



MEDIA RELEASE

May 12, 2016

For Release: Immediate

Minnesota State Community and Technical College

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M State Gas Utility program launches first class of graduates into new careers

WADENA, Minn. – Each of the students had his own reasons for enrolling in the Gas Utility Construction and Service program at Minnesota State Community and Technical College last fall, but all are leaving with something in common: a job.

This year's six-man graduating class was the first for the 32-credit diploma program, which began in the fall of 2015 on M State's Wadena campus.

A few weeks before their May 6 graduation, Josh Horstmann of Staples said he enrolled because he was looking to get into a growing industry. His brother, Ben, didn't want an office job. William Richards of New York Mills wanted to learn a trade, and Damian Henry of Carlos was looking for a job where he could work outdoors. Dustin Jones of Wadena enrolled because he was "sick of working in a factory."

Gas Utility instructor and industry veteran Randy Baker wasn't surprised by the market for students in the program, which was created in large part in response to industry demand. He said there's only one graduate of the program who doesn't have employment in the gas industry, and that student has a great job lined up at a family construction business.

The impetus for the Gas Utility program came from conversations between industry representatives and M State Academic Dean Monty Johnson at meetings of the Minnesota Energy Consortium. Johnson is a member of the consortium, and there he learned there were no gas industry training programs at technical colleges in either Minnesota or North Dakota.

Until M State opened its program, the nearest ones were in Green Bay, Wis., and Mitchell, S.D.

“We were very pleased to see M State launch a career path dedicated to those who want to work in the gas field,” said Jerry Guck, general manager for Arvig Construction in Perham, one of the companies involved with the program since its inception. “This (program) fills a niche in the Upper Midwest, as there are no other options within 350 miles for people choosing this career path.”

In addition to Arvig, companies including CenterPoint Energy, MP Technologies, Groebner and Ellingson have supported the M State program with hands-on learning opportunities on job sites and on-campus demonstrations.

Equipment donations have come from CenterPoint Energy, Minnesota Energy, Arvig, Groebner, MP Technologies, Border States Electric and Lane Trailers, and industry representatives serve on its advisory board.

When the program began accepting students last year, Ward Westphal of MP Technologies said it would help fill a “huge” need for trained employees in the gas industry, which he said was facing a shortage of workers who had the unique skills needed by gas and electric utilities.

The M State program prepares students for a range of career options within the natural gas industry, including repairing, replacing, installing and inspecting natural gas pipeline, with starting salaries in the range of \$20 an hour and higher.

According to Guck, graduates will find employment opportunities with construction and pipeline companies, gas distribution operators and local plumbers and HVAC companies.

“The outlook for employment opportunities in this sector of the utility industry is very positive,” he added. “While there will still be much learning to be done on the job, the foundation a student will get by completing a program in the gas field – especially one outlined by the very people who will be employing them – puts them on a fast track to advance in this industry.”

The graduates of M State’s new Gas Utility program are beginning their careers throughout the region – at Excel Energy in St. Cloud and in the Twin Cities, Greater Minnesota Gas in Detroit Lakes, Arvig and Michels Pipeline in Rogers.

In five to 15 years, when there are predictions that 25 percent or more of the gas industry workforce will be retiring, members of the first class of M State’s Gas Utility programs say “that’s when we’re going to be running these companies that are hiring us now.”

As a member of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, M State serves more than 8,000 students in credit courses each year in more than 70 career and liberal arts programs online and at its campuses in Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, Moorhead and Wadena. By partnering with communities, the college also provides custom training services and other responsive training programs.

Photo outline:

Left to right: Gas Utility Instructor Randy Baker and first-year students Josh Horstmann, Ben Horstmann, William Richards, Dustin Jones and Damien Henry.