

Example of Excellence

Western Area Power Administration — Upper Great Plains Region (UGPR)
System Operator Development Programs

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In 2004, UGPR recognized a need for a cost-effective process to recruit and train new system operators in preparation for future vacancies due to its aging operations staff. In reviewing the available training resources, UGPR recognized the Electrical Transmission System Technology (ETST) program at Bismarck State College (BSC) as an excellent resource that could free up in-house training resources to focus on the needs of its certified system operators and provide entry-level personnel the required academic structure to develop as system operators. Through an arrangement with BSC, UGPR has developed and implemented two system operator development pilot programs: one to identify and train BSC students for system operator positions while working as temporary employees and another to allow current employees to train as prospective system operators while continuing to perform their regular duties.

UGPR designed the student program as a way to hire and evaluate BSC students as temporary employees that receive full-time pay while completing their studies at BSC. The students do not have a guarantee of a job at the end of the program and must maintain adequate grades to remain in the program. This program provides students the opportunity to work part time at UGPR and utilize the BSC ETST curriculum to complete their technical training to become system operators. The BSC online courses are available around-the-clock, and students can expect to spend approximately 20 hours per week on course work and 20 hours per week working with UGPR's on-shift system operators and trainers. The part-time work at UGPR allows students to gain specific experience related to UGPR's operations while providing UGPR the opportunity to evaluate the students as potential system operators.

UGPR designed a second pilot program for existing employees. The program provides UGPR employees the opportunity to determine whether they are interested in becoming system operators before making the decision to change career paths by allowing them to continue performing the functions of their current positions while completing the BSC ETST program. This program allows UGPR to train prospective system operators and have them on stand-by until a vacancy occurs.

BSC has been one of the nation's premier energy education trainers since 1976 and provides education and training programs in power plant, process plant, electric power, electrical transmission systems, and nuclear power technologies. BSC is a NERC-approved continuing education provider and offers the following advantages to its students and the energy industry:

- Students simultaneously earn college credits and NERC continuing education hours
- Accredited programs lead to Associate in Applied Science degrees that are transferable into Bachelor of Applied Science degree
- Available online courses save travel time and costs while offering convenience for part-time students
- Programs provide qualified instructor-led courses with curriculum developed by and for the industry

BSC has been awarded government grants and is currently building a National Center of Energy Excellence. For more information, visit <http://www.bismarckstate.edu/energy/>.

The remote location of the UGPR control facilities, like many others in the industry, leads to some difficulty in hiring and training personnel for system operator positions. The partnership arrangement with BSC enables UGPR to identify new candidates for system operator positions and develop them as employees; UGPR has two system operators on staff today as a result of these pilot programs. With the energy industry facing significant numbers of retirements in the next few years in system operations' technical and management areas, NERC recognizes UGPR's pilot programs and partnership arrangement with BSC as an important model for the electric utility industry and cites this as an example of excellence.