

# On the Rebound

With IT workers back in demand, Ridgewater is expanding its Computer Systems Technology program courses to the Willmar campus.

**Quick quiz:** Can you name one of today's fastest-growing occupations—both around the country and in Minnesota?

Would you believe that it's IT/computer support? Despite the common perception that the sector is still suffering from the post-dot-com meltdown blues, demand for IT workers—and particularly skilled computer support specialists—has increased dramatically of late. In an effort to help meet that demand and to make its Network System Administrator program available to a broader range of students, Ridgewater College is now offering Computer Systems Technology (CST) program courses on the Willmar campus this fall.

"People have been discouraged from going into the field," says Jeff Polman, an instructor in the CST program since 1999. "Now there are all kinds of jobs at the entry level."

Statistics on both federal and state levels give testimony to the industry's growth. "When we looked at statistics from both the Federal Bureau of Labor and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development [DEED], they showed that, for graduates of associate degree programs, computer support led the way in both wages and job growth," says Mike Boehme, dean of instruction for Ridgewater's technical programs. "DEED

sees a 31 percent increase in these jobs between 2000 and 2012; that's pretty significant. And it shows a 2004 median annual wage of \$62,711."

Meanwhile, Federal Bureau of Labor statistics show a median annual wage of \$59,480. "When we looked at that, we thought that this is a program we need to expand," Boehme says. "We also looked at the number of students coming from Willmar and found that we weren't serving them as well as we could with the program only being offered in Hutchinson."

With all of that in mind, the decision to expand the accessibility of courses for the Network System Administration degree was a logical one, particularly since most computers in the business world today are networked, and security is a critical element of those systems. "Security has become a very important part of our program," Boehme says. "On the Willmar campus we already have a Cisco program [developed by global computer giant Cisco Corp.]; four of those courses are part of the Networking degree."

CST courses will be offered through a variety of channels and at various times in hopes of making them available to full- and part-time students. Along with traditional classroom instruction, students will have access to online courses, interactive TV, and videoconferencing. Courses also will be offered during the day and in the evenings.

Polman sees a strong future for students earning degrees in Ridgewater's CST program. "The techs from our program basically have their pick of jobs," he says.

*For more information on the CST program, see [www.ridgewater.edu](http://www.ridgewater.edu).*



— Vicki Stavig

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