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Rio Hondo College Receives Initial Approval for Four-Year Bachelor of Science Degree in Automotive Technology

WHITTIER, Calif. – Rio Hondo College on Tuesday was named as one of 15 California community colleges granted initial approval by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors to offer a four-year degree as part of a historic statewide pilot program.

The program will undergo additional review by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office before the Board of Governors considers final approval in March.

Thirty-four campuses sought approval of degrees in the program, authorized by Senate Bill 850 as a way to train a new generation of graduates for high-demand technical jobs that increasingly require bachelor degrees.

Rio Hondo College has proposed creating a Bachelor of Science degree in Automotive Technology that would position students for jobs in the automotive field and comparable posts at sea and rail transit companies.

"We are proud and humbled to be considered among those helping to lead this innovative new educational program," said Superintendent/President Teresa Dreyfuss. "Our selection is a testament to the strength of Rio Hondo's programs, especially our Automotive Technology program."

Under SB 850, signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in early October, community colleges must launch their bachelor programs by 2017-18 and sunset them by July 2023. Programs could be started as early as fall 2015, and the legislature and governor may renew the pilot effort after review.

Degree programs must not duplicate degrees offered by the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC). They also must be approved by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC).

Rio Hondo's Bachelor of Science degree would build on the school's highly successful Automotive Technology program, which draws 300 students annually for a series of certificate courses and two-year degree options. Enrollment in the program has climbed

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about 20 percent over the last five years as new components – including one in alternative fuels – have been added.

Two concentrations are being considered for the new degree – one in management and one focused on technical expertise.

“We’ve really tapped an area of strong interest. Students are already asking us how soon we could offer the program,” said Mike Slavich, Rio Hondo College’s Dean of Career and Technical Education programs. “We likely could launch classes well ahead of the 2017-18 deadline.”

The degree would equip graduates for a variety of posts with auto manufacturers, car dealers or aftermarket companies that modify vehicles – companies that typically demand four-year college degrees when hiring but which often have to train new employees because of the lack of comprehensive technical degree programs.

Posts include field service operations, fleet management, technical support activities, service/parts management, sales and marketing. Many of the jobs require a mesh of technical skills and understanding of customer service and needs.

Among the auto companies headquartered here are Kia, Hyundai and Honda, which partners with Rio Hondo’s two-year program. Toyota, Ford and Mazda also have strong programs in the region. The area is home to the Specialty Equipment Market Association, a trade association that includes manufacturers, distributors, retailers, auto restorers, street-rod builders, restylers, car clubs and race teams.

Rio Hondo Professor Steve Tomory, who would be the faculty adviser for the program, said graduates will have the skills to seek employment in related industries, too.

“These graduates would be well positioned not only for the auto industry, but also for jobs in the ports, airports and rail transportation systems,” Tomory said.

Students will take 65 units in lower-division courses at the current fee of \$46 a unit and about 60 units in upper-division courses at a cost of \$84 a unit to qualify for graduation.

At those fees, a bachelor’s degree offered through the community college system – including other fees and books – will cost about \$10,000. That’s less than two years’ tuition at CSU and less than one year’s tuition at UC.

It is estimated California needs 1 million more tech-oriented graduates to remain competitive. The legislation specifies such fields as health, biotech and public safety.

Community colleges in 21 states already offer four-year degrees.

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