ISCA Training Centre Revisited
By Don Procter

About a year ago, I reported on the newly expanded training centre of the Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario. The $3.8 million project, which increased training facilities for drywall and exterior insulation and finish systems trades in Toronto, was badly needed due to the high demand for tradespeople in the city.

When the additional space came on tap in July 2001, the training centre’s objective was to run 130 students through the drywall application program and 86 more through drywall finishing and plastering. That objective was easily met. Today, 144 drywall applicators and more than 90 finishers and plasterers will graduate annually. What’s most impressive is that the centre continues to place more than 90 percent of these graduates in jobs.

The centre operates drywall applicator and finisher programs twice annually, plus two advanced courses. Each course is eight weeks long. If the objective was simply to fill the extra seats the centre created through expansion, then the folks at ISCA wouldn’t need to embark on a recruitment drive. That is because the centre gets dozens of calls weekly from people wanting to apply for the programs. But ISCA’s objective is more than to just fill classroom seats. The association aims to sign up students most likely to continue on in the trade for years to come. In the past many graduates didn’t pursue jobs in the field; today it seems most grads want to do just that.

Candi Colandrea, ISCA’s assistant training coordinator, deserves some of the credit for finding the right career-minded students for the trade. She says key to ISCA’s success is a pre-screening process developed by the association last year. The idea behind it is to identify students who have a serious interest in the drywall trade, rather than students who are simply looking for a job that pays well (graduates start at more than $12 [Cdn.] an hour and get a raise to more than $14 an hour after only a few months).

Colandrea’s recruitment drives start at high schools throughout Greater Toronto. She tells those students that a career in drywall doesn’t have to start and end with applying drywall. There is a range of opportunities that tradespeople might take up after some experience in the field. It is worth noting that many of the opportunities aren’t nearly as physical as installing drywall, for example, drywall estimating and occupational health and safety.

Getting that message across to high school students is easy enough; telling them that they have a year-long waiting list to sign up for isn’t. However, the centre does try to move people up the waiting list ladder if they display a strong interest in the field. The centre also offers several basic two-week courses for those dying to get into the work. These include boarding, insulating and EIFS classes.

In an ideal world, ISCA would get further government funding for expansion of the training centre to meet the pent-up demand, but the association doesn’t expect that to happen anytime soon. Meanwhile, experts predict there will be plenty of work for graduates over the next couple of years as the building economy continues to be strong.

A trainer by profession, Colandrea was hired in 2001 to help with expansion plans. She says: “I’m really proud of the school. There’s no reluctance on anyone’s part here to make changes if they help to make things better at the centre. That’s what it should all be about.”

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada.