

Data center tech program attracting more students

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

When students complete Blue Mountain Community College's nine-month data center technician program, many won't have to leave their hometown to find a job.

"I'd love to stay local," said Noah Davis, a Hermiston resident currently studying in the program. "They're expanding so much, there's not a reason to leave."

"They," as many students and professors are hesitant to say, are Amazon Web Services, which has several data centers at the ports of Morrow and Umatilla, and is constructing more in both counties.

As Amazon expands, so does the number of people wanting to get into the data center tech program.

For the 2018-19 school year, instructor Pete Hernberg said 54 people applied for the 20 available spots.

"The first year I was deathly afraid we wouldn't have any students at all," he said adding that they had to look for applicants. "Since then, we've had more interested than we're able to accommodate."

Ready to work

The program is tailored toward students who want to go directly into the workforce. Unlike many college programs, where students are required to take humanities courses or other core classes, the three-term program focuses squarely on IT — or information technology — and equips students to quickly get a technician job.

Hernberg said a company approached him about developing the program four



Joan Cardenas, left, and Christian Weyland, right, work on setting up a wired computer network with their lab partner Mandy Tobin, back, on Wednesday at BMCC Early Learning Center in Boardman.

STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

years ago.

"Prior to my working here, in Prineville I was involved in a somewhat similar program at Central Oregon Community College," he said.

While that program was unsuccessful, Hernberg said it left him with some ideas.

In November 2014, Hernberg said BMCC was approached by a local employer, whom he said he couldn't name due to a non-disclosure agreement with the company.

"They indicated to the college that they were expecting a lot of growth in the coming years, and they needed to have a large number of qualified technicians in the next three to five years," he said. "I worked

with them to develop a curriculum, specifically targeted to prepare students for employment."

The majority of students, he said, come from east Morrow and west Umatilla counties.

"Most of our grads are employed at data centers, and most are employed locally," he said. Though he said he didn't have exact numbers for how many students go on to get jobs at local data centers, he said 42 or 43 students of the 60 that have completed the program so far have gotten data center jobs — both locally and elsewhere. He said many students' first jobs out of the program can include internships or temporary contracts, not necessarily full-

time jobs.

Amazon financial support

On Aug. 15, BMCC announced that Amazon Web Services was putting \$50,000 toward scholarships for students currently in the data center technician program. Thirteen students applied for and will receive scholarships.

Hernberg said he was pleased with the funds.

"I know some specific situations where it's really made the difference between students being able to go to school or not go to school," he said.

Last Wednesday afternoon in the data center technician lab, students tried to figure out a problem: how

do they make two computers talk to each other? They worked on a simple static routing exercise, setting up two subnetworks and one router that connects them.

One group of students ran into a problem when they found out one of the switches wasn't communicating with one of the computers. Hernberg encouraged them to troubleshoot by connecting different cables to different ports, and trying to isolate where the problem was.

Solving those types of problem is one of the roadblocks students will have to deal with in a job as a data center technician.

"It's dealing with customer data, repairing servers and switches," Davis said. "Making sure everything is

upstreaming so there's no down time, so customers aren't losing access to their stuff, or credit card information to hackers."

Student backgrounds

Students in the program have a variety of backgrounds.

"I've always been interested in computers," said Jonathan Macias, a Hermiston resident. "When I got older, I started building them."

When he heard Amazon was opening data centers, he thought it was a good fit for him, and an opportunity to do IT work.

"Even if you don't want to start working with the company, what you learn here can be applied to any company," he said.

But most of the people in the program are interested in staying nearby.

"With Amazon building, and all the opportunities here, there's no reason to move that far away," said Shayla Preston.

Preston works 30 hours a week as a medical assistant at Good Shepherd Medical Center and had no background in computers when she started the program. She said she was drawn to the profession because of the pay and the independent nature of the work.

Mandy Tobin, a Boardman resident, said the program has been a good service for the region.

"I feel it's really helped the community learn more advanced skills," she said. "The program is very hands-on, and caters to (people) whether they're advanced in IT or have no IT background whatsoever."

Fire brings dangerous air into Umatilla County

By **KATHY ANEY**
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County's air quality deteriorated Sunday evening as smoke from multiple fires drifted into the area.

On Monday, smoke still shrouded Umatilla County like an unwanted houseguest that wouldn't leave.

The Hermiston Family Aquatic Center was closed all day to prevent families and staff from spending time in the smoke.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality measures the tiny particles and gases in smoke that can irritate lungs, eyes

and heart. The toxic mixture includes carbon monoxide, organic carbon and an array of 5,000-to-10,000 different gases. By midnight on Sunday, DEQ readings for Pendleton topped out at 404 micrograms per cubic meter, which is considered hazardous, while in Hermiston the air was merely "very unhealthy." The measurement refers to fine particulate matter with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers, which is 3 percent the diameter of a human hair. The tiny particles can be inhaled deep into the lungs of those who breathe them.

As fires dot the state, smoke would have rolled

into the area no matter which way the wind blew. Most flowed from British Columbia, where around 600 fires burned. A NASA satellite captured images of the smoke from space. A National Weather Service simulation shows smoke

flowing southwest into the Pacific Northwest from British Columbia and northeast from California and Oregon in two swirling masses of hazardous air.

Other fires, including one in Gilliam County, added to smogginess around the state.

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