “represent ourselves as an advocate for the trades.” And while we had always championed the trades through our digital and print publications — PHC News, Plumbing Engineer, and The Wholesaler magazines — we knew there was more we could do to create actionable change in our industry.

Thus, in 2024 we decided to launch RUGGED Mind and Body, an initiative aimed at promoting mental health and wellness for the trades. Leaning into what we do best, we felt the most effective way to achieve our goal was primarily through two pathways: 1) Create a new print and digital magazine dedicated to sharing resources, advice and inspirational stories of tradespeople, and 2) Foster meaningful connections with the PHCP community at tradeshow and in-person events around the country.

IDENTIFYING A NEED

So, why would a publishing company with a readership consisting of contractors and installers, engineers and specifiers, and wholesalers and distributors decide to add mental health and wellness to the mix?

“A few years ago, we had also launched an agency arm dedicated to connecting our print



RUGGED MIND AND BODY

**PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH
AND WELLNESS FOR THE TRADES**

and digital advertisers to social media influencers in the trades,” said PHCProPros Principal Cate Brown. “Through working with these influencers on a regular basis and developing more direct relationships with tradespeople out in the field, we realized many of them were experiencing the same issues — but they weren’t necessarily talking to one another about it.

“We just thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to broaden this conversation, break the stigma and help these individuals realize they weren’t alone in the challenges they were facing?’” continued

Brown.

Common themes that popped up in our conversations with tradespeople included experiencing stress from irregular schedules and lack of sleep; poor nutrition from eating out or from the lunch bus; wear-and-tear on the body due to the physical nature of their work; poor mental health from dealing with unruly customers; the financial woes of running a business; and personal relationships suffering due to an overall lack of work-life balance.

Our sense of urgency further increased after reading a 2024 article from NBC News¹. Citing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the organization reported that the construction industry had one of the highest suicide rates among all professions, with male construction workers 75% more likely to die by suicide than other men. Statistically, construction occupations continue to exhibit both the highest rate of suicide and the highest number of suicides across all occupational groups.²

A UNIQUE RESOURCE

Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to mental health and wellness, RUGGED Mind and Body decided we would start by focusing on providing practical insights for tradespeople.

Now with five quarterly publications under our belt, RUGGED's content has included general topics such as nutrition's role in mental health, how to tackle workplace bullying, and steps to identify and treat prostate cancer — in addition to more niche articles.

From how weight training changed one tradeswoman's day-to-day life on the job to the difference meal prepping has made on another plumber's daily work, as well as how an HVAC tech balances the high-pressure world of service calls with the restorative power of the great outdoors, RUGGED believes we're sharing unique stories that readers aren't necessarily going to find elsewhere.

Our cover story subjects delve even deeper into tradespeople's personal journeys:

- A-Team Plumbing Owner Antonio Delacerda helps fellow U.S. military veterans in his community and company through the power of conversation.
- HVAC Service Tech Ilija Martinovich battles cancer and personal strife by fostering connections with others.
- Miller Marriott Construction Co. puts their own spin on a charity home to support the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).
- Nate Agentis helps fellow tradespeople find health and wholeness after discovering the

hardest part of building a business was taking care of himself in the process.

- DLK Septic Services Owner Shaun Carlyon confronts his years-long battle with addiction to rebuild his life — and help others do the same — after surviving childhood trauma, business failures and the psychological toll of firefighting.

After surveying nearly 200 readers about this content in our magazines, the results were overwhelmingly positive:

- 84% of readers have gained at least one positive takeaway from RUGGED Mind and Body magazine.
- 88% of readers feel they are making more of an effort to improve their mental health since reading RUGGED Mind and Body magazine.
- 93% of readers feel RUGGED Mind and Body magazine is helping them improve their work-life balance.





RUGGED Mind and Body sponsored a \$2,500 scholarship at the October 2025 Bring Back the Trades Skills Expo.

"These numbers really reinforce that the combination of practical advice and shared personal experiences we're publishing are actually making an impact," Brown said.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY

In addition to our print and digital efforts, RUGGED Mind and Body has hosted three RUGGED Road Shows throughout the country. These free events aim to help tradespeople connect, unwind and learn. The majority have taken place at an interactive venue such as Topgolf, kicking off with a work-life balance seminar before a fun evening of food, drinks, golf and giveaways.

"Encouraging tradespeople to get out and get active is always top of mind when we host our Road Shows," said Brown. "Fostering community and hosting fun evenings where these individuals can gather, meet new friends and potentially take home a new piece of wisdom that will improve their lives is what this is all about for us."

One such attendee, Abel Villagomez, owner, NEXGEN Plumbing & Drain, left a Road Show feeling



A group from Notturmo Home Services enjoyed connecting and unwinding at RUGGED's Road Show at Topgolf Boston.

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

Through conversations with tradespeople and industry research, several common challenges rose to the surface:



Stress from irregular schedules and lack of sleep



Poor nutrition from eating out



Physical wear and tear from the demands of the job



Financial pressure and the challenges of running a business



Personal relationships suffering from a lack of work-life balance



MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

The trades are built on strength, skill and resilience. But even the strongest among us need support.

RUGGED Mind and Body exists to break the stigma, start the conversations and provide the tools and resources our industry needs to thrive — in mind and body.

that RUGGED gave him a new perspective.

"Attending the RUGGED event was a powerful reminder of how important it is to invest time into developing myself — not just for business growth, but personal growth as well," said Villagomez. "I realized how much I've been focused on production without giving enough time to my own mind. Taking that step back and refocusing is what fuels better performance in both life and work."

So far, each RUGGED Road Show has drawn more attendees than the previous one, and we are excited to see how they continue to grow. RUGGED continues to hold conversations with the PHCP community at trade shows as well, most recently hosting a mental health and wellness panel at the March 2026 InstallerShow in New York City. We also sponsored a \$2,500 scholarship at the October 2025 Bring Back the Trades Skills Expo, helping to support tradespeople by lessening the financial burden and stress of pursuing a career in the skilled trades.

A CALL TO ACTION

RUGGED Mind and Body is not a nonprofit organization, nor is it a substitute for professional care. What we are is a platform — one that's leaning into its strengths in storytelling and community-building to make a meaningful difference. By doing what we do best, we hope to help move the conversation forward and support the people who

power our industry.

"At its core, RUGGED Mind and Body is meant to inspire action," said Brown. "We've seen firsthand how even small, intentional efforts can make a meaningful impact. We encourage other companies in the industry to consider how their own strengths can be leveraged to support the mental health and wellness of the trades."

"When we began this journey, we did not know where it would lead," continued Brown. "We just knew that with the tremendous reach we have in the PHCP industry, we had the responsibility to try to help tradespeople lead healthier, happier lives."

RUGGED Mind and Body would like to thank our sponsors, whose support is crucial to our mission. At the highest level of Vanguard Sponsorship are Cintas and Watts Water Technologies, along with Watts brands AERCO International and Bradley Corp. Guardian Sponsors include F.W. Webb Co., Legend Valve, Liberty Pumps, Matco-Norca and U.S. Boiler Co.

RESOURCES:

1. NBC News: Construction workers are dying by suicide at an alarming rate. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/economics/construction-workers-are-dying-suicide-alarming-rate-rcna156587>
2. Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention. <https://www.preventconstructionsuicide.com/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Meyer studied journalism and strategic communication at the University of Missouri and has since built a career full of diverse experiences in marketing and storytelling. She has worked in the PHCP industry since 2018 in several roles, currently acting as the digital strategy and business development manager for PHCPPros. Most recently, Meyer helped to launch the company's new mental health and wellness initiative for the trades, RUGGED Mind and Body, serving as the editor-in-chief of its quarterly print and digital publication. For more information, visit stayrugged.org.



Megan Swisher

Building the Future: How One Engineer Grew with Manufacturing's Evolution

While working full-time and homeschooling five children, Megan Swisher earned both an engineering degree and an MBA, building a career that continues to grow alongside the future of manufacturing.

In 2022, Megan Swisher earned her Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering Technology through [ECPI University's](#) online program, all while working full-time and homeschooling five children.

For many, that would be the finish line. For Megan, it was just the beginning.

After several years of advancing her engineering career, she returned to ECPI to earn her Master of Business Administration, completing the program in May 2024. Her momentum has only accelerated since.

THE CHANGING MANUFACTURING LANDSCAPE

For the past 17 and a half years, Megan has worked in the manufacturing sector with Hollister Incorporated, a company specializing in ostomy and wound care products. After completing her bachelor's degree in 2022, she stepped into an engineering role where she was close to the action. "I was on the floor, hands on the equipment, figuring out how to make it better," she said.

While getting her bachelor's degree, Megan saw her company and the manufacturing industry evolve. She noticed over the years how "everything is going more towards automation, and technology is our future."

One factor she says contributes to this change is the high cost of labor. Keeping production in the U.S. is very costly. Seeing the competitive market, Megan knew that she had to evolve with the industry. She wanted to understand the business side of projects and how it all tied together with her engineering work.

This curiosity led Megan to enroll in the MBA

program at ECPI as soon as she got her bachelor's degree.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Megan wasn't after a career change: she wanted to understand the bigger picture behind operations. She knew that she was working in a challenging space where she would have to stand out. "Something important I took away from my MBA is how to stay competitive and build a growing portfolio," she shared.

While getting her MBA, Megan was still working full-time as an engineer. That alone is impressive enough, but during her studies, Megan received a promotion at her work. It was clear that she was applying everything she learned in class to the workplace in real time.

While getting her MBA, Megan was still working full-time as an engineer. That alone is impressive enough, but during her studies, Megan received a promotion at her work. It was clear that she was applying everything she learned in class to the workplace in real time.

For Megan, earning her MBA provided a new perspective on her engineering work. This experience gave her the knowledge and confidence to step up and take on more responsibilities.



“ I’M HANDLING MORE CAPITAL PROJECTS NOW, SHE SAID. I WENT FROM HANDLING \$10,000 PROJECTS TO \$7 MILLION PROJECTS. ”

LEADERSHIP IN MOTION

Since graduating in May 2024, Megan has already received two more promotions.

Currently, she works as a senior project engineer, doing product commercialization. She describes her work as “expanding the company’s portfolio” and “taking machines to a whole different level.” This work has even taken her abroad. After upgrading two machines here in the U.S., Megan flew to Ireland for two weeks to assist with another upgrade there.

Her responsibilities have expanded a lot with her new background. “I’m handling more capital projects now,” she said. “I went from handling \$10,000 projects to \$7 million projects.”

Megan recently shared one of her latest successes. Her company was developing a new ostomy pouch, and she collaborated closely with

the core research and development team. When some hiccups came up before launching, the team decided to go back to the drawing board and redesign the product. It paid off, and the final product ended up being a big success.

AN EDUCATION THAT KEEPS PACE

With how quickly technology is changing, it’s important to keep up the pace. Megan believes that ECPI provides “an education for the now and sets up students for the future.” Her story is a perfect example of that commitment.

Megan exemplifies ECPI University’s commitment to putting knowledge into practice. Her continued growth and professional development reflect the university’s belief that learning extends far beyond graduation, as graduates build on their education and find new opportunities to advance in their careers and lives.

MEGAN’S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

To stay competitive in a changing industry, you must keep learning, adapting, and expanding your skills.



What Kept Her Going

A desire to grow professionally, understand the bigger picture, and evolve alongside advances in technology and manufacturing.



Advice for Future Students

Don’t stop learning after you reach your first goal. Every new skill and experience can open doors to opportunities you never imagined possible.

Dental Assisting Careers Offer Flexibility and Opportunity

Dental assisting is a rewarding healthcare career that combines patient care, technical skills, and teamwork.



Many students considering healthcare careers are looking for work that feels meaningful, stable, and hands-on without requiring years of schooling before entering the workforce. According to Anne Hoffman, Program Director of the Dental Department at [Central Penn College](#) in Enola, PA, dental assisting offers students an opportunity to work directly with patients while developing technical skills in a fast-paced healthcare environment.

Hoffman describes dental assistants as professionals who “run the show” inside a dental office. While many prospective students initially believe dental assistants simply sit beside the dentist and hand over instruments, she explained that the role involves far more responsibility. Dental assistants help with infection control, prepare treatment rooms before and after appointments, sterilize instruments and equipment, take X-rays, help with scheduling, and support dentists throughout procedures.



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A CAREER FOCUSED ON PATIENT CARE

One of the most important qualities Hoffman emphasizes in dental assisting is empathy. Many patients arrive at the dental office feeling nervous or anxious, especially if they are in pain or facing restorative procedures. Dental assistants help patients feel more comfortable and supported throughout treatment.

Dental assisting also involves what is known in dentistry as “four-handed dentistry.” Dental assistants learn procedures thoroughly so they can anticipate what the dentist needs before being asked. Rather than waiting for instructions, assistants understand the next step in a procedure and prepare instruments or materials in advance to ensure treatment flows smoothly.

The role combines technical knowledge with communication and patient interaction, making it appealing to students who enjoy multitasking and working closely with people. Hoffman noted that organization, empathy, and the ability to stay on schedule during busy days are all important strengths for success in the field.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT ROLES IN DENTISTRY

According to Hoffman, one of the most common questions students ask is the difference between dental assistants and dental hygienists. Dental assistants work directly with dentists on the restorative side of dentistry, helping treat pain, restore teeth, and support procedures designed to return patients to proper function.

Dental hygienists, on the other hand, focus more on preventative care. They typically perform

cleanings, take X-rays, and educate patients about oral health during routine visits.

Hoffman explained that dental assistants also play an educational role by teaching patients how to care for restorations after procedures and how to prevent future problems.

TRAINING AND ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

At Central Penn College, students can complete a dental assisting certificate program in approximately nine months. The program includes 18 college credits and combines lecture instruction with extensive hands-on learning experiences.

Students in the program participate in classroom learning as well as practical lab work where they practice skills in a dental office style environment. Hoffman noted that many students especially enjoy the hands-on portions of the program because they are actively applying what they learn.

Students complete shadowing experiences in different dental specialties during their second term. Hoffman explained that students visit areas such as orthodontics, pediatric dentistry, oral surgery, and periodontal offices to better understand the wide variety of opportunities available within the dental field.

Some students discover career paths they had never previously considered. Hoffman shared the example of students who initially felt unsure about shadowing experiences but later appreciated being able to explore multiple specialties before deciding where they wanted to complete their externships.

The program also includes externship opportunities during students' third term. These experiences place students in real dental offices where they work with actual patients and gain practical experience before graduation.

Who Thrives in Dental Assisting



Strong communicators



Multitaskers



Team-oriented students



People who enjoy helping others



Hands-on learners

For students interested in advancing further, Central Penn College also offers an Expanded Functions Dental Assistant certificate program, commonly referred to in Pennsylvania as an EFTA program. After completing an additional six months of training, expanded functions dental assistants can perform more advanced restorative procedures, including filling teeth after the dentist has prepared them for treatment.

Hoffman noted that this additional training often leads to increased pay and greater responsibility within dental offices.

CERTIFICATIONS AND WORKFORCE DEMAND

Dental assistants who take X-rays must earn radiology certification through the Dental Assisting National Board. Hoffman explained that Central

ABOUT CENTRAL PENN COLLEGE

Central Penn College is a career-oriented, residential college located in suburban Summerdale, PA, just minutes from downtown Harrisburg, the state capital. Established in 1881, the college offers a range of programs including certificates, associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees, catering to both traditional and continuing education students. Education is delivered through hands-on learning by experienced and caring faculty.

The college emphasizes career-focused education, with programs taught by supportive faculty with real-world experience. The accelerated 11-week terms and year-round schedule enable students to complete a bachelor's degree in three years, an associate degree in 18 months, and certificates in as little as nine months. Students benefit from small class sizes and various course formats, including day, evening, in-person, online, and hybrid classes.

Learn more about Central Penn at <https://www.centralpenn.edu/>.

Penn College prepares students for this certification exam as well as infection control examinations during the program.

While certification requirements can vary, Hoffman emphasized that radiology certification is essential for dental assistants entering the field.

The demand for dental assistants continues to grow, particularly as workforce shortages impact dental offices across the country. Hoffman described the shortage as a growing crisis, especially in rural communities where patients are struggling to access care.

She explained that many patients now wait months for appointments, while emergency rooms increasingly see patients suffering from untreated dental pain because they cannot access dental care quickly enough.

Because dentists rely heavily on assistants, hygienists, and expanded functions dental assistants to help manage patient care, trained professionals are in high demand.

CAREER FLEXIBILITY AND LONG-TERM OPPORTUNITY

Hoffman also highlighted the flexibility that many dental careers offer. Many dental offices operate fewer than five days per week, and full-time schedules are often around 32 hours weekly. Compared to some healthcare careers, dental assisting may offer more predictable schedules with fewer nights, weekends, holidays, or on-call responsibilities.

The field also offers opportunities to continue advancing through additional education and specialization. Students may begin as dental assistants, return for expanded functions training, continue into dental hygiene, or explore roles in education, insurance, billing, dental laboratories, sales, or specialty practices.

Hoffman shared the story of a former student who previously worked in the nail industry and later transitioned into a dental laboratory role because her artistic background transferred well into creating crowns, dentures, and other dental restorations.

WHY STUDENTS ARE EXPLORING DENTAL ASSISTING CAREERS

For students who want to enter healthcare without spending years in school, dental assisting offers a shorter pathway into a career that combines patient care, technical skills, and long-term opportunities.

Hoffman believes many students are surprised

Dental Assistant JOB OUTLOOK



2024 MEDIAN PAY

\$47,300 per year

\$22.74 per hour



JOB OUTLOOK, 2024-34

6% (Faster than average)



ANNUAL OPENINGS

52,900



TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

**Postsecondary
nondegree award**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Occupational Outlook Handbook

by how rewarding the work can be, especially when helping patients overcome fear, relieve pain, and regain confidence in their smiles and overall health.

Hoffman also emphasized that oral health is closely connected to overall health, including conditions such as heart disease, stroke, and other systemic health issues. Dental professionals play an important role not only in improving smiles but also in supporting patients' overall well-being.

As workforce shortages continue to create opportunities throughout the dental industry, more students are discovering that dental assisting offers a rewarding, flexible, and stable healthcare career with room to grow.

PREPARING FOR A CAREER IN NURSING

A Guide for Students

By Michelle Whiteley (MSN, RN, IBCLC),
Eagle Gate College, Campus Dean,
Layton, UT



Choosing a career in nursing is more than selecting a profession; it's answering a calling to care for others in moments that matter most. For many students considering this path, one of the biggest questions is: *What does life as a nurse really look like, and how do I get there?*

From my perspective as a nurse, it's a journey filled with challenge, growth, and incredible reward, and it often begins with the right education and support system, like the one offered at Eagle Gate College.

WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE TO BE A NURSE

One of the first things I tell prospective students is that there's no such thing as a "typical" day in nursing and that's part of what makes it so meaningful. A shift might start with reviewing patient updates and checking vital signs, but it quickly becomes much more than a checklist. You're coordinating care, administering medications, educating patients, and supporting families through both routine and critical moments.

In one day, you might comfort a patient who is anxious about a diagnosis and, just hours later, celebrate a recovery milestone with another. Depending on your setting, whether it's a hospital, clinic, or specialty area like pediatrics or labor and delivery, the pace and focus can vary. But the heart of the work remains the same: being present, skilled, and compassionate when it matters most.

FINDING THE RIGHT PATH INTO NURSING

One of the strengths of nursing as a career is that there isn't just one path to get there. At [Eagle Gate College](#), students can choose from multiple

entry points depending on their goals and timeline.

Some begin with a Practical Nursing (PN) program, which can be completed in as little as 12–18 months and offers a fast entry into patient care. Others pursue an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN), typically taking about two years and leading to licensure as a registered nurse. For those looking to expand future opportunities, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) provides a more comprehensive education and can open doors to leadership and advanced roles.

Each pathway is designed to build strong clinical skills and confidence, helping students transition from the classroom into real healthcare environments.

A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITIES AFTER GRADUATION

Nursing is one of the few careers where your degree can take you in so many different directions. Graduates from Eagle Gate College step into roles in hospitals, outpatient clinics, long-term care facilities, and community health settings.

What I've always appreciated about nursing is the ability to grow and change over time. You might start with one specialty and later discover a passion for another. Whether it's critical care, mental health, pediatrics, or surgical nursing, there's space to find where you fit and to keep evolving.

STRONG DEMAND AND LASTING CAREER STABILITY

Healthcare is constantly evolving, but one thing remains consistent: the need for skilled nurses. With an aging population and increasing access

to care, the demand for nurses continues to rise nationwide.

For students, this means entering a profession with strong job security and a wide range of opportunities. Graduates aren't just finding jobs, they're building long-term, stable careers that make a difference in their communities.

EARNING POTENTIAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Nursing also offers a solid financial foundation. Many newly registered nurses begin with competitive starting salaries, and income tends to grow steadily with experience.

What's encouraging is how much opportunity there is to increase your earning potential. Specializing in areas like intensive care or operating room nursing, pursuing advanced degrees, or stepping into leadership roles can all lead to higher compensation over time.

BECOMING LICENSED AND CAREER-READY

To become a practicing nurse, graduates must pass a licensing exam, either the NCLEX-PN for practical nurses or the NCLEX-RN for registered nurses. These exams ensure that every nurse is prepared to provide safe, effective care.

At Eagle Gate College, preparation for these exams is built into the curriculum, helping students feel confident and ready to take that next step into their profession.

THE QUALITIES THAT MAKE A GREAT NURSE

While technical skills are essential, nursing is equally about who you are as a person. Compassion, patience, and strong communication skills are at the core of great nursing care.

Equally important is the ability to think critically

Registered Nurses JOB OUTLOOK



2024 MEDIAN PAY

\$93,600 per year

\$45.00 per hour



JOB OUTLOOK, 2024-34

5% (Faster than average)



ANNUAL OPENINGS

189,100



TYPICAL ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

Bachelor's degree

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Occupational Outlook Handbook

ABOUT EAGLE GATE COLLEGE

Eagle Gate College is dedicated to preparing students for rewarding careers in healthcare through hands-on, career-focused education. The program combines classroom instruction, simulation labs, and clinical training to help students develop the practical skills and real-world experience employers seek in today's healthcare workforce.

Working closely with healthcare professionals and industry partners, Eagle Gate College designs its curriculum to align with current workforce needs and evolving patient care standards. Students receive personalized support, guidance, and mentorship throughout their educational journey, helping them build the confidence, professionalism, and clinical competencies needed to enter the workforce prepared to make an immediate impact.

Learn more about Eagle Gate College at <https://www.eaglegatecollege.edu/>.

and adapt. Healthcare environments can change quickly, and being able to respond with confidence is key. What I often tell students is this: you don't have to have all the answers on day one, you just need the willingness to learn and the desire to truly care for others.

KNOWING YOUR "WHY"

One thing that becomes especially important both as a student and as a practicing nurse is knowing your "why." Nursing is incredibly rewarding, but it can also be physically and emotionally demanding. There will be long shifts, challenging patient situations, and moments where you feel stretched.



One thing that becomes especially important both as a student and as a practicing nurse is knowing your "why."

Nursing is incredibly rewarding, but it can also be physically and emotionally demanding. There will be long shifts, challenging patient situations, and moments where you feel stretched.

In those moments, your "why" grounds you. For some, it's a personal experience caring

for a loved one or being inspired by a nurse who made a difference. For others, it's a deep desire to help people, to bring comfort, or to be part of something bigger than themselves. I've found that when students stay connected to their purpose, it helps them push through difficult days and fully appreciate meaningful ones.

Your "why" doesn't have to be complicated, it just has to be real and meaningful to you.

GROWING BEYOND THE BEDSIDE

One of the most exciting aspects of nursing is how far it can take you. With experience and continued education, nurses can specialize, teach, lead teams, or move into advanced practice roles such as nurse practitioner.

At Eagle Gate College, the foundation you build doesn't limit you, it prepares you for a career that can grow alongside your interests and ambitions.

A FINAL WORD OF ADVICE

If you're considering nursing, take that first step with confidence. It's a career that will challenge you, but it will also give you purpose in a way few professions can.

There will be long days, but there will also be moments you'll never forget when a patient thanks you, when a family feels supported, or when you realize the impact, you've made.

Starting your journey at Eagle Gate College means you're not doing it alone. You're joining a community that is invested in your success from your first day in class to your first day as a nurse.

And in the end, that support combined with a clear sense of your "why" can make all the difference.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Whiteley is a seasoned nursing leader, educator, and advocate with more than 30 years of diverse clinical and academic experience spanning labor and delivery, newborn nursery, NICU, women's education, lactation consultation, community health, and quality and safety improvement. A graduate of Weber State University with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and a Master of Health Leadership from Western Governors University, she currently serves as Campus Dean at Eagle Gate College, where she leads program development, faculty mentorship, and student success initiatives.

Michelle's career has been shaped by a deep commitment to compassionate, high-quality care, further enriched by her years as a foster parent alongside her husband, raising six children and welcoming two grandchildren. Her passion for teaching is evident in both the classroom and community, where she has developed and delivered educational programs that empower individuals and families. Guided by the belief that true strength comes from within, Michelle continues to inspire future nurses through her dedication, leadership, and heart-centered approach to care.



Yes, We're Actually Reading Her Mind.

We translate behaviors into your institutional growth.
From non-linear paths to personalized engagement, we provide the real-time intelligence for an integrated enrollment and brand strategy that delivers.

**Motivated by
Mobility, Not
Tradition**

**Responds to
Personalization,
Ignores Jargon**

**Seeks
Real-World
Relevance**

**Operates on
a Non-Linear
Timeline**





Jermaine Redd

A Calling to Care Through Nursing

From a childhood experience to a career of compassion, Jermaine Redd's journey is a testament to faith, family, and the desire to make a difference.



For Jermaine Redd, nursing is more than a career. It is a calling shaped by family, faith, compassion, and a lifelong desire to help others during their most difficult moments.

Jermaine's path into healthcare began with a childhood experience that left a lasting impression on him. When he was young, his mother struggled with high blood pressure and one day unexpectedly passed out at home. After calling 911, Jermaine accompanied her to the hospital, frightened and unsure of what would happen next. But amid the chaos, one nurse stood out.

"As a kid, you're terrified, but to have someone make you comfortable, that's great," Jermaine recalled.

That experience stayed with him for years and planted the seed for what would eventually become his life's work.

Today, Jermaine works as a hospice nurse, caring for patients and supporting families during deeply emotional moments. His journey to this role began at [Dorsey College](#) in Madison Heights, MI, where he first trained to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). Determined to continue growing in the field, he later returned to Dorsey College to complete his Registered Nurse (RN) training. He is now continuing his education through an RN to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program at University of Michigan-Flint, which he expects to complete in May 2026.

Nursing has become something of a family profession. Jermaine's wife attended nursing school alongside him as they both pursued their RN credentials, while his older sister and mother-in-law are also nurses. Throughout his journey, family support remained one of the biggest factors in his success.

Before becoming a nurse, Jermaine had already spent years working in healthcare as a Patient Care Technician at St. John's Macomb Hospital. That hands-on experience gave him early exposure to

patient care and strengthened his desire to move further into the profession.

When he enrolled at Dorsey College, he quickly discovered that the instructors and clinical training would have a lasting impact on his confidence and professional growth.

"The instructors instilled confidence in me and took great time with me during clinical training," Jermaine shared.

One instructor in particular left a strong impression during his Intensive Care Unit (ICU) clinical rotations. Knowing Jermaine enjoyed football, the instructor used sports references and relatable examples to explain difficult concepts in ways that clicked for him.

The transition from LPN training to RN training was not always easy. Jermaine explained that the responsibilities and mindset between the two roles are very different.

"As an RN, you're delegating more versus doing some of the direct care yourself as an LPN," he said.

Still, his education at Dorsey College prepared him well for the realities of the profession. He felt confident stepping into the workforce after graduation, even while adapting to new environments and increased responsibilities.

Over time, Jermaine discovered a passion for

Over time, Jermaine discovered a passion for fast paced hospital environments, particularly the ICU and Emergency Department. But eventually, his career led him toward hospice care, where he found another side of nursing that deeply resonated with him.

fast paced hospital environments, particularly the ICU and Emergency Department. But eventually, his career led him toward hospice care, where he found another side of nursing that deeply resonated with him.

Today, his workday begins with a morning huddle and prayer before he visits patients throughout the day. As a hospice nurse, Jermaine focuses not only on patient care, but also on supporting families, addressing concerns, and ensuring patients remain comfortable and cared for.

As a hospice nurse, Jermaine focuses not only on patient care, but also on supporting families, addressing concerns, and ensuring patients remain comfortable and cared for.

"I want to spend time with each patient and not be rushed," he explained.

That compassion is one of the things he values most about nursing.

Like many adult learners, Jermaine also faced significant personal challenges while pursuing his education. During nursing school, his daughter suffered a torn ACL and meniscus, creating emotional and logistical stress for the family while both he and his wife were balancing school demands. At the same time, Jermaine developed high blood pressure himself after neglecting his own health during the intensity of the program.

Looking back, he now encourages students to take care of themselves and ask for help when needed.

"When your body shows you and tells you to slow down, listen," he said. "It's okay to ask for help from family and teachers."

Despite the challenges, Jermaine says nursing has transformed his life. Becoming an RN brought greater career satisfaction, improved financial stability, and a better work life balance for his family. After working night shifts for nearly a decade, he now treasures being able to take his children to school and share dinner with them at night.

He also credits his employer's tuition reimbursement program for helping him continue advancing his education and career goals.

Looking ahead, Jermaine hopes to eventually become a Nurse Practitioner and continue growing within the profession he believes he was meant to pursue.

When asked what advice he would give someone considering nursing, his answer reflected the perspective he has gained throughout his journey.

"If you can find comfort in something you love, it makes it easier," he said. "Just realize what you may have to sacrifice, set a goal, and pace yourself."

As for the advice he would give his younger self?

"Go after what you want. Don't be scared to fail."

Jermaine Redd's story is one of perseverance, faith, and service. Through every challenge, every late night, and every milestone, he has continued moving forward with the support of his family and a passion for caring for others. For him, nursing is not simply a profession. As he puts it, "It was what I was born to do."

JERMAINE'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

"When your body shows you and tells you to slow down, listen. It's okay to ask for help from family and teachers."



What Kept Him Going

The support of his family and faith. They were his foundation through every challenge.



Advice for Future Students

"If you can find comfort in something you love, it makes it easier. Set a goal, pace yourself, and never give up."

CERTIFICATIONS THAT COUNT: WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW BEFORE ENTERING ALLIED HEALTH

Short-term certification programs are an opportunity for beginning a healthcare career that more learners should consider.

Americans are increasingly considering alternatives to a traditional four-year college degree, which makes sense given that some of the most stable, in-demand careers in today's economy don't require one. This includes a wide variety of careers in healthcare. Allied health is a broad category of healthcare roles that includes medical assistants, pharmacy technicians, phlebotomists, patient care technicians, and more, many of whom require a two-year degree or even shorter-term training program. These careers offer faster entry into the workforce, strong earning potential, and — important in today's age — resilience to automation.

THERE ARE MORE PATHS TO HEALTHCARE THAN YOU THINK

If you're considering a career in healthcare, you may only be thinking about becoming a physician or nurse. But when it comes to healthcare careers, allied health professionals are another important option and are a substantial, essential part of the workforce.¹ On the front lines of patient care, these professionals are responsible for taking vital signs, drawing blood, assisting with procedures, supporting the broader care team, and ensuring that healthcare systems run efficiently. Not only are

these jobs in demand as our population continues to age and requires more care, but many of these roles are considered "AI-resistant" because they rely on human interaction, empathy, and hands-on care.² These are skills that technology cannot easily replicate nor replace. As artificial intelligence continues to reshape industries and eliminate jobs, allied health stands out as a rare category where demand is expected to grow, not shrink.

But not all pathways into these careers are created equal. And while an associate or bachelor's degree is not always required, a certification can help those interested stand out in a competitive job market, gain the skills they need, and begin the career they want.

WHAT IS AN ALLIED HEALTH CERTIFICATION – AND DO YOU NEED ONE?

Unlike degrees or licenses, certifications are typically shorter, targeted credentials that signal job readiness in a specific field. They are designed in partnership with employers and industry leaders to reflect real-world skills, not just classroom knowledge. It is important to note that in some allied health professions, certifications are required. Pharmacy technicians, for example, face some of the most stringent standards, with roughly

WHY CERTIFICATIONS MATTER

85%

of employers say they prefer to interview and hire candidates with nationally recognized certifications.

86%

of employers report that certificates signal real job readiness – evidence that a candidate can do the job from day one.

71%

of employers have increased pay for employees who earn a credential.

38 states requiring certification.³ And even when certification is not mandated, the labor market speaks clearly: 98% of employers either require or strongly encourage certification for pharmacy technicians.⁴

WHY GETTING CERTIFIED MATTERS (EVEN IF IT'S NOT REQUIRED)

Across allied health fields, certification has become a powerful differentiator. According to the National Healthcareer Association's (NHA) 2025 Industry Outlook, 85% of employers say they prefer to interview and hire candidates with nationally recognized certifications. More broadly, 86% of employers report that certificates signal real job readiness – evidence that a candidate can do the job from day one.⁵ In a hiring environment where employers are inundated with applicants but struggle to assess practical skills, certifications provide a trusted, standardized signal that you are job-ready.

That preference translates directly into economic opportunity. NHA's 2025 Industry Outlook also found that 71% of employers have increased pay for employees who earn a credential, highlighting the tangible benefits of certification for career advancement and financial growth.⁶ For workers without a bachelor's degree, the payoff is even clearer: earning a first relevant certification is associated with a 7.06% wage premium, with each additional certification adding another 3.49%. For early-career workers, the pattern holds, with a 5.22% pay boost for the first certification, according to a 2023 Coursera survey.⁷ At a time when many young people are weighing the cost of education against uncertain returns, these measurable gains matter.

Equally important, certifications reduce friction in the hiring process. Employers increasingly need workers who can step into roles with minimal additional training. In fast-paced healthcare settings, this readiness is not just preferred; it is essential to ensure safe and high-quality patient care. Certified candidates often move more quickly from applying for jobs to securing employment, shortening the time it takes to launch a career and begin earning.⁸

FROM ALLIED HEALTH TO NURSING – AND BEYOND

Beyond immediate job prospects, certifications can also create opportunities for advancement. Allied health roles are often steppingstones to other positions, including nursing and specialized clinical roles. Nationally, more than 70% of registered nurses report having held a health-related job

before earning their RN degree, with nursing aides and assistants topping the list.⁹

Furthermore, “earn and learn” models such as apprenticeships and internal employee development programs allow individuals to build experience, income, and confidence over time. Rather than incurring significant costs and committing to years of education, students can gain experience while simultaneously testing their interests and continue advancing as they gain clarity about their long-term goals. This flexibility is especially valuable for adult learners and career changers.

If you aspire to become a nurse, physician, or other advanced healthcare clinician, allied health experience is a powerful tool to jump-start your career.

How to Choose the Right Program

Still, students should choose their certification programs carefully, as not all certifications offer the same level of quality or recognition. The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) is a leading accrediting body for national

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE CHOOSING A PROGRAM



Is the program accredited?



Does it prepare me for national certification?



How long will it take to complete?



What is the total cost? Are there financial aid options?



What kind of career support does the program provide?

certification and licensure examinations, ensuring that certification programs are validated and reliably indicate entry-level knowledge and skills.¹⁰ In addition to accreditation, access to nationally-recognized certification exams should be a top consideration.

Before enrolling in a program, prospective students should ask some simple, yet critical questions to ensure they're selecting the right certification:

- Is this program accredited?
- Is the certification exam developed using industry best practices and proven to accurately measure real job skills?
- Does this program advocate for the industry and people working in the profession?
- Does this program make certification accessible to different types of learners?
- Will this program prepare me with a credential that employers truly value?
- Can this certification lead to other credentials or advanced roles?
- Does the program offer exam preparation and support?

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR STUDENTS

A career in allied health offers a faster, more affordable route into a growing field, with clear returns in both hiring and earnings. Just as importantly, it provides a foundation for lifelong learning and career mobility in one of the nation's most essential industries. These careers may also offer stability in an AI-driven economy. Even entry-level allied health positions are safe from automation because they require hands-on skills to provide safe, empathetic patient care. An allied health care certification can help boost your short- and long-term career in healthcare.



Even entry-level allied health positions are safe from automation because they require hands-on skills to provide safe, empathetic patient care. An allied health care certification can help boost your short- and long-term career in healthcare.

For students weighing their next step, the message is simple: healthcare offers more paths than you may even be aware of, and an allied health certification can be a great gateway to a rewarding, in-demand career.

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL HEALTHCAREER ASSOCIATION

NHA is building the next generation of allied health professionals. Since 1989, we have helped over 1.25 million people access a better future in healthcare. From innovative learning solutions to certification and career development, we partner with individuals, educators, and employers to elevate the learning experience, ensure practice, and career readiness and drive positive outcomes for the industry, allied health professionals, and ultimately patients. For more information, visit www.nhanow.com.



Allie Martin

From Young Mother and First-Generation Student to CMA Supporting Young Mothers

From balancing motherhood, work, and school to building a healthcare career, Allie Martin's journey is a testament to perseverance and creating a better future for her family.

As a young mother and first-generation college student, Allie Martin understood early that there would be no clear roadmap for her future. Every step forward would require determination, sacrifice, and faith in herself. While balancing work, parenting, and school, she pursued a career in healthcare with one goal: creating a better life for her children while helping others along the way.

Today, Allie is a Certified Medical Assistant at a clinic that serves young mothers, a role that feels deeply personal and full circle. Her journey is proof that even in the most challenging circumstances, persistence and purpose can open doors to opportunity.

For Allie, the decision to enter the medical field came from a desire to make a meaningful difference in people's lives while building a stable career for her family. Before enrolling at [Delta Technical College](#), in Ridgeland, MS, she worked in jobs outside healthcare and was searching for a career path that offered both growth and purpose.

"My motivation to pursue medical assisting came from wanting to make a tangible difference in people's lives while also building a stable future for myself and my children," Allie shared.

The Medical Assisting program offered exactly what she needed. The hands-on training, shorter program length, and direct pathway into the workforce made it possible for her to continue supporting her family while preparing for a long-term career. She was drawn to the variety within the profession, from clinical care to administrative responsibilities, and saw it as an opportunity to build practical skills that would always be in demand.

But balancing school, parenting, and work was far from easy.

While attending school, Allie worked both at Amazon and as an intern at the clinic where she is now employed full-time. Long days often stretched into late nights as she managed coursework, parenting responsibilities, and employment all at once.

"The hardest part was time management and being pulled in different directions," she explained. "There were days when I was exhausted, but I reminded myself why I started."

She credits organization, routine, and support from her fiancé for helping her stay focused. Most importantly, she learned to give herself grace and understand that success did not require perfection, only consistency.

Throughout the program, Allie found encouragement not only from her family, but also from her instructors. She described the faculty as understanding, supportive, and committed to helping students succeed, especially those

“The instructors are motivating. They push you and help you any way they can, she said. They would text me and tell me to keep going if I needed anything. That support became part of my motivation.”

balancing responsibilities outside the classroom.

"The instructors are motivating. They push you and help you any way they can," she said. "They would text me and tell me to keep going if I needed anything. That support became part of my motivation."

That support helped carry her through the challenges and toward extraordinary success. By the time she completed the program in December 2025, Allie had earned a 4.0 GPA, been inducted into the National Technical Honor Society, received Perfect Attendance recognition, was a student ambassador, and earned High Honors graduate accolades.

The transition from student to healthcare professional was both exciting and overwhelming at first, but Allie quickly realized how prepared she was for the role. Her training gave her confidence in patient care, clinical procedures, and the day-to-day operations of a healthcare environment.

Now working in a clinic that specializes in caring for young mothers, Allie feels a unique connection to the patients she serves.

"Working with young mothers is especially meaningful because I can relate to many of their experiences," she said. "It allows me to connect with patients on a deeper level and provide care with understanding and empathy."

The experience has transformed her life in ways she once thought were out of reach. She now has financial stability, a career she is passionate about, and the confidence that comes with achieving a major personal goal.

Most importantly, she knows her children are watching.

"It showed me that I am capable of achieving goals I once thought were out of reach," Allie said. "I'm setting an example for my children and showing



them the value of education and perseverance."

Although she has already accomplished so much, Allie has not finished chasing her dreams. She hopes to continue her education and eventually become a traveling nurse, a path that would allow her to expand her knowledge, experience new environments, and continue growing within healthcare.

For students who may be uncertain about balancing school, work, and family responsibilities, Allie offers simple but powerful advice: take it one step at a time.

"It's definitely challenging, but it's possible," she said. "Remember why you started and keep that motivation in front of you. The short-term sacrifices are worth the long-term benefits."

Allie Martin's story is not just about earning a credential. It is about resilience, sacrifice, and the courage to create a future that once felt impossible. As a young mother, a first-generation student, and now a healthcare professional serving other young mothers, she is proving every day that determination can change the course of a life.

ALLIE'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

Success doesn't require perfection, only consistency, faith in yourself, and remembering why you started.



What Kept Her Going

Her children, support from her fiancé, encouraging instructors, and the desire to build a better future for her family.



Advice for Future Students

"It's definitely challenging, but it's possible. Remember why you started and keep that motivation in front of you."

WHY “SOFT SKILLS” DRIVE HARD OUTCOMES IN HEALTHCARE

Technical training is the foundation of any health sciences education. Students learn procedures, master clinical protocols, and meet the certification requirements that allow them to enter a profession. These are non-negotiable, and for good reasons.

But they don't tell the whole story of who succeeds and why.

In healthcare settings, few professionals operate alone. The work involves constant interaction with both care teams and patients. To function in such an environment is a skill in itself, albeit one often overlooked.

An early study¹ that dates back over a century found that upward of 85 percent of job performance comes down to communication, judgment, and the ability to work alongside other people. Since then, the research has consistently echoed this finding², showing that so-called soft skills remain paramount to professional success.

An early study that dates back over a century found that upward of 85 percent of job performance comes down to communication, judgment, and the ability to work alongside other people. Since then, the research has consistently echoed this finding, showing that so-called soft skills remain paramount to professional success.

None of this is surprising. What is surprising is how unintentionally these skills are crafted, and how inconsistently education has been designed around them, particularly when they claim to be career-focused.



ECPI Medical Assistant students celebrating Medical Assistants Recognition Week.

THE DEMANDS OF HEALTH SCIENCES CAREERS

Health sciences careers offer clear entry points into the workforce, strong employment prospects, and genuine advancement opportunities over time. Demand across the sector continues to grow, and the range of roles available gives students real options based on their interests and long-term goals.

What unites these roles is that they all require more than a credential to perform well.

Professionals in the field regularly navigate high-stakes situations where they're expected to react and make sound decisions without the benefit of slowing things down. That pace requires a level of clarity that doesn't come from technical knowledge alone.

When that process breaks down, it shows, often by way of missed details, delayed responses, or avoidable mistakes. Research³ has linked stronger communication and judgment to better outcomes and fewer errors.

WHAT NURSING MAKES VISIBLE

Nursing surfaces this tension more clearly than most disciplines.

Clinical accuracy is essential, but it's rarely

sufficient on its own. A nurse who struggles to explain a care plan to a patient or make sound decisions under pressure will fall short in ways no licensing exam can be measured.

The evidence⁴ is clear: communication, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and team-based practice are directly tied to patient outcomes. These are not, therefore, peripheral competencies. Yet the field has historically weighted technical training more heavily, creating a persistent gap between what programs teach and what the profession actually demands.

Students who distinguish themselves are not only the ones who master clinical procedures. They are those who can communicate with clarity and contribute meaningfully within a care team.

HOW SOFT SKILLS ARE DEVELOPED IN HEALTHCARE

Despite their interpersonal nature, these soft capabilities are teachable, not innate. They develop through practice, structured feedback, and repeated exposure to conditions that resemble real professional environments.

We facilitate this at [ECPI University](#) through our cohort structure, where students often move through a program together as a consistent group over time. This continuity creates something a traditional classroom rarely achieves.

We have seen remarkably tight-knit cohorts develop over the years, particularly in nursing and health science programs. One medical assistant student, Natasha⁵, described a group

chat that stayed active throughout the program and continued well beyond it. Those kinds of stories are common here.

Another healthcare education model we employ that reinforces soft skills development is simulation-based training⁶. Students are placed in realistic scenarios where the pressure is genuine and the feedback is immediate. The closer the training environment mirrors actual clinical conditions, the less jarring that transition into practice becomes.

Working alongside the same people week after week builds habits of precise communication and mutual accountability. These are the dynamics present in every functional care team, and students who arrive already familiar with them are better positioned to contribute from day one.

RETHINKING CAREER READINESS

Employers across healthcare consistently report confidence in the technical preparation of new hires alongside recurring concerns about communication, adaptability, and professional judgment.

The assumption has long been that these skills will emerge naturally with experience. For some people, in some environments, that holds true. But

**SOFT SKILLS ARE
MORE THAN NICE
TO HAVE**



*They are essential to
providing great care.*



A nursing faculty member and student working on a high-fidelity, lifelike manikin in the nursing mobile simulation lab.



Physical Therapist Assistant faculty Katherine Nedved demonstrating how to perform a transfer with a spinal cord injury.

it's an unreliable foundation, and students deserve more deliberate preparation than that.

Career readiness isn't a fixed quality that candidates either have or lack. It develops through experience, and well-designed programs build that experience into the coursework deliberately.

This also shifts thinking about who belongs in these fields. The answer extends well beyond those who already demonstrate polished interpersonal skills to anyone willing to develop them, given the right structure and opportunity.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR WHAT THE WORK REQUIRES

Health sciences careers continue to garner

interest because they provide durable, meaningful opportunities across a wide range of disciplines.

Demand continues to grow, shaped by an aging population and expanding access to care. Over time, many professionals build careers with real depth, taking on greater responsibility or moving into more specialized roles.

But the work in this field carries something harder to quantify: it matters to the people on the receiving end of it. As a result, soft skills, which at this point may as well be called core skills, remain an integral part of success on the job.

At ECPI University, preparing students for that work means taking seriously everything it actually requires. The cohort model, simulation-based learning, and intentional focus on communication and collaboration aren't additions to our technical curriculum. They're part of the same commitment to producing graduates who are ready to perform, not just qualified to apply.

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ABOUT ECPI UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1966, ECPI University is a private university accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). The University serves career-focused adults across technology, nursing, health science, business, and criminal justice programs, with a consistent focus on building proven capability that supports real career outcomes.

Programs are designed in alignment with employer expectations, combining hands-on instruction, industry insight, and structured pathways that support measurable progress. Students complete their education with the ability to demonstrate what they can do, not just what they know.

With year-round scheduling, flexible formats, and credit for prior experience, ECPI University is built for adults balancing education with work, family, and service.

Learn more about ECPI University at <https://www.ecpi.edu/>.



Brandi Gomez

How One Working Mom Earned Her Master's Degree While Balancing Career and Family

While balancing a career, family, and military life, Brandi Gomez proved that it's never too late to invest in your education and future.



Most nights, after tucking her young children into bed, the day wasn't over for [Columbia Southern University](#) (CSU) alumnae Brandi Gomez—she still had a couple of hours of studying and homework to complete, despite working a full-time job.

A 33-year-old mother of two and the wife of a police officer and U.S. Marine reservist, Brandi is no stranger to the challenges of balancing multiple responsibilities.

"To put it simply: I'm just a human trying to build a good life for myself and my family," she said. "I'm a working parent and military spouse, juggling many roles in addition to holding down the fort at home just like so many others out there."

“To put it simply: I’m just a human trying to build a good life for myself and my family, she said. I’m a working parent and military spouse, juggling many roles in addition to holding down the fort at home just like so many others out there.”

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Brandi is an incident communications manager and knew she wanted to return to school and earn her master's degree.

"I felt it was important to gain real-world experience first," she said. "After earning my

undergraduate degree, I spent a decade building my career, and I'm grateful I waited—those years in the workplace gave me valuable context that deepened my learning."

Brandi witnessed friends and coworkers balance full-time jobs while working toward their degrees, and that gave her the confidence that she could do it too.

"What really made it feel close to home was my husband starting his bachelor's degree about a year before I did," she said. "Watching his journey gave me a front-row seat to what Columbia Southern University had to offer."

BREAKING GENERATIONAL BARRIERS

Brandi is setting a strong example for her children and is the first in her family to pursue graduate school.

"As a first-generation college graduate, earning both my bachelor's and now my master's degree, this achievement is deeply personal," she said. "It feels like I'm breaking generational barriers and creating a legacy for my children. I want them, and other women like me, to know that they can do anything they set their minds to. This degree isn't just a milestone, it's a message of possibility."

Brandi's background is in human resources, and Columbia Southern University's course layout aligned with her development goals.

"All the courses for that specific degree were really interesting to me," she said. "Instead of going down the path for a master's in communications or organizational leadership, I wanted to do something different, something more applicable to any role that I go into in the future."



FINDING THE PERFECT FIT

CSU's online structure and flexibility afforded her the opportunity to pursue her degree despite navigating the role of wife, mom and coworker.

"I needed a program that could fit into my life, not the other way around," she said. "What really stood out to me was how accessible everything felt. The online learning format was thoughtfully designed, and the support I received, from registration all the way through to graduation, was consistent and encouraging. It truly felt like CSU was built for people like me."

“ I needed a program that could fit into my life, not the other way around, she said. What really stood out to me was how accessible everything felt. The online learning format was thoughtfully designed, and the support I received, from registration all the way through to graduation, was consistent and encouraging. It truly felt like CSU was built for people like me. ”

In addition, Brandi has a background in crisis communication and particularly enjoyed the training and development course of the program.

"Getting to take that course and really thinking about how organizations set their workforce up for success...I could see myself getting into some sort of realm within learning and development, coaching or something of that nature," she said.

Despite challenges and setbacks, she credits CSU professors for working with her when life became overwhelming while trying to complete assignments.

"There was a particularly challenging time during my graduate program when my husband was away for over a month at a military training school, and I was battling a severe case of pneumonia," she said. "It became incredibly difficult to keep up with assignments. But when I reached out to my instructors to explain what was happening, I was met with nothing but understanding and grace. I genuinely feel like I would not have made it this far if it weren't for their understanding that we all have lives outside of school. That kind of compassion made all the difference."

BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND BROADENING HORIZONS

Brandi feels that obtaining her master's degree in human resources will open new doors and possibilities. She also feels her degree will give her more confidence in the future.

"Earning my master's degree has significantly broadened my professional horizons," she said. "With a background in communications and extensive experience working alongside human resources, this degree has allowed me to deepen my expertise in key HR areas such as training and development, research methods, measurement

and crisis communication. These courses have enriched my understanding of the strategies and functions that contribute to thriving workplace environments."

"The greatest benefit I gained from earning my master's degree was confidence," she said. "I hadn't realized how much the absence of that formal education had been affecting the way I showed up in the workplace. Completing this program gave me a renewed sense of self-assurance, not just in my knowledge, but in my voice and presence as a professional."

Submitting the last assignment for any student is exciting, and Brandi describes how it felt to hit the submit button to complete the program.

"I think the best word I can use is surreal," she said. "Having spent two years in the program with many late nights and balancing work, motherhood, military life and all the things, being able to click the button for the last time and know that it was my last assignment—I felt like there was just a weight lifted off my shoulders."

She attended CSU's 2025 Commencement Ceremony in October. When she walked across the stage to receive her diploma, she proudly carried with her all the hard work and sacrifice it took to achieve higher education.

"On a personal level, the experience was incredibly empowering," she said. "I earned this degree on my own while balancing the demands of being a working parent, and that accomplishment means the world to me. It's not just a milestone for my career, it's a step toward creating a better future for myself and my family."

“ On a personal level, the experience was incredibly empowering, she said. I earned this degree on my own while balancing the demands of being a working parent, and that accomplishment means the world to me. It's not just a milestone for my career, it's a step toward creating a better future for myself and my family. ”

Brandi exemplifies the determination it takes to pursue a degree while juggling adult responsibilities and being active in many social and professional groups throughout her career. She's proven it can be done, especially with the support of her family, friends and colleagues.

She also has advice for anyone looking to consider higher education.

"I've always believed that education is one of the few things in life that no one can ever take away from you. That belief has guided me throughout my journey, and it's the same advice I'd give to anyone who is on the fence about going back to school. It's not always easy, and the timing may never feel perfect, but the growth, confidence and sense of accomplishment you gain are more than worth it. If you're thinking about it, take the leap. You're more capable than you realize."

BRANDI'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

The confidence gained through education can transform both your career and the way you see yourself.



What Kept Her Going

Her family, the example she wanted to set for her children, and the belief that education creates opportunity.



Advice for Future Students

"It's not always easy, and the timing may never feel perfect, but the growth, confidence and sense of accomplishment you gain are more than worth it."

MORE THAN HAIR AND MAKEUP: CAREERS IN COSMETOLOGY

A career that combines creativity, client relationships, and opportunities for entrepreneurship.



For students who enjoy creativity, working with people, and building personal connections, cosmetology offers a career path that combines artistry with entrepreneurship. While many people associate cosmetology primarily with salon work, the industry offers far more career opportunities than students often realize. From education and editorial styling to social media, product development, and salon ownership, cosmetology continues to evolve into a field with diverse pathways and long-term growth potential.

According to Erica Marshall, Senior Director of Education at [Paul Mitchell](#) Advanced Education, a typical day for a cosmetologist blends creativity, technical skill, and client connection. Cosmetologists may provide services such as hair cutting, coloring, styling, chemical services, makeup application, or texture services depending on their licensure and specialization.

But technical services are only one part of the profession. Marshall explained that cosmetologists also spend a significant amount of time consulting with clients, building relationships, recommending products, and managing their schedules and client books.

A CAREER BUILT ON CREATIVITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

One of the defining characteristics of cosmetology is the personal connection professionals build with their clients. Success in the field often depends not only on technical ability but also on communication skills, professionalism, and the ability to create trust and long-term relationships.

Marshall noted that strong communication skills, adaptability, work ethic, and a passion for serving others are all important qualities for success in cosmetology. The most successful professionals are often those who remain coachable, consistent, and willing to continue learning throughout their careers.

For students who enjoy helping people feel more confident while expressing creativity through their work, cosmetology can provide a career that feels both artistic and rewarding.

TRAINING FOR THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

Cosmetology programs are designed to prepare students for both technical work and real-world client experiences. According to Marshall, most cosmetology programs range from 1,000 to 1,600 training hours depending on state requirements. Full time students typically complete training within approximately 9 to 14 months.

During training, students learn foundational technical skills such as cutting, coloring, and styling hair. Programs also focus on sanitation, client communication, business fundamentals, and clinic experiences that help students prepare for professional salon environments.

In addition to technical instruction, students prepare for the licensing requirements to enter the field. Cosmetologists must complete state required training hours and pass both written and practical licensing examinations. Marshall emphasized that while the process requires discipline and commitment, cosmetology programs are designed to thoroughly prepare students for both testing and professional success.

MORE CAREER PATHS THAN MANY STUDENTS EXPECT

While many graduates begin working in salons, cosmetology offers career opportunities that extend far beyond traditional salon settings. Marshall explained that professionals may pursue careers in education, platform artistry, editorial and fashion work, product development, brand education, consulting, and independent entrepreneurship.

The rise of digital media has also created opportunities for cosmetologists to build careers through content creation and social media. Many professionals now combine beauty services with online education, brand partnerships, and personal business development.

For students interested in business ownership, the industry also provides pathways into salon ownership, independent studio rentals, or freelance work. This flexibility allows professionals to shape careers that align with both their creative interests and lifestyle goals.

BUILDING EXPERIENCE AND GROWING A CLIENTELE

According to Marshall, many new graduates begin their careers as salon assistants or associates. These early roles provide mentorship opportunities while helping new professionals continue developing technical skills and building confidence behind the chair.

As cosmetologists gain experience and grow their clientele, they often increase both their responsibilities and earning potential. Marshall explained that income can vary depending on location, salon structure, specialization, and individual effort. Early in a career, income may start more modestly while professionals build their client base.

Over time, however, cosmetologists may significantly increase their earnings through strong client retention, retail sales, and specialization.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT AND SPECIALIZATION

One of the strengths of the cosmetology industry is the wide range of advancement opportunities available throughout a professional's career. Marshall noted that cosmetologists may specialize in hair color, texture services, or extensions. Others may transition into education, brand work, consulting, or salon ownership.

The field also supports entrepreneurial growth. Professionals may choose to rent salon suites, operate independently, or eventually build businesses of their own.

Because the beauty industry continues evolving



alongside trends, technology, and social media, professionals who continue learning and adapting often find new opportunities for growth throughout their careers.

WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW BEFORE ENROLLING

Marshall emphasized that success in cosmetology requires more than talent alone. Building a successful career takes consistency, professionalism, and a willingness to build relationships over time.

For students unsure whether cosmetology is the right fit, she recommends spending time inside a salon environment, asking questions, and observing the day-to-day realities of the profession.

Students who enjoy creativity, working with people, and building something of their own may find cosmetology to be both flexible and fulfilling. While building a career takes time and commitment, Marshall believes the industry offers significant opportunities for motivated students willing to continue learning.

ABOUT PAUL MITCHELL SCHOOLS

Founded more than 40 years ago, Paul Mitchell has grown into one of the most recognized names in professional beauty education and hair care. With a network of more than 90 schools, nearly 10,000 graduates each year, and a presence in more than 80 countries, Paul Mitchell is known for its commitment to innovation, excellence, and industry-leading training. Students benefit from hands-on education designed to prepare them for success in the beauty industry while becoming part of a global brand recognized for quality and professional achievement.

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Programs vary by location, so please find a Paul Mitchell School near you for more information on programs offered, class start dates, tuition, financial aid, scholarships and more.



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Margo Snopek

From Cosmetology School to Salon Owner

From cosmetology student to salon owner and mentor, Margo Snopek built a career centered on creativity, leadership, and helping others grow.



For Margo Snopek, cosmetology became more than a creative outlet. It became a career that transformed her life, opened unexpected opportunities, and allowed her to build a business centered around mentorship, growth, and community.

Today, Margo is the co-owner of Lux Salon, where she leads a team of nine stylists and focuses heavily on training and developing the next generation of beauty professionals. But her path into the industry was not the one she originally planned.

Before pursuing cosmetology, Margo earned a degree in Elementary Education. Although she valued education and enjoyed working with people, she quickly realized she was searching for a career that felt more creative, hands-on, and personally fulfilling.

"That realization led me to pursue cosmetology, and it ultimately changed the course of my career in the best way," Margo shared.

She enrolled at [Tricoci University of Beauty Culture](#) in Chicago, IL, and graduated in 2010, launching what would become a career spanning more than 15 years in the cosmetology industry.

Over time, Margo built not only technical expertise but also a passion for leadership and mentorship. At Lux Salon, she has developed and continues to refine an associate training program designed to help new stylists successfully transition from cosmetology school into the realities of salon work.

"I'm especially passionate about mentoring new stylists," she explained. "Helping them build confidence, technical skills, and a strong foundation for long-term growth."

For Margo, one of the most rewarding parts of the industry is the ability to create opportunities

for others while building meaningful relationships with clients.

"The most rewarding part is the impact you have on people," she said. "You're not just doing hair. You're helping someone feel confident, seen, and taken care of."

“The most rewarding part is the impact you have on people, she said. You’re not just doing hair. You’re helping someone feel confident, seen, and taken care of.”

She says no two days in the salon are exactly the same, which is one of the things she loves most about the profession. A typical day can include consultations, haircuts, color services, extensions, product recommendations, team collaboration, and ensuring every client has a seamless experience from start to finish.

"There's also a strong team element," Margo explained. "Helping coworkers, managing schedules, and making sure the client experience is seamless."

While creativity is central to cosmetology, Margo emphasizes that success in the field depends on much more than technical ability alone.

"One of the biggest challenges is balancing technical skill with customer service and time management," she said. "It's not just about doing great hair. It's about communication, consistency, and professionalism."

That is why hands-on training plays such

a critical role in preparing students for real-world salon environments. According to Margo, working directly with clients helps students build confidence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills that simply cannot be learned through textbooks alone.

"Hands-on training is everything in this industry," she said. "It builds confidence, speed, and problem-solving skills."

As both a salon owner and mentor, Margo looks for more than technical certifications when hiring graduates from career-focused training programs.

"I look for a strong work ethic, professionalism, and a positive attitude above anything else," she explained. "Technical skills can always be developed, but mindset is everything."

"I look for a strong work ethic, professionalism, and a positive attitude above anything else, she explained. Technical skills can always be developed, but mindset is everything."

She also believes the beauty industry offers tremendous flexibility and opportunity for long-term career growth. Stylists can specialize in areas like blonding, extensions, smoothing treatments, or color correction, while others may move into salon ownership, education, product development, or platform artistry.

"There are endless opportunities," Margo said.

Recently, Margo's perspective on leadership and life deepened even further after her two-year-old son underwent a lifesaving liver transplant. The experience reinforced the importance of resilience, purpose, and community, values she now brings into every aspect of her personal and professional life.

"That experience reinforced the importance of community, resilience, and purpose," she shared.

Despite the challenges she has faced, Margo says cosmetology has given her a life and career she never imagined possible. Through the industry, she has been able to build a successful business, mentor future professionals, support her family, and remain deeply involved as a mother.

"This career has completely changed my life," she said. "It gave me the opportunity to build a business, create a team, and support my family while doing something I love."

For students considering cosmetology as a career path, Margo encourages them to fully commit to the process and embrace every stage of learning and growth.

"If you're passionate about it, go all in," she said. "This career rewards hard work and dedication. Don't be afraid to start at the bottom. Every successful stylist started there."

Margo Snopek's story is a reminder that career paths are not always linear and that success often comes from following a passion that aligns with both creativity and purpose. Through cosmetology, she found not only a profession but also the opportunity to lead, mentor, and create lasting impact in the lives of others.

MARGO'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS



Biggest Lesson Learned

Success is built through consistency, professionalism, and a willingness to keep learning and growing throughout your career.



What Kept Her Going

A passion for creativity, helping others feel confident, and the opportunity to mentor and support the next generation of beauty professionals,



Advice for Future Students

"If you're passionate about it, go all in. This career rewards hard work and dedication. Don't be afraid to start at the bottom. Every successful stylist started there."

BEYOND THE CHAIR

The Dynamic and Expanding Career Landscape of the Beauty and Wellness Industry

By Sheila Lawrence, Director of Marketing, Bellus Academy



When most people picture a career in beauty and wellness, they imagine a stylist behind a salon chair or an esthetician in a treatment room. And while those paths are deeply rewarding and remain at the heart of the industry, they represent only a fraction of what a cosmetology or esthetics license can unlock. Today, beauty and wellness professionals are traveling the world on luxury cruise ships, standing on stages at national industry events, transitioning into medical aesthetics, and representing global brands from New York to Milan. The career ceiling, for those willing to pursue it, simply does not exist.

This is the story the beauty and wellness industry has not always done a good job of telling,

and it is one worth telling loudly, especially to the next generation of professionals who are choosing their educational path right now.

THE MED SPA BOOM: WHERE BEAUTY MEETS HEALTHCARE

One of the most significant shifts reshaping the beauty and wellness industry over the last decade is the explosive growth of the medical aesthetics sector. Medical spas — facilities that offer cosmetic treatments such as Botox, dermal fillers, laser therapies, and microneedling under medical supervision — have become one of the fastest-growing segments in both healthcare and the beauty industry.

The U.S. aesthetic injectables market was projected to reach \$4.56 billion in 2025, with an 11.2 percent annual growth rate expected through 2030. That growth has created an urgent demand for skilled aesthetic practitioners, and it has opened a striking career pathway for registered nurses looking for a change.

Burnout in traditional nursing is real. According to the American Academy of Cosmetic Medicine, approximately 20 percent of the nation's 4.5 million registered nurses planned to exit conventional clinical roles within a few years, citing long shifts, high patient-to-nurse ratios, and limited flexibility as primary drivers. For many of those nurses, aesthetic medicine has become the answer.

Nurse injectors, registered nurses trained to administer Botox, hyaluronic acid fillers, and other cosmetic treatments, are among the most sought-after professionals in the medical aesthetics field. The transition typically requires specialized training and certification in areas such as facial anatomy, neuromodulators, and injection techniques, which can be completed in a matter of months through accredited programs. From there, nurse injectors can work in medical spas, dermatology clinics, and plastic surgery offices, or eventually open their own aesthetic practices.

The financial opportunity is significant. According to ZipRecruiter, the average aesthetic nurse injector in the United States earns between \$78,000 and \$109,000 annually, with top earners in high-demand markets such as California exceeding \$150,000 per year.

What makes this trend particularly relevant to the beauty and wellness education community is the natural alignment between esthetic training and aesthetic nursing. Licensed estheticians already possess deep knowledge of skin physiology, facial anatomy, and client consultation — foundational competencies that translate directly into the med spa environment. As the lines between beauty and healthcare continue to blur, students with a beauty and wellness background may find themselves uniquely positioned to step into this expanding field with additional licensure or certification.

PLATFORM ARTISTRY AND BRAND EDUCATION: THE STAGE AWAITS

For cosmetologists who thrive in front of an audience, platform artistry offers one of the most exhilarating career paths in the industry. A platform artist is, at once, an educator, a performer, a brand representative, and a technical innovator — someone who takes the stage at trade shows, industry conferences, and brand events to demonstrate techniques, introduce new products,



and inspire fellow professionals.

Platform artists are regarded as subject matter experts in their craft, and many specialize in a particular discipline, such as hair color, precision cutting, avant-garde styling, or editorial makeup. They travel extensively, often performing at major industry events such as Premiere Orlando, America's Beauty Show, and international hair shows. Many platform artists continue to maintain their salon work in their home markets while performing contract platform work on weekends at key industry events throughout the year.

Closely related is the role of the brand educator, in which a licensed professional partners with a product company to train other stylists and estheticians on the brand's techniques, products, and applications. Brand educators often travel regionally or nationally, conduct hands-on classes in salons and schools, and serve as the face of the brand in their markets.

Gayle Fulbright, owner of Headlines The Salon in North County San Diego and a beauty industry professional since 1976, has spent portions of her career as a traveling business educator for major beauty brands, an experience she credits as transformational, both professionally and

personally.

"I traveled 40 out of 52 weekends one year," Gayle recalled. "From Alaska to Toronto to England. I had no idea when I signed up for beauty school that I'd be able to be paid to travel. And that's one of the things that should be highlighted — the opportunities are there if you want them." She described the industry as one with no ceiling: "First, you master your craft. Then you mentor someone. Then you go out and make a difference."

For students who love creativity, community, and the spotlight, platform artistry and brand education represent a path where passion and profession become one.

THE WORLD AS YOUR SALON: CAREERS AT SEA

Few career paths in the beauty and wellness industry are as genuinely adventurous as working aboard a luxury cruise ship. Licensed cosmetologists, estheticians, nail technicians, and massage therapists can apply to work in the onboard spas and salons that are a standard feature of major cruise lines and, in doing so, turn their professional license into a passport.

Major cruise spa operators such as OneSpaWorld, which manages spas on more than 160 luxury cruise ships sailing worldwide, actively recruit licensed beauty and wellness professionals. Stylists and spa therapists who join cruise ship teams typically work contracts ranging from several months, returning to their home markets between voyages. In exchange, they receive paid room and board, the opportunity to travel to destinations ranging from the Caribbean and Mediterranean to Alaska, Iceland, and Southeast Asia, and the experience of working with an exceptionally diverse international clientele.

The skills developed in a cruise ship salon environment are considerable. Stylists work in a fast-paced, multicultural setting, serving guests from around the world and collaborating with colleagues from dozens of different countries. The experience often accelerates professional development, builds adaptability, and produces a resume that stands apart from the traditional salon path.

For new graduates with a spirit of adventure and an appetite for the world, the cruise industry offers an entry point that is both financially practical, with room and board covered, and personally extraordinary.

FASHION WEEK AND EDITORIAL WORK: WHERE BEAUTY MEETS ART

At the intersection of beauty and high fashion lives the world of editorial and runway work, and it is more accessible to emerging professionals than many students realize.

Monse, a cosmetology graduate of Bellus Academy's Chula Vista, CA, campus who began her program in 2019, is a powerful example of what is possible when a young professional pursues opportunity with intention. Monse began her career focused primarily on makeup artistry, building her craft through weddings, events, and salon work. Through a connection made with an educator at [Bellus Academy](#), she was introduced to Fashion Week San Diego, and that introduction changed the trajectory of her career.

Monse credits her Bellus Academy makeup educator, Sonia Sevilla, with making the introduction that started it all. "Sonia was the one who introduced me to the Fashion Week San Diego team," Monse explained. From there, the leadership passed to Joanna Camargo, who kept Monse on the team, and then to Breana Rae, who ultimately passed the lead role down to Monse herself. "They've all been super supportive of my journey," she said. "It just comes with a lot of opportunities."

This year, Monse is traveling to New York City for the second time with the Fashion Week San Diego team to participate in a collaborative art event in which a painter, a designer, a hairstylist, and a makeup artist are each paired with a model to translate a painting into a living, wearable look.





Monse serves as the makeup lead for the team — a role she earned through her work and her relationships within the beauty community.

"We all have to come up with the look on a model to translate the painting into real life," she described. "I get to be as creative as I can. That's why it's my favorite event, if not my favorite thing I've ever done."

Monse's experience illustrates the truth that experienced beauty professionals repeat consistently: in this industry, the connections you make in school can take you further than you imagine. Her educator's introduction opened a door that has now taken her to New York twice before the age of 25, with dreams of international runway work ahead.

"You never know what's going to happen, where you're going to end up," Monse said. "Just don't give up. Just try. And when you get to events, just make friends everywhere. Be yourself. People who appreciate you and appreciate your work will be the right people to work with."

THE COMMON THREAD: COMMUNITY, EDUCATION, AND THE LONG GAME

Across every career path explored here, from med spa nursing to platform artistry to cruise ship work to fashion week stages, a common theme emerges: the beauty and wellness industry rewards those who invest in relationships and never stop

ABOUT BELLUS ACADEMY

Bellus Academy is a leading beauty and wellness institution dedicated to inspiring students to achieve their career goals through innovative, career-focused education. Known for its advanced training programs and strong industry connections, Bellus Academy has built a reputation for excellence, earning numerous honors through Modern Salon's national Excellence in Education program.

The academy is committed to graduating career-ready professionals who are equipped to succeed in a rapidly evolving industry. Under the leadership of owner and CEO Lynelle Lynch, Bellus Academy has also become recognized for its commitment to community impact. Lynch is the founder of the Beauty Changes Lives Foundation, an organization dedicated to elevating the beauty and wellness profession through scholarships, mentorship, and career opportunities. Bellus Academy's dedication to service earned the institution Modern Salon's Gold Award for Excellence in Community Service in both 2017 and 2018.

Learn more about Bellus Academy here: bellusacademy.edu | 888-990-7094.

learning.

Fulbright, who has run Headlines The Salon for nearly four decades, attributes much of her professional longevity and growth to a relentless commitment to continuing education. She attends multiple industry conferences annually, belongs to a long-standing peer group of salon owners, and regularly sends her top team members to national training events. Her top stylists recently completed their third trip to New York City to train as national trainers for the salon's color line, a direct result of Gayle's belief that professional growth does not end when you reach a certain level of success.

"When you quit learning, you quit being inspired," Gayle said. "Hanging around people smarter than me, going to conferences, keeping up with where the industry is going — that is the answer to how you scale. You never stop being a student."

For students entering beauty and wellness programs today, this is perhaps the most valuable lesson the industry can offer. Your license is the beginning of the conversation, not the end of it. The paths that open from that starting point, into medical aesthetics, onto stages, aboard ships, into creative collaborations with artists and designers, are limited only by the curiosity and commitment you bring to them.

The beauty and wellness industry has always been about transformation. It transforms clients, yes, but it also transforms the professionals who choose it. The career landscape is broader, more dynamic, and more financially compelling than it has ever been. The question is simply which direction you want to go.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheila Lawrence is the Director of Marketing at Bellus Academy, a leading beauty and wellness institution with campuses in Chula Vista, El Cajon, and Poway, California, as well as Manhattan, Kansas. With more than 22 years of experience in the beauty and wellness industry, Sheila oversees all marketing initiatives for the Academy, including enrollment-driving content, SEO and generative AI optimization strategies, and high school and community outreach campaigns. Her work focuses on telling the authentic stories of beauty professionals, alumni, and industry partners — shining a light on the real opportunities a career in beauty and wellness can offer. Sheila collaborates directly with salon owners, educators, and alumni to bridge the gap between education and industry, ensuring that prospective students understand the full scope of what a beauty career can become. She is passionate about elevating the perception of the beauty and wellness trades as serious, rewarding, and financially viable career paths.



Orly Perez

Skin Deep: How One Bellus Academy Graduate Built a Spa, a Brand, and a Second Act

From full-time mother to spa owner and skincare entrepreneur, Orly Perez reinvented her life through esthetics and a passion for helping others feel confident.

At 39, most people aren't starting over. But for Orly Perez, starting over was exactly the point.

A full-time mother searching for a career that could flex around her family, Orly found her answer in esthetics—a field that allowed her, as she puts it, to blend a love for beauty, healing, and self-care while helping others feel confident in their own skin. What began as a practical solution became something much more profound: a reinvention with a purpose.

Today, Orly is the owner of Bella Sareena Spa and the creator of the Bella Sareena skincare and body care product line. Fifteen years into her career, she has built a business rooted in results, relationships, and resilience. Her journey from first-time student to entrepreneur offers a compelling roadmap for anyone considering a career in the beauty and wellness industry.

A NEW BEGINNING AT BELLUS ACADEMY

Orly's entry into esthetics was not without uncertainty. But from her first days at Bellus Academy, she found both direction and encouragement. "When I entered [Bellus Academy](#), I met Wendy," she recalls, "and she gave me so much hope, strength, and clarity of a new path." That early mentorship shaped not only her technical foundation but her professional confidence, two pillars that would carry her through the challenges ahead.

The hands-on training model at Bellus Academy was particularly meaningful. Orly credits the supportive instructors and real-world practice environment by helping her discover her strengths and push past self-doubt. "Hands-on training

“ Hands-on training prepared me for the real world, she says. The more you engage and experience, the more it builds your confidence. ”

prepared me for the real world," she says. "The more you engage and experience, the more it builds your confidence." For Orly, the classroom was never just about technique; it was where she found her voice and her purpose in the beauty and wellness industry.

BUILDING A PRACTICE AROUND CLIENT NEEDS

After completing her education, Orly built her spa menu the same way she approached everything: by listening. She paid close attention to her clients' most common skin concerns and selected treatments and products designed to address those issues safely and effectively. The goal was never just results, it was trust. "I wanted to create an experience that my clients would trust and see results," she explains.

Over 15 years, Bella Sareena Spa grew into a full day spa with Orly overseeing a team of 12 practitioners. The rewards were significant, and so were the demands. Building a loyal clientele from the ground up required more than technical skill. It required marketing savvy, business acumen, and an ability to connect with people on a human

level. Orly notes that new professionals are often surprised to discover just how much the career extends beyond the treatment room. "Clients don't just come for treatments," she says. "They come for trust, confidence, and connection."

That emotional dimension of the work remains, for Orly, among the most rewarding aspects of the profession. "Seeing the transformation in my clients and seeing how someone feels about themselves when they leave glowing inside and out, the human connection is very rewarding," she says. "Knowing that you are helping build their confidence and overall appearance means everything."

FROM PERSONAL STRUGGLE TO PRODUCT LINE

The Bella Sareena skincare and body care line was not born from a business plan; it was born from a personal need. In her mid-30s, Orly developed various skin sensitivities and conditions. Frustrated by the lack of gentle, effective options, she set out to create something she could fully believe in. "I needed something a little cleaner and more effective," she recalls. "Having sensitive skin and always searching for the non-irritating option, I developed my products by researching ingredients, attending trade shows, and learning directly from industry experts—connecting with chemists and vendors who helped me build formulas every step

of the way."

The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced estheticians out of their treatment rooms, unexpectedly accelerated her product development journey. With service income halted, Orly leaned into the product line as a new avenue for business. It reinforced a lesson she shares freely with aspiring professionals: "As estheticians, being in the treatment room is rewarding but also challenging. Finding other ways to grow a business is very important."

Today, the Bella Sareena line is sold to other spas, featured at pop-up events, and poised for an online launch in 2026. The most rewarding part, Orly says, is seeing her clients fall in love with products they trust; products co-created to nurture sensitive skin and help people feel their best.

STAYING SHARP IN A CHANGING INDUSTRY

For Orly, education never ended with graduation. Staying ahead in esthetics requires ongoing investment in professional development. She regularly attends industry conferences, advanced training sessions, and trade shows, and maintains close relationships with product developers, dermatologists, and esthetic educators. The beauty and wellness landscape evolves constantly, with new technologies, treatment modalities, and skincare science emerging each year, and Orly



ORLY'S ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDENTS

When asked what she wishes she had known at the start of her career, Orly is candid: "I wish I had known that confidence comes with experience. In the beginning, I doubted myself more than I needed to. With time, I learned to trust my skills, trust the process, and know that growth happens step by step." She also wishes she had understood earlier how critical the business side of esthetics truly is—marketing, communication, and client retention are skills as essential as any treatment technique.

Her advice to current students is both practical and encouraging. She urges them to think like business owners from day one, even if they start by working for someone else. "Focus on customer service, professionalism, and creating an experience that keeps clients coming back," she says. "Invest in education, both during school and after you graduate. Don't stop learning."

Networking, community involvement, and fundraising have also been key to her success, strategies she recommends for anyone working to build a steady, loyal clientele. "Do a lot of networking and seek out the type of clientele you want to attract," she advises. "Being involved in your community can help you create that loyal base that will help you succeed in this profession."



believes that a commitment to lifelong learning is non-negotiable for long-term success.

"This career continues to evolve," she says, "so there is always room to grow, reinvent yourself, and explore new paths." For her, that evolution has taken the form of stepping back from managing a large team to focusing on a curated VIP client list three days a week, and devoting the rest of her time to product development and the next chapter of Bella Sareena.

LOOKING AHEAD

As she looks toward 2026 and beyond, Orly's vision has expanded beyond her own business. She hopes to connect with other esthetic professionals who are just starting out, sharing what she has learned to help them build their careers more efficiently. "I would love to be part of something bigger, helping more people feel confident and beautiful," she says. "My vision is to help other professionals in the industry of esthetics who are starting out, and to see if I can help expedite their success."

Her gratitude for Bellus Academy and for the mentor who opened the door, and opened her heart to what was possible, remains deeply felt. It is a reminder of what career education can do when it does its job well: not just teach a skill but change a life.

Orly Perez's story is proof that it is never too late to reinvent yourself with purpose, and that with the right foundation, the right mentors, and an unwavering commitment to your clients and

your craft, the beauty and wellness industry offers extraordinary room to grow.

ABOUT ORLY PEREZ

Orly Perez is the founder and owner of Bella Sareena Spa and the creator of the Bella Sareena skincare and body care product line. A proud Bellus Academy alumna, Orly launched her esthetics career as a second chapter, entering the industry at 39 while balancing the demands of full-time motherhood. Over the past 15 years, she has built a thriving practice rooted in results-driven, sensitive-skin solutions and deep client relationships. Her product line was born out of personal need, developed through collaboration with chemists, vendors, and industry experts. Today, Orly continues to see VIP clients, grow her product line, and pursue her vision of empowering other beauty and wellness professionals just entering the field. She can be reached through Bella Sareena Spa.



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SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRADE SCHOOL STUDENTS

The Pathways to Careers Scholarship was established to help individuals pursue careers in the skilled trades. Funded through generous contributions from higher education and workforce partners, the program expands access to training opportunities in some of the nation's most in-demand fields.

The country's need for skilled labor is undeniable, yet higher education funding remains disproportionately concentrated outside many workforce critical programs. Most public scholarships continue to limit eligibility based on institution type, leaving many aspiring professionals without access to needed financial assistance.

Designed for those preparing to enter high-demand careers, the Pathways to Careers Scholarship recognizes individuals who are committed to improving their lives while making a positive impact in their communities.

Designed for those preparing to enter high-demand careers, the Pathways to Careers Scholarship recognizes individuals who are committed to improving their lives while making a positive impact in their communities.

Applications are open to those enrolled in a skilled trade program at a participating campus. Applicants are asked to submit a video or personal statement describing their chosen career path and commitment to strengthening workforce



readiness in their community. The next application cycle opens in January 2026, providing additional opportunities for students pursuing careers in the skilled trades to apply for scholarship support.

Contributions may be made year-round and directed toward a specific program area, geographic region, or the general fund. Gifts of \$15,000 or more are recognized as Legacy Scholarships and may be named in honor of an individual or organization. Each \$15,000 contribution establishes a permanent \$500 annual award for the life of the program, creating a lasting investment in workforce development.

Six recipients were selected during the inaugural spring application cycle, marking the first awards distributed through the program.

Learn more about the Pathways to Careers Scholarship, including how to apply or become a supporter, at cecufoundation.org/about-pathways-to-careers. To explore other scholarship opportunities, visit link.career.org/scholarships.

MEET THE 2026 SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS



SADIR BALLANCE

School: Lincoln Technical Institute, Moorestown, NJ
Program: Electrical and Electronic Systems Technology

Sadir quotes his training at Lincoln Tech as a major turning point in his life. Through the hands-on learning, he has gained real exposure to the skilled trades and discovered his passion for working with his hands, solving problems, and understanding how systems work.

He is committed to building a secure and reliable career that provides stability for himself and his new child.



LISETTE BARCUS

School: Intercoast College, West Covina, CA
Program: Addiction Studies

Lisette currently works on the front lines as a drug and alcohol counselor and outreach case manager where she supports individuals in accessing treatment, housing, and long-term recovery resources. Her commitment to this work stems from her own past experiences, where she faced incarceration due to substance use and the instability that came with it.

She notes that recovery gave her the purpose and determination to be rooted in her path of service to others facing similar challenges.



COLIN FEIKEMA

School: National Aviation Academy, Clearwater, FL
Program: Aviation Maintenance Technician

Colin knew he was interested in a career in the trades from an early age. From fixing up his first car to an early job in HVAC, he learned a passion for understanding how certain mechanical systems work and the discipline needed to pursue a career in a field that keeps the economy going. After overcoming a long string of health issues, he is pursuing a career in aviation maintenance. His goal is to one day tell his children that he helped keep the planes they see overhead safe and ready for flight.

MEET THE 2026 SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

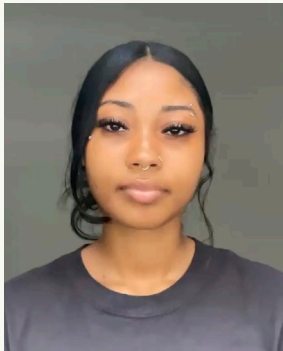


ANNA KATELYN GUZMAN

School: Lincoln Technical Institute, Shelton, CT

Program: Licensed Practical Nursing

Anna found her passion for caregiving while supporting her mother through her breast cancer journey. She took note through the process of how the nurses shaped the experience by being empathetic, encouraging, and patient. They embodied the kind of care she hopes to provide to families throughout her nursing career. She strives to help bridge the gap between Western medicine and cultural beliefs within the Hispanic community and to be a place of comfort for patients to ask questions and genuinely understand what is happening with their health and the role they play in their own care.



SADEIA JAHANGIR

School: Tulsa Welding School, Jacksonville, FL

Program: Welding

Sadeia is enrolled in the Welding program at Tulsa Welding School to pursue her passion in the trade. Her passion for making things with her hands started in her production construction classes in high school.

Throughout her early education years, she and her family experienced bouts of homelessness, which has been a significant motivator for her to succeed. She is eager to start a career that offers financial stability while fulfilling her creative passion to become a woman of many trades.



FIDEL ROSARIO

School: New England Tractor Tractor Training School

Program: CDL

Fidel is pursuing his CDL license to better himself and assist his family. As a single father, he balances his family responsibilities and professional obligations to ensure he is set up to support the people he loves. He is appreciative of the support he has received from his school leaders and employers, which helps to keep him motivated towards a better road ahead.

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CONTACT US

1530 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1050
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communications@career.org
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