In Long Beach, city college helps train harbor truckers

Most sectors of trucking complain it's hard to hire qualified drivers, but drayage company owners at congested ports say they face increasing competition for drivers from over-the-road competitors such as less-than-truckload carriers.

Long Beach City College, supported by the Harbor Trucking Association, has a 14-week program that is helping to put more drivers behind the wheel of drayage trucks, whether as employees or owner operators. “This is a short-term career training program that gets people trained and into the industry,” said Dana Friez, workforce development training manager at California's LBCC.

The community college is situated in the largest U.S. port complex, with drayage operators in high demand at the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles. The two cities had an unemployment rate of 6 percent in January, according to U.S. data, higher than the national 4.9 percent average. But it's still difficult to find workers who want to either own or lease a truck or drive one.

“Our top need is access to qualified drivers,” said Michael Mayor, president of Mayor Logistics and vice president of the Harbor Trucking Association, which represents drayage carriers at the Southern California ports. “We have an academic solution as well as a professional solution.”

The HTA worked with LBCC to develop the professional training program, which has placed 125 to 130...
individuals in truck cabs since 2013, Friez and Mayor said at the 16th annual TPM Conference earlier this month. “We’ve taken people who are unemployed and underemployed, and even people who are homeless, and in 14 weeks taken them to the point where they’re making $40,000 to $70,000 a year,” Fred Johring, president of Golden State Logistics and chairman of the HTA said at TPM. The LBCC truck driver training, he pointed out, is free.

“Some of our most successful graduates are not people who would have had the money up front to go through this training,” Johring said. There still are issues, he said, including insurance requirements. But the program is growing and producing more graduates.

The program is designed with port drayage in mind, and is significantly more substantive than many commercial driver’s license training programs, Friez said. “We train for 14 weeks, about 5 days week, and we provide overall 200 hours of behind-the-wheel training,” she said. “That’s significant when you look at private CDL schools that will turn people around in two to three weeks. We also provide coursework for hazardous materials and other endorsements.”

The level of detail in the coursework helps the students get insurance coverage, even without prior driving experience, she said. The new drivers then get two to three months additional training with their employers or contractual partners, if they decide to become owner operators.

Most of the trainees are not millennials new to the job market, but older workers looking for a better source of employment or business opportunity, Friez said. “The ports are well known here. People know there’s money to be made at the ports. They just don’t know how to do it.”

Improving the image of the drayage driver and harbor trucking is still the key to attracting more people to the program and the industry, Mayor said. “People have an image of the truck going down the road with a big plume of smoke, but that’s not the driver today. We have all kinds of technology in the cab, we have electronic logs, we’re super-specialized in what we do.”

Programs like the LBCC training course could help influence public perception of truck driving, if more community colleges were to partner with industry and adopt them, Friez and Mayor said.

Contact William B. Cassidy at bill.cassidy@ihs.com and follow him on Twitter: @wbcassidy_joc