

## COS Learning Environment was Worth the Hour Commute

In his late 20's, Angel Gutierrez was motivated to attend College of the Sequoias (COS) on his girlfriend's recommendation as well as his desire to make a better living. He started in the fall of 2020, with the intention of gaining skills for a steady blue-collar job. He enjoyed what he was learning so much that he earned both a Certificate of Achievement and Associate of Science in Environmental Control Technology (Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning - HVAC) as well as a Certificate of Achievement in Industrial Maintenance. Today, he has a career with a future in power plant operations maintenance at Wellhead Electric Company, Inc. in Fresno.

After high school, Gutierrez took advantage of the growing gig economy, working as an independent contractor. "I liked the independence but consistent work wasn't promised," said Gutierrez. "The pay was insufficient and varied from week to week." Although he was living in Fresno, he had heard good things about COS. "My girlfriend was going to COS and she pushed me to apply," said Gutierrez. "I started taking general education classes and then enrolled in the one-year Environmental Control Technology program to become a HVAC technician."

He really enjoyed the learning environment at COS. "Going to COS was a great experience," said Gutierrez. "I felt so welcomed by the instructors, my peer group and the staff. I liked it so much that I was willing to drive an hour each way, every day, for over two years to attend classes."

The instructors were very supportive, according to Gutierrez. "Bill Reilly had years and years of HVAC experience," said Gutierrez. "He was always able to answer my questions and would take the time to explain things so I'd understand." Bill Reilly, Environmental Control Technology Instructor, indicated that Gutierrez was highly motivated to complete the 32-credit program spread over two semesters. "Angel was very determined to succeed and earned straight A's," said Reilly. "The program covers refrigerant diagnostics, sealed systems and electrical. When something goes wrong, it takes an electro-mechanical mindset to troubleshoot the system. Angel wanted learn all he could about diagnostics."

The college provided a lot of support to students, explained Gutierrez. "Lisette Conway, CTE Student Success Coordinator, was awesome," said Gutierrez. "She helped with resume building, sent job announcements and provided anything students needed to prepare themselves to transition to a career. For example, it was exciting to meet people who worked in the industry at college barbeques with contractors."

Reilly explained that COS is committed to helping students get started in their careers. "Lisette from the Student Success and Career Center came into my classroom once a week to offer help in preparing for interviews, responding to want ads and supplying new dress clothes to wear to an interview," said Reilly. "The college also holds a major Career Technical Education hiring event in March with over 75 employers conducting on-the-spot interviews."

There are many local career opportunities in HVAC with home builders, dairy manufacturers and fruit packing houses, according to Reilly. "With 70,000 HVAC technicians retiring nationwide in the next three years, employers are eager to hire our graduates," said Reilly. "In addition to the college programs, we encourage students to earn industry certifications with the Refrigeration Service Engineers Society (RSES) or North American Technician Excellence (NATE).



HVAC technician salaries start at \$20-22 per hour, quickly get a boost after a proving period of 30-90 days and in five to seven years, technicians can earn \$50-70 per hour.”

Gutierrez credits his girlfriend with making it possible to stay in school. “COS financial aid helped, too,” said Gutierrez. “Since I was driving so far, each day, receiving gas gift cards made a difference. COVID grants also resulted in vouchers that paid for my books and supplies. And, the success center helped with things like making copies and other resources for students.”

After completing the Environmental Control Technology with a Certificate of Achievement and Associate of Science degree, Gutierrez decided that he wanted to pursue a career in industrial HVAC or become an industrial maintenance mechanic. “So, I enrolled in the COS Industrial Maintenance program for the next fall,” said Gutierrez. “Over the summer, I landed a job with the Bowlero bowling center as a pinsetter mechanic. When I returned to school, I was able to keep working at Bowlero in the evenings. Everything I was learning in the COS Industrial Maintenance program related to what I was doing on the job.”

Once he had his Certificate of Achievement in Industrial Maintenance in-hand, Gutierrez had several interviews. “I received two job offers at double the pay range I had been making,” said Gutierrez. “I selected the plant assistant position with Wellhead Electric Company, Inc. working as a maintenance tech in power plant operations maintenance.” Gutierrez indicated that he finds the work as an industrial mechanic very satisfying. “I definitely see myself staying in this industry,” said Gutierrez. “My favorite part is troubleshooting. I have to deal with issue or systems that aren’t working and use whatever I have available to get it back online. I like getting my hands on the problem and fixing it.”

Now, Gutierrez is excited about learning more about automation. “I’m taking night classes at Fresno City College,” said Gutierrez. “I’m continuing to learn more about electrical systems and am aiming to get an automation certificate.”

Gutierrez says he was lucky that his girlfriend was so supportive. “My life has changed since I started at COS,” said Gutierrez. “Bill Reilly in HVAC and Shane Souza in Industrial Maintenance were excellent instructors and very encouraging. The supportive atmosphere made me willing to commute the long distance to attend COS. My advice, to those thinking about going back to school, is to enroll at COS, hear them out and get it done. I took the first step to come to COS and look where I am now, with a rewarding career as an industrial maintenance mechanic.”

