

SPECIAL REPORT / THE FUTURE OF ARKANSAS'S VO-TECH SYSTEM

Vo-tech schools may get new image

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going to sacrifice two of the largest populations in the state, the adult education population and the vocational-technical population, for such a small segment of the population," Raymond Morrison, director of the Vo-Tech Division, said.

Morrison said the 24 vo-tech schools scattered around the state provided good access to post-secondary educational opportunities and coordinated well with high school vo-tech programs.

State Rep. John Lipton of Warren, who will be speaker of the House in 1991, said the current system was good but did not get enough support from the state. He sponsored the legislation that created the current set-up and served on the National Advisory Council for Vocational Education under President Jimmy Carter. He noted that Oklahoma's successful vo-tech program was modeled after Arkansas's.

"We've got the structure," he said. "We just haven't funded it."

Gerald Fisher, president of Garland County Community College, disagrees. He estimated that 30,000 people in the state don't go to school because they have no access to academic programs. He based his estimate on the fact that Arkansas has 15,000 students, 20 percent of its total college enrollment, in two-year colleges, while the national average is 47 percent.

Morrison disputes that estimate. In states with similar programs, he said, only about 10 percent of the students enrolled in vo-techs would be interested in programs more advanced than the certificate programs offered at the vo-tech schools.

"I just have difficulty believing that there are 30,000 students who are going to appear suddenly who want associate degrees," he said.

Fisher said, though, the vast majority of students in his "missing 30,000" were not interested in vo-tech certificates, so they are not enrolled anywhere.

Morrison and Paul Marion, former director of the Higher Education Department, have a plan that

leaves the administrative set-up alone but develops more cooperative programs for associate degrees.

The plan recommends a state Technical Degree Commission made up of three members from the Vo-Tech board and three from the Board of Higher Education. The commission would encourage vo-tech schools and community colleges to cooperate in offering associate of applied science degrees.

Technical courses could be taken at the vo-tech schools and academic courses at the community colleges. If the schools in a student's area did not have a cooperative program, the student could take courses at both schools and petition the commission for a degree.

The plan calls for \$2.5 million annually to help schools pay for the equipment and library materials.

The state Vo-Tech board and the Board of Higher Education both endorsed the plan in April. The state Technical Education Enhancement Study Committee, an ad-hoc group created by the legislature in 1989 to look at the vo-tech system, essentially endorsed the plan in June.

State Sen. Lu Hardin of Russellville, chairman of the state Advisory Council for Vocational-Technical Education, said he was leaning toward introducing a bill based on the plan in the 1991 regular session.

However, others have attacked the plan, saying it does little to increase educational opportunities. Three separate plans have been advanced that call for upgrading the vo-tech schools to community colleges and placing the schools under a separate board.

The first plan, which predates the Marion-Morrison proposal, came from the Arkansas Business Council, a group of the state's wealthiest businessmen, in September 1988. The council recommended putting the high school vo-tech programs under the Board of Education and the post-secondary vo-tech schools under a separate board. It would function under the Board of Higher Education,

much as the University of Arkansas board of trustees does.

Among the board's missions would be to upgrade as many schools as possible to community colleges and to merge vo-techs and community colleges in the same adjoining counties.

The report identifies four sites with vo-tech schools and community colleges in close proximity as prime targets: Hot Springs, Harrison, Forrest City and Mississippi County.

Archie Schaffer III, executive director of the council, said the council believed the vo-tech schools were not getting their fair share of attention under the Department of Education, which is concerned mainly with general education. He said advancing technology had put most vocational education at the college level anyway.

Morrison said the emphasis would shift away from vocational training to academic courses if the schools were upgraded to community colleges. Then, he said, the people who need the vocational training to move into the workforce will get the short end of the stick.

Schaffer pointed out that three schools in the state, Westark Community College at Fort Smith, Phillips County Community College and Rich Mountain Community College at Mena, currently offer technical programs along with the academics. Joel Stubblefield, president of Westark, said he thought his school had succeeded in balancing the two.

"There will be periods of time when the technical programs will flourish because of some new job opportunities in town, and there will be other times that the academic side will be growing faster," he said.

Fisher has proposed a similar plan that would place the vo-tech schools together with the state's 11 two-year colleges under an independent board.

His plan also calls for merging vo-techs and two-year colleges close to each other and upgrading more isolated vo-tech schools.

Fisher said his plan would especially benefit Pulaski County,

which he identified as one of two large metropolitan areas in the nation without a community college. Pulaski Vo-Tech in North Little Rock could draw as many as 15,000 students if upgraded to a community college, he said.

Morrison's fears that technical courses would become second-class were unfounded because the students who only wanted vo-tech certificates would not enter academic courses regardless of their availability, he said.

"We should be able to come up with a plan that will put whatever college courses are needed in the community, remembering that the people won't come if [the courses are] not needed," Fisher said. Fisher has estimated that his plan, including upgrading vo-tech teacher salaries to community college levels, would cost about \$30 million.

"I don't think the opposition will be on money at all," he added. "I think it's on concepts. I'd be against pouring \$30 million into the system as it is now."

Nelson also has proposed putting vo-tech schools under a separate board. He said he might eventually support putting two-year colleges under the board, as Fisher's plan does.

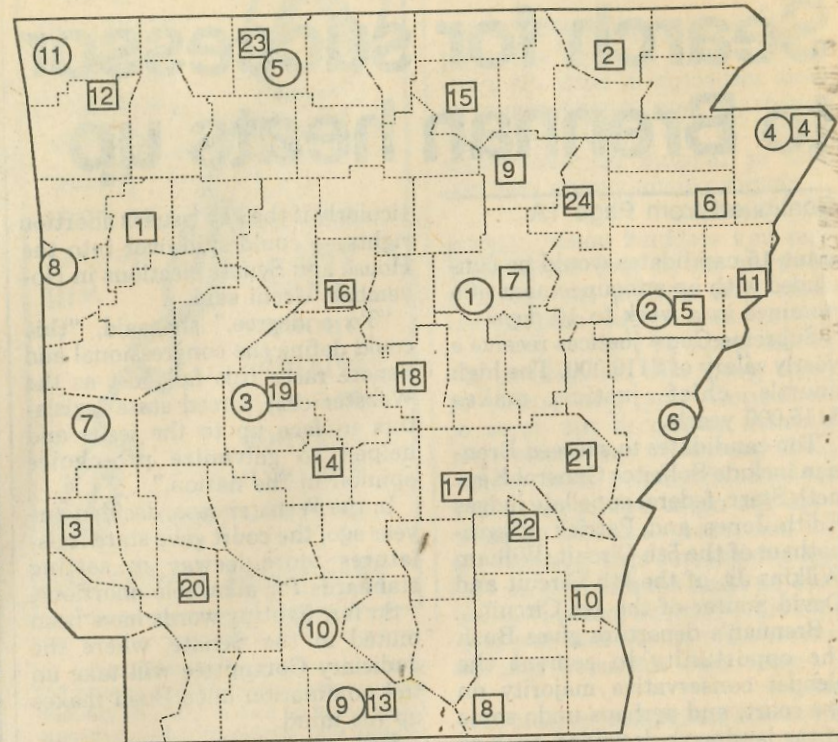
He also would expand programs at the vo-techs, offering two-year programs and cooperative degree programs with community colleges if accreditation problems prevented the vo-techs from offering associate degrees.

Nelson said the schools probably would need more money from the state, but that the improved schools would attract more students, and, therefore, more revenues.

Nelson also said he would set up programs in hospitality services technology at the vo-tech schools in Harrison, Hot Springs and Little Rock to train people to work in the tourist economy.

Clinton said was still examining how the schools should be governed, but he said he did not think governance was the priority issue.

"What I think we need to do now is to transform the system that we have now into a system of compre-



□ Vocational-Technical Schools

- 1. Arkansas Valley
- 2. Black River
- 3. Cassatot
- 4. Cotton Boll
- 5. Crowley's Ridge
- 6. Delta
- 7. Foothills
- 8. Forest Echoes
- 9. Gateway
- 10. Great Rivers
- 11. Mid-South
- 12. Northwest
- 13. Oil Belt
- 14. Ouachita
- 15. Ozarka
- 16. Petit Jean
- 17. Pines
- 18. Pulaski
- 19. Quapaw
- 20. Red River
- 21. Rice Belt
- 22. Riverside
- 23. Twin Lakes
- 24. White River

○ Two-year Colleges

- 1. Arkansas State University - Beebe
- 2. East Arkansas Community College
- 3. Garland County Community College
- 4. Mississippi County Community College
- 5. North Arkansas Community College
- 6. Phillips County Community College
- 7. Rich Mountain Community College
- 8. Westark Community College
- 9. Southern Arkansas University - El Dorado
- 10. S.A.U. - Tech
- 11. Northwest Arkansas Community College

The state's vo-tech schools offer technical courses, while the two-year colleges offer academic courses and college degrees.

Dan Morris/Gazette Staff

hensive lifetime centers so that everyone will be within driving distance of the kind of education that they need," he said.

Clinton said he would favor upgrading some of the vo-tech schools, notably Mid-South Vo-Tech at West Memphis, to community colleges, and alliances be-

tween vo-techs and nearby two-year colleges.

"I haven't worked out in my mind what the governance of these schools should be," he said, "but I do know what they should look like, and that's a local equivalent of Westark, a school that's responsive to the needs of the area."

Proposed vo-tech plans

Candidates tinker with vo-tech

Plans emphasize academic upgrade

By Michael Arbanas
Gazette Staff

Some think the state's vocational-technical education system does a good job, though recognizing it needs more money and a few more programs.

Others believe the system falls woefully short, leaving as many as 30,000 people without access to the education they need to improve themselves and attract jobs to the state. They want a major overhaul.

As the gubernatorial campaign heats up and the 1991 legislative session nears, vo-tech education is becoming a hot topic.

For more than two years, state and private boards, committees, councils and other groups have been looking for ways

■ A list of the vo-tech plans/10A

to improve the system. Sheffield Nelson has made it a major plank in his gubernatorial campaign.

"I think it's going to be a bigger issue in the campaign than a lot of people think," Nelson, a Republican, said Wednesday. "I think a lot of working people out there are in tune with what's going on in the vo-tech area."

Gov. Bill Clinton said the issue of vocational education and training would be an important one both in the election and with the General Assembly.

"If I win this race, it certainly will be at the forefront of the next legislative session," Clinton, a Democrat, said Friday.

At issue is whether to change the system under which the state's 24 vo-tech schools are governed.

Since 1981, the vo-tech system has been a division of the state Department

of Education. The Vo-Tech Division administers adult education, literacy programs and high school vocational education as well as the 24 post-secondary schools.

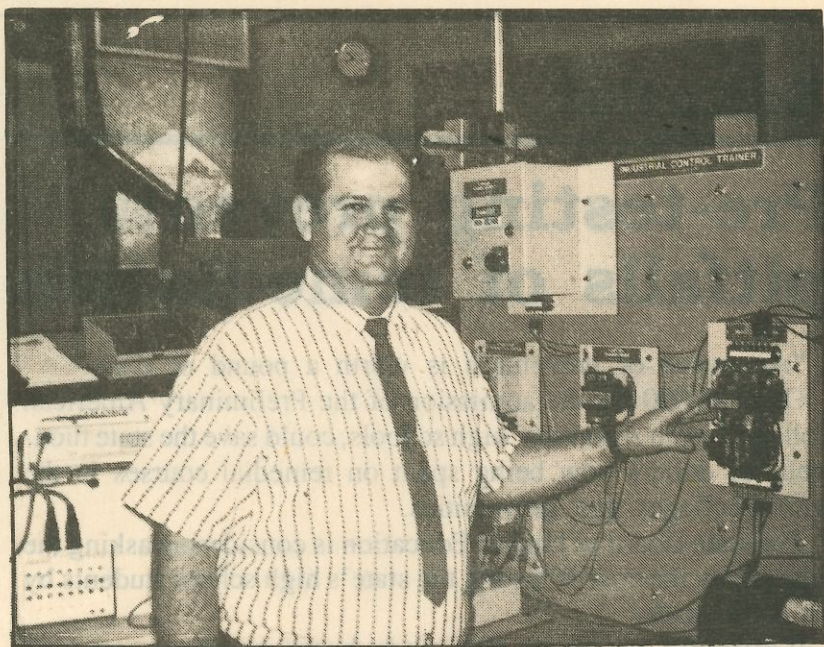
Several proposals have been advanced to break the schools and the adult education programs away from the Education Department and put them under a separate board — either with or without the state's 11 two-year colleges — and upgrading the vo-tech schools, which offer technical courses, to community colleges, which offer academic classes and associate degrees.

The state boards of Higher Education and Vo-Tech Education and an ad-hoc committee that spent more than a year studying the issue, think that would be a mistake.

"What I'm concerned with is that we're

See VO-TECH/10A

EVENTS



Jim Hendrix, OVT graduate.

Hendrix earns degree, achieves satisfaction

By **RONNIE THOMPSON**
Ouachita Vocational Technical School

Education is one way to achieve job satisfaction. Not being able to see the end results or the day-to-day routine of a dead-end job can be very monotonous and frustrating. Jim Hendrix, a recent graduate of Ouachita Vocational Technical School, had these problems.

Hendrix retired from the military in 1988. At that time he said he had no idea what his next career move would be. He decided to attend Ouachita Vo-Tech, where he recently graduated from the electronic's program, but it took a lot of consideration before he made his career choice.

"I couldn't decide on a school or a career," Hendrix said. "So, one day my mother-in-law asked me what I wanted to do and I told her 'fix things.'"

"I got a good feeling about the school after visiting the campus and talking with electronics instructor Gary Ingle and that is when I made my decision," Hendrix said.

"It has really paid off. The whole time I was in the military, I never got to see the end results of my work," Hendrix said. "Now, in the electronics field, when I go into a business office and the machine doesn't work,

we fix it and then watch it work."

Hendrix says seeing the end result makes the people who use the machines happy and gives him a sense of job satisfaction.

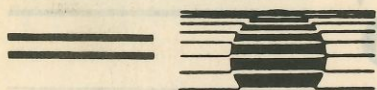
Hendrix said his age and money were key obstacles in his attending Ouachita. "I was older than most of the students and some of the instructors. Money was also tight; however, I was luckier than some because I had a G.I. Bill and my wife worked."

He also drove the school's bus to earn extra money while in school and also saved him the cost of driving to school from Arkadelphia.

But Hendrix says it was well worth the sacrifices. He said the training he received at Ouachita has helped him tremendously in his new job as an electronics technician.

"A lot of the copy machines I repair are mechanical things. Every piece of equipment we work on has electronic equipment on it," Hendrix said. "All the things I see regarding electronics and mechanics, I remember studying at school. Without this basic knowledge, I wouldn't be able to do my job."

If you would like more information on course-offerings at Ouachita Vocational Technical School, call 332-3658.



Editorial

Pre-testing prevents pitfalls of remediation

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Or \$120,000 for the admission of the Preliminary American College Test in Arkansas' high schools, could save the state thousands of dollars now being spent on remedial courses in the state's colleges and universities.

The state Board of Higher Education is considering asking the state to pay the cost of testing the state's high school students by the 10th grade.

If given the test by the 10th grade, board members were told, student difficulties could be detected early, helping to reduce college expenditures on remedial courses later.

In the 1988-89 school year 59 percent of the state's incoming freshmen required remedial math courses, 41 percent remedial reading courses and 39 percent remedial writing.

If detected early, problems in these areas could be spear-headed and dealt with on a more individualized basis at the high school level than at the college level.

Early testing would also help school districts determine areas of weakness within their curriculums, therefore improving the quality of education for all students.

The state's colleges and universities were created as institutions of higher education, not as institutional checks for the shortcomings of the state's secondary and elementary schools.

In order for education to reach new heights in Arkansas, on all levels, from elementary to post-secondary, students in need of remedial assistance must be reached before they enter a state college or university.

Legislators across the state should seriously consider the option of pre-testing as compared to college-level remedial courses.

The \$120,000 spent up-front, could save the state millions and upgrade the quality of education for all.