

## **Technicians needed: new curriculum established, problem solved A case study in work force development and training**

Maintaining and repairing heavy aircraft requires a team with a number of specialized skills working in a variety of areas, including sheet metal, engines, electrical, hydraulics and more. Someone who has been trained in several related disciplines can earn an Airframe and Powerplant license to be an A&P technician.

Aviation maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) companies require a bevy of A&P's on staff to complete the task of returning airplanes to the skies following routine light and heavy maintenance checks.

Empire Aero Center was struggling to fill A&P positions after opening its doors in January 2004. A concerted effort recruited A&P technicians from around the country, but a source of talent was closer to the company's Rome, New York operations – local residents who just needed some training.

In the fall of 2004 Mohawk Valley EDGE worked with Empire Aero Center, Working Solutions and BOCES Consortium of Continuing Education to set up a structural technician training program. Under the supervision of a licensed A&P technician, the participants spent approximately 20 hours each week in a classroom-based learning environment, and the same amount of time shadowing a licensed Empire Aero Center A&P technician to receive practical hands-on training and learn the basic skills required to work in the sheet metal repair segment of the aircraft maintenance industry.

Three sessions of the 12-week, 480-hour program were conducted over the course a year, training 28 people, all of whom were hired by Empire Aero Center as sheet metal technicians. The 480 hours of course time could be applied toward Repairman certification requirements.

This effort, however, was just an interim measure until a full A&P curriculum could be developed by Mohawk Valley Community College, which has a campus just a half mile from the Griffiss Airfield where Empire is located.

With Mohawk Valley EDGE helping bring the parties together, MVCC developed an A&P curriculum to fit the needs of Empire Aero Center, and Oneida County (sponsor of the community college and operator of the Griffiss Airfield) invested \$2 million to renovate a former Air Force hangar just a few hundred yards from Empire's headquarters to serve as the program's home. The school is in session year-round so students can complete the FAA-required 1,905 hours in 12 months of class work. Students work on a variety of aircraft and engines, including a

Boeing 727-100 donated by FedEx Corporation, and are taught by instructors, many of whom are Empire Aero Center employees.

The first class of 10 students started in August 2006 and will graduate in August 2007. All have been offered jobs at Empire immediately upon graduation. Some will accept the offer, while others will seek employment in the industry elsewhere. Those who accept can literally roll their tool cabinet out of MVCC's Aviation Training Center, across the tarmac and into Empire's hangar.

A second class of 18 began in December 2006 and will graduate in December 2007. The third class of 22 began in April 2007 and will graduate in April 2008. The fourth class to begin in August 2007 is expected to be at capacity of 25 students, and all classes going forward are expected to be full as well.

Students include displaced workers and high school students – ages range from 18 to 53. Through BOCES, high school seniors are able to complete the first 400 hours, allowing them to save one-third of the tuition.

Empire Aero Center has grown from about 150 people in 2004 – about half management and half direct employees working on aircraft – to more than 400 in the summer of 2007, with all but about 75 indirect employees working on aircraft. With plans to add 10 mechanics a month until they reach 1,000 workers, there is room for all of the students who graduate from the MVCC program.