

Community Colleges Help to Train Workers

By Sandra Tan - News Business Reporter

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State colleges continue to play a growing role in meeting the needs of the local economy, either by stitching together new programs to fill major occupational vacancies in Western New York, or by working directly with local residents or municipalities to address community problems.

Despite the Buffalo Niagara region's reputation as having few jobs to offer, community colleges are scrambling to offer programs to train people for the biggest vacancies that do exist.

Erie Community College, for instance, has developed a partnership with 40 industrial companies to develop a semester-long industrial technology program initially designed to fill 250 vacancies at companies like Accellent, Moog, McGard, Palma Tool, Keller Technology, Mod-Pac and Wilson Greatbatch Technologies.

Enrollment has grown from a mere eight students when the program started two years ago to 68 registered for the spring, said Richard Washousky, associate vice president for academic affairs.

Even with this growth, he said, "We're still falling short on the jobs that the industry said it needs to fill." ECC is now working on expanding the program to specialize in biomanufacturing to meet the needs of companies like Invitrogen, American Pharmaceutical Partners, Astellas, and Mentholatum. The program may be ready to go by fall and include a cluster of science courses.

ECC has also developed a new Police Basic Training Certificate being launched in the spring to train civilians who want to become police officers.

The program not only would give students a leg up on police Civil Service exams, but also would assist those interested in getting jobs in growing fields like airport and casino security, Washousky said.

Given the growth in casino development, Niagara County Community College began offering a new associate's degree in gaming and casino management management and certificate programs in casino operations.

The degree program emphasizes the management of a labor-intensive, 24 hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week operation. The certificate program is aimed at entry-level employees seeking to advance in casino operations.

NCCC has also recently announced its first jointly registered program with ECC and Sisters Hospital in the area of surgical technology. NCCC used to offer the program alone, but now has extended it to Erie County through its new partnerships.

These technologists scrub and prepare instruments, supplies and equipment for various surgical procedures. Every member of the last two graduating classes at NCCC passed the national certification exam, and 94 percent found jobs, Niagara officials said.

Two other state colleges are pursuing new programs designed to directly assist low-income residents in their own communities.

Buffalo State College's Continuing Education Office is one of the leading organizers of a "Self Sufficiency Coalition" of more than 30 organizations seeking to increase the financial independence of low-income families.

A primary goal of the coalition is to increase the number of poor Erie County residents applying for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides an average tax credit of \$2,000. The coalition hopes to help more than 7,000 families file tax returns this year, and 200 families open bank accounts.

Fredonia State College is working to address neighborhood problems in Dunkirk through a \$399,868 Housing and Urban Development grant. The grant partners the college with Dunkirk government, housing, health, and library organizations among others.

The goal of the new program is to empower local neighborhoods to find solutions to their own problems, especially in lower-income and ethnic populations. As one of 13 new Community Outreach Partnership Centers, Fredonia State will help train community leaders and volunteer citizens in leadership, networking and strategic planning.

Niagara University and the University at Buffalo received similar grants to work with neighborhoods in Niagara Falls and the City of Buffalo.

GRAPHIC: Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News Students like Rich Hanson learn how to use computer numerical control machines in the Machine Tool Program at Erie Community College's North Campus.

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