

From Apprentice to Master

Olympic College and the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility partner to produce a skilled workforce capable of maintaining and restoring military ships.

DEBBIE RITENOUR

The apprenticeship program at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility develops today's journey-level workers and tomorrow's leaders.

At A Glance

The Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility apprenticeship program was established in 1901.

Olympic College oversees the academic portion of the program, which focuses on teaching technical and managerial skills.

Students earn two journey-level certificates and an associate degree in technical arts.



When the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility (PSNS & IMF) was established in Bremerton in 1891, skilled workers weren't always easy to come by. The shipyard needed a trained workforce capable of building, repairing and maintaining world-class ships and other naval assets.

Ten years later, the shipyard's leaders recognized the opportunity to develop workers from the local community, thereby ensuring the workers had the required experience and expertise. They chose six men to serve as apprentices and receive hands-on training and instruction.

Today, about 200 students graduate from the PSNS & IMF apprenticeship program each year. Graduates receive two journey-level worker certificates—one from the U.S. Department of the Navy

"The apprenticeship program is one of the most practical and sound training systems available to develop individuals into skilled journey-level workers."

— REUBEN FARLEY, APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM DIRECTOR, PSNS & IMF

www.awbinstitute.org
www.commerce.wa.gov/datadashboard

and one from the U.S. Department of Labor—as well as an associate degree in technical arts from Olympic College, which oversees the academic portion of the program.

At a time when employers are struggling to find enough workers, this 120-year-old program may serve as a model for other industries.

“The apprenticeship program is one of the most practical and sound training systems available to develop individuals into skilled journey-level workers,” said Reuben Farley, director of the program.

A COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM

The apprenticeship program has grown and evolved throughout its 120-year history. Olympic College, which serves about 13,000 students throughout Kitsap and Mason counties, developed the current curriculum in collaboration with shipyard leadership. Courses include everything from college-level physics and technical drawing to business English and organizational leadership and resource management.

“We want students to be quantitatively literate so when they analyze a problem and send it up to an engineer, it’s respected and understood,” said Bob Abel, professor of applied physics at Olympic College, who has taught in the program for 25 years.

Equally as important as the subjects students learn, however, are the problem-solving and critical-thinking skills they acquire along the way.

“The shipyard wants apprentices to be able to think and ask questions,” Abel said. “The curriculum is designed to create workers who don’t just do what they’re told, but at the same time know when to do what they’re told.”

The program takes four years to complete. During the first three years, students take classes for two weeks and then work on the docks for two weeks. The fourth year consists entirely of on-the-job training. The shipyard covers the cost of tuition and pays a full wage to students throughout the duration of their apprenticeship.

“It’s a rigorous program,” Abel said. “These folks earn their degrees. There’s no doubt about that.”

When they graduate, students are fully prepared and certified to work in one of 26 trades, which include machinist, painter, rigger, shipwright, high-voltage electrician and toolmaker. They also have developed the skills and knowledge needed to advance to supervisory and management positions with the shipyard should they choose to do so.

“Most of the civilian management at the shipyard went through the program,” Abel said. “We’re not just preparing them for their trade.”

The program serves as the model for other naval apprenticeship programs across the country. In 2010, PSNS & IMF and Olympic College won the Excellence in Apprenticeship Award for Outstanding Partnership at the Pacific Northwest Apprenticeship Education Conference, and in 2017, Olympic College won the Outstanding College/Corporate Partnership Award from the American Association of Community Colleges in recognition of the program’s success.

LEARNING TO LEAD

Farley, the apprenticeship program’s current director, graduated from the program in 2002. Two weeks before his first day of classes, he was managing a bar and restaurant.

“I had just had my first child and bought a house close to the shipyard,” Farley said. “I was looking for a stable career. This was an opportunity to come into something with zero knowledge. Within four years, I was making a pretty good wage.”



“We teach them how to lead. That starts with being able to lead yourself first.”

— REUBEN FARLEY, APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM DIRECTOR, PSNS & IMF



When Farley joined the program in 1998, anyone could apply. Today, the official apprenticeship program is offered only to current shipyard workers. However, a separate helper program is available for students interested in entry-level employment with the shipyard. There is also an internship program for high school students.

After graduation, Farley began his career with the shipyard as a journey-level rigger and spent six years mastering the trade. In 2008, he was promoted to work leader, and a year after that, he became an apprentice trade instructor. He continued to move up the ranks and was named director of the program in 2016. While he is aware that his own career path might serve as an inspiration for many apprentices, Farley doesn't believe that is the only route to success.

"If I asked a student what they thought the biggest benefit of the program was, they'd probably say the fast track to being a superintendent when they're done," Farley said. "I don't necessarily agree. We teach them how to lead. That starts with being able to lead yourself first."

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

PSNS & IMF has a long and rich history. During World War I, the shipyard built hundreds of ships, including two minesweepers, seven submarines, 25 submarine chasers and 1,700 small boats. In World

"[Students] develop a lot of self-confidence, and they realize their dreams are achievable."

— BOB ABEL, PROFESSOR OF APPLIED PHYSICS, OLYMPIC COLLEGE

War II, the shipyard repaired the five battleships that survived the attack on Pearl Harbor and serviced nearly one-third of the entire U.S. fleet.

Today, PSNS & IMF is the biggest naval shore facility in the Pacific Northwest and one of the largest industrial installations in the state. It is the only shipyard capable of deactivating and recycling nuclear-powered ships.

Having the opportunity to grow their careers at such a prestigious employer is a major draw for apprentices. But that is just one of the program's many perks.

"Apprentices find out more about their potential," Abel said. "Maybe they didn't do well in high school because they didn't see a purpose for what they were learning. They come through this program, and we focus on teaching them how to learn, not just how to get a grade. They develop a lot of self-confidence, and they realize their dreams are achievable." ☰