

# CONSTRUCTION EQUIPMENT Distribution

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## COMING TO THE RESCUE OF TECHNICAL SCHOOLS

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*No longer content to wait for a knock at the door, more equipment dealerships and manufacturers are joining forces to recruit and train skilled employees.*

Schools that teach high school graduates the skills to work in technical specialties are the endangered species of U.S. education. Without help from our industry, their numbers will fall to a precious few.

A major reason for the shortage of technicians in the construction equipment industry may be that modern educators take too many courses in business management and accounting when they go to school.

Learning to count beans just as business managers do has influenced many educators to run schools like corporations. In recent years, scores of America's trade/technical schools and community colleges have eliminated or downsized programs for heavy equipment technicians and other "trades" because the bottom line told them to.

Kenny Acton, a 22-year teaching veteran in the Heavy Equipment Technology program at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., says economics is calling the shots on such decisions. In years past, he says, schools were less concerned with spreadsheets and financial ratios. Now, every decision is based on the cost of instruction.

In Michigan, an industrial state where you'd think technical education for industries like ours would abound, Ferris State is now the only post-secondary institution turning out construction equipment technicians. Acton says there were as many as 12 other schools with such a program 25 years ago, but they've disappeared one by one.

The situation in Michigan is typical of what's happened to technical education in the United States. Instructor Dennis Massingham of Idaho's Lewis-Clark State College points out that diesel programs across the country are closing their doors.

Why? Many people blame the narrow-mindedness of high school teachers and counselors who forsake skilled technology programs in favor of promoting only four-year colleges to their students. While this is true, other factors are contributing to the problem.

When budgeting for public education, state legislatures justifiably look at how many students are knocking on the doors, at the amount of investment in shops and classrooms, at the number of future jobs, at availability of teachers and a litany of other things. Because a literature course is a lot cheaper to put in place than a hydraulics course, for example, guess which is more likely to get the money?

Acton estimates that more than \$3 million worth of construction equipment, much of it loaned or donated by industry partners, is available on the Ferris State campus for students who matriculate in either two- or four-year programs.

Further curtailing the growth of these programs is that limited funds leave few dollars for the ongoing marketing efforts needed to reach students, and then to sell them on the value of technical education.

Although the program at Ferris has a national reputation and its enrollment of 126 future technicians and service managers is in great demand, it is not at full capacity. It's expanding its recruitment efforts by inviting high school counselors to seminars at the campus. They learn first hand about careers in the heavy equipment industry, and see the advantages of encouraging students to follow that path.

But instead of waiting for school administrators and local elected officials to solve the problem, the various sectors of the construction industry must step up their efforts to demand more technical education programs--and the sooner, the better.

Construction equipment businesses need to shout about the availability of technical careers, to work to save such programs before the ax falls, to encourage state legislators to meet technical school needs and, perhaps most important, to recruit more students. It needn't be expensive.

The AED Foundation, on a website called [AEDCreativeConnections.com](http://AEDCreativeConnections.com), is compiling the results of successful efforts by individual businesses and groups of businesses to form partnerships with schools. Already there are more than 30 examples, which are very instructive for those interested in starting local initiatives. Many ideas involve loaning or contributing machines and tools to technical schools that have difficulty procuring them otherwise.

Without more industry support of these schools, we might as well put our heads in concrete rather than sand. Massingham warns that if machinery manufacturers and dealerships don't help out more, there won't be any more programs.

Acton offered another reminder: If it weren't for friends in the industry who support the Ferris State training program, he and other instructors wouldn't be involved in the industry, either.