



Photos by ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Erik Anderson, 17, a senior at Centralia High School, participates in the 32nd annual skills competition for high school welders and machinists at Clark College. Despite the recession, organizers say they expect an excellent job outlook for blue-collar skills.

TESTING TORCHES

Student welders show off skills in competition

By **ERIK ROBINSON**
Columbian staff writer

Student welders and machinists from a half-dozen high schools competed against one another Saturday at Clark College, but organizers expect the real victory should come when the students enter the job market.

"Typically the worse the economy, the better we are for enrollment," said Kenny Snyder, who has taught welding at Clark for 21 years.

Enrollment in the welding program is currently running at 110 percent of capacity.

"We can't hold any more," Snyder said. "We physically can't hold anymore unless we teach on Sunday."

Yet, even with a recession, Snyder said half of his students don't finish the program because they can find assembly-type work with basic skills. Don Wagner, a contest judge who works for Pro-Tech of Vancouver, said students who wait to acquire additional skills can find even more lucrative work.

Despite the well-documented migration of American manufacturing jobs overseas, Snyder said blue-collar workers are needed to weld buildings, dams and other large-scale products that can't be readily shipped from China.

"Damn near everything you look at is welded," Snyder said.

On Saturday, high schoolers from as far as Centralia took part in the 32nd annual skills competition at Clark.

"I think the outlook is excellent," Snyder said. "I have faith that the economy is coming back and, more important, a large number of welders are gray-haired like me."

Which means plenty of job opportunities will be available soon for the next generation of blue-collar

workers.

Vancouver student Matthew Criswell, who first came to Clark as a high schooler in 1998, said he returned to pick up additional skills after being laid off from his job as a load master at Portland International Airport. He's enthused by the talk of funneling billions of dollars to stimulate the national economy with construction jobs.

"We'll have a lot to do," he said.

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Evergreen High School student Zack Searcy cleans up after competing. Skilled manufacturing workers say they clean up in the job market, too.