NORTHERN MAINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

News Release

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NMCC ensures students are both academically and physically prepared to enter wind power technology program

Aroostook County **-** Climbing a 250 foot wind turbine is an essential part of the curriculum for students in New England's first wind power technology program at Northern Maine Community College. It's just one of the physical rigors campus officials are looking to ensure entering students are both prepared for and capable of undertaking.

As the College readies to welcome its second entering class of students into the program this fall, NMCC is taking the lead on student safety. In partnership with County Physical Therapy, a new assessment has been developed to make certain students are physically able to fully participate in the hands-on work involved in the curriculum of the program and of their future profession.

"To our knowledge we are the first program in the country taking this step to ensure our students are both prepared and safe. Our goal is the make sure that our graduates are the highest quality, best prepared technicians in the field," said Dr. William Egeler, NMCC dean of students. "Wind power technology students are in a hazardous environment with requirements to climb hundreds of feet in the air, work at heights, and lift heavy weights. We wanted to ensure that the students wouldn't hurt themselves or endanger fellow students."

Last year, Egeler began to research what other wind power technology programs in the country were doing to ensure students were physically able to take part in their selected field. What he discovered was that others were leaving the screening of the physical ability of the student to prospective employers as a pre-employment requirement after they had graduated.

Recognizing that NMCC would be a pioneer in establishing physical requirements for entering wind power students, Egeler found that standards set by the U.S. Department of Labor for wind power technicians would be a good starting point to determine prospective students' ability to perform the physical requirements of the program. It was at that point that County Physical Therapy was brought into the fold as a partner to develop and conduct the actual assessment to determine whether those requirements could be met.

To best measure the prospective students' physical ability vis-à-vis the set standards, County Physical Therapy sent two of their own on a climb with NMCC students and instructors up the wind turbine at the University of Maine at Presque Isle last fall. Paul Marquis, vice president of clinical operations and a physical therapist at CPT, along with Adam Simoes, director of industrial rehabilitation and an occupational therapist at CPT, took part taking photos and asking questions along the way.

"We wanted to make sure that we had a true feel for what the physical demands of climbing the wind turbine were, as well as some of the other challenges, such as lifting heavy objects, the need for flexibility and operating in confined spaces," said Marquis. "We then took that experience and sat down with the photos we had taken to develop a 30 to 40 minute-long evaluation that is specific to NMCC's wind power technology program."

The first such prospective student physical assessments were conducted earlier this month at CPT's Presque Isle location. The 17-step screening includes a vertebral artery test, a 55 pound two hand carry, a 50 step climbing test on a Versaclimber – which simulates a ladder climb, and a 33 inch step-up exercise to simulate stepping from inside the turbine to the top of the turbine.

Most of the tasks are performed while the student is in a harness and while wearing gloves to simulate the actual work/climbing environment. Throughout the screening the student's heart rate is measured and monitored.

"We're hoping to increase awareness of physical fitness and safety to prepare students for their career. We want to make sure they have the physical ability and endurance to perform their job in a confined space and at heights," said Simoes.

One of the 40 applicants for entry in NMCC's 18 wind power technology slots this fall is 18-year-old Jared LeBlond of New Sharon. LeBlond, who just graduated from Mount Blue High School in Farmington, recently completed his physical assessment.

"It's better to ensure that we are physically fit and can handle both what we will need to do in the program and in our future careers," said LeBlond . "The more experience we have as students the better."

In addition to creating and conducting the assessments, CPT has also signed on to develop four-week training programs for any prospective NMCC wind power technology students who don't pass the initial screening. The customized programs will be designed to help the individual student in areas where they need assistance, with the goal of helping them pass the assessment on the second attempt.

Egeler points to required courses for all wind power and other trade and technical occupations students in occupational fitness and safety as further evidence that NMCC takes very seriously its role ensuring graduates are well prepared to enter the workforce with both technical competency and awareness of related workplace issues.

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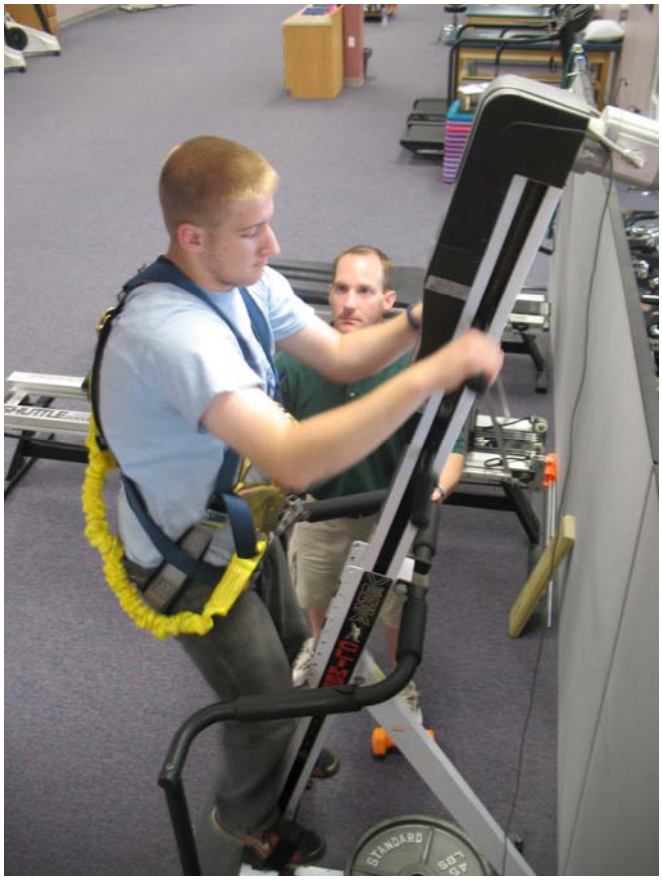

Jared LeBlond of New Sharon, an entering student in the wind power technology program at Northern Maine Community College this fall, completes one of the tasks of a 17-step physical assessment that is required of all prospective students in the program. Monitoring LeBlond's progress is Adam Simoes, director of industrial rehabilitation and an occupational therapist at County Physical Therapy.