

Career Series Articles

Collision Repair: a trade and an art

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"From the mechanical and electronic components, to the structural elements, to even the very finish and color, all aspects of today's cars are high-technology and very sophisticated" said Donald Thompson, program manager for the **Automotive Collision Repair and Refinishing program** at Florida Community College. "Auto repair shop employers expect the same of their technicians," Thompson said.

Emily Bradsher is one of the students in the FCCJ program, housed at the College's Downtown Campus. During the course of the program, she and the other students have classroom instruction, hands-on training in a state-of-the-art lab, and the opportunity for paid internships. Bradsher recently began working for an auto parts supplier, reporting in the afternoons when finished with her morning classes.

"I've been working on cars since my childhood," Bradsher says, when asked how she became interested in auto repair. "I've just always been attracted to the appearance," she explained. She moved to Florida from California in 2005 with her husband, a military man. She decided she wanted to focus on a career and achieve a goal, instead of just working jobs. That's a good thing for Bradsher and for the collision repair profession.

"There's a growing shortage of trained technicians in all aspects of auto repair, and shops won't hire someone without experience," said Glenn Lynch, one of Bradsher's instructors. Lynch has 30 years of experience in auto body repair and body shop management. He knows what employers seek in employees.

"Employers look for enthusiasm, technical knowledge and real-world experience," he said. "Reliability is important. Show up on time. Follow instructions." Lynch works with students to help develop communication skills for working with customers.

The technical knowledge gained in the program, which takes a year to complete, includes basic and advanced courses auto painting, body repair and auto glass. There is also training in frame straightening, auto welding, custom painting, sheet metal and panel replacement.

A course in estimating aids in diagnosing problems. "A car hit in the front may also have damage in the back," Program Manager Thompson points out.

Partnerships with industry leaders ensure students have access to up-to-date equipment and technology. According to Thompson, Toyota and Lexus have only four national training centers for collision repair and painting. FCCJ is one of them. A partnership with DuPont Paints provides highest quality materials and instruction. Most recently, a unique partnership with Travelers of Florida will provide students with autos that have been deemed totaled, but still have educational value as they will have a steady supply of complete vehicles for real-world training. Other industry partnerships provide equipment and dealerships offer paid internships for students.

Student Claudio Joya is changing careers after working for a financial services company for several years. He developed his interest in working on cars at age 12 with his brother's car. He suggests young students who are considering auto body repair as a career should develop their math skills, including algebra and geometry. Those skills are employed in the technical work and for estimating.

Full-time students can complete the program in one year at a cost of around \$3,000. It results in a workforce certificate. According to Thompson, FCCJ automotive graduates have about a 90 percent immediate placement rate. Entry-level pay begins at about \$30,000 annually and increases to about \$50,000 after five years. With experience, income potential can reach as much as \$80,000 or more for top-notch technicians. A night program is also available for students with daytime commitments. It can be completed in two years.

For more information about FCCJ's Collision Repair and Refinishing program or **other automotive programs**, call 904.646.2300.

*Tuition and fees are subject to change by action of the College's District Board of Trustees. Current tuition and fees will be posted at the time of registration.

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To request information, contact the Learner Support Center at info@fccj.edu or 904.646.2300.

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