

UNM-LA starts new program in solar technology this semester

By Bonnie Gordon

A market assessment study pointing to a need for solar technicians and grant money laid the groundwork for UNM-LA's newest program. A solar technician concentration has been added to the Associate of Science in Applied Technologies degree. The popular program trains technicians in a variety of fields, including nanotechnology, electro-mechanical and manufacturing technology. Students can get started with solar technology right away. The first course is being offered for Spring Semester, with the other courses in the concentration to follow this fall.

But the class is not just for those interested in earning a degree, said instructor Don Davis.

"You can't beat these classes for homeowners," said Davis. "You learn everything you need to make your home truly energy efficient. With the current rebates for solar installation, who can pass it up?"

Davis teaches pre-engineering at Los Alamos High School. He has been involved with solar energy for many years. In 1993, Davis won a Presidential Award for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching for his work with solar energy in the classroom.

"I'm glad to see the Obama administration put emphasis on solar energy," said Davis.

As the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act puts money into solar energy, opportunities in the field are expanding.

"Solar contractors are springing up everywhere in New Mexico," Davis said. "Students who earn this degree can go into business for themselves or join an existing company."

The courses in the program will cover both theory and practice. "This program is all about problem solving," said Davis.

The course offered for the Spring Semester is Photovoltaics I (ELCT 193). The class will meet from 4:00-6:30 p.m. on Thursdays. Classes start January 21. This course will cover site analysis. Students will learn how to take solar irradiance measurements and figure out the best location for solar equipment at a particular site. They will learn what equipment is best for a particular site. Class members will use a small unit to learn about the components.

Class members needn't worry about climbing on a roof in freezing weather. Davis has constructed a special "practice roof" indoors at UNM-LA. Students will learn installation techniques on a real roof without the snow and ice.

More classes in solar technology will be added for the Fall Semester, all taught by Davis. They will include Photovoltaics II, which builds on the first course. Students will install a large unit on a roof in this class. Solar Architecture will also be offered this fall. In this class, students will learn how to refit existing structures. Alternative architectures, such as cob houses, rammed earth and earth-berming will be

covered, as well as site analysis using thermal imaging technologies. Cost vs. savings analysis of solar installations will be also be covered.

Davis is excited about new technologies available to solar technicians, such as a device that sits in a yard and calculates how much solar energy the site will receive in a year. Students will get hands-on experience this new technology.

Getting involved with solar technology is not just a smart career move, it's an opportunity to help the environment and save resources, said Davis. Whether you plan to work on your own home or pursue a career as a technician, the time couldn't be better to learn about solar technology.

To learn more about this program, call Irina Alvestad at 662-5919 ext. 679. To register, visit www.la.unm.edu or call 662-0332.