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Positioned to help reignite the economy

By John Pulley, Published March 26, 2009

There are days when Deborah Wright, vice president of workforce development at Thomas Nelson Community College (TNCC) in Virginia, feels like a NASCAR driver.

Wright and her colleagues have been running hard and fast for the past year to train workers for a new factory that will make printer cartridges and cameras. The Canon company chose to build in Hampton, Va.—bypassing sites in Japan, England and elsewhere—after determining that the community college could provide fast-track training for operators of specialized manufacturing robots that didn't yet exist.

To make good on its promise of producing 880 skilled technicians, TNCC has created curriculum and delivered worker training on the fly, a process that is "like designing a race car while it's on a racetrack," Wright says.

In the past four years, refining the way it does business has allowed the college to train 4,400 skilled workers hired by 60 companies. The college has succeeded by becoming more responsiveness to companies' needs, deftly handling training challenges and getting up to speed in record time, she says. "It's a very important shift of delivery on our mission," Wright says.

At a time when the economy is lumbering along like a rusted bucket of bolts, community colleges are rushing to provide workers with technical skills demanded by established and emerging industries that are poised for growth, among them health information technology, energy, transportation, advanced manufacturing and green jobs. Regions that in the past might have hawked tax breaks, the ready availability of inexpensive labor and other financial incentives to recruit companies are seeking a competitive advantage by touting the training capacity of their community colleges.

A growing number of community colleges are compiling reports to show their impact on local and state economies. A new Washington Trustees Association for Community and Technical College report shows a demand for workforce training programs even during the current economic downturn. Washington state will need 32,965 more workers with one or two years of postsecondary training by 2012, for jobs such as surgical technicians, welders, auto mechanics, dental hygienists and accounting technicians.

The report by Economic Modeling Specialists Inc. also gives details on investment returns. Taxpayers get a 7 percent long-term return on investment in Washington's community and technical colleges—a much higher return than most publicly funded investments, the report said. Community college students see a 43 percent return on investment, it noted.

Another details that appeals to lawmakers and taxpayers—students of community colleges in Washington contribute an extra \$321 million in tax revenue as a direct result of going to college, and 98 percent of program participants live and work in the state, the report said.



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state, the report said.

College with a proven track record also appeal to industries looking for trained workers.

“A key issue for businesses when they are looking to expand or locate to a community is the availability of a workforce, and that includes the kinds of educational opportunities that exist for training new and incumbent workers,” says Karen Elzey, vice president and executive director of the Institute for a Competitive Workforce at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. “Community colleges are incredibly important economic engines that play a key role in the reskilling of the American workforce.”

Indeed, while the country’s leaders in Washington, D.C., formulate policies and spending plans for stimulating the economy, two-year institutions “are trying to determine how they can increase their capacity for retraining dislocated workers,” says Gerardo de los Santos, president and chief executive officer for the League for Innovation in the Community College. “They are going to be the biggest difference in helping us to get back on track.”

The economic restructuring that accompanies a deep recession displaces workers whose jobs don’t always return when economic activity resumes. In such an environment, the magnitude of change is reflected in the number of older workers seeking to acquire new skills.

“The number of adult applications is skyrocketing,” says Sally Griffith, vice president for career programs at Harper College, a two-year institution in the suburbs of Chicago that has rolled out new tools—a Professional Advancement and Learning Center and a “career stimulus” program—for retrofitting the skills of displaced workers.

Harper uses a matrix to assess the skills of displaced workers and the economic strength of industries that employ them. The college helps people with marketable skills in moribund sectors to transfer into viable industries, and it provides inadequately prepared workers in growth industries the skills they need to prosper.

“The biggest challenges are people who have outdated skills in declining industries,” Griffith says.

The imperative to retool the country’s workforce is raising the profile of community colleges even as it strains the capacity of two-year institutions, experts say.

“This is like the Renaissance for community colleges,” says Julian Alssid, executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center. “They’re being relied upon to get the economy moving, but community colleges are busting at the seams.”

Demand for training is particularly high for fast-changing sectors like energy production.

Indiana River State College in Florida has begun training students for careers in solar energy, which should get a boost from provision in the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 that provides incentives for homeowners to install solar systems.

“Solar energy and alternative energies are going to play a key role in the economic revitalization of the region,” says Jose Farinos, the college’s dean of advanced technologies.

In Missouri, Metropolitan Community College-Kansas City is training workers in sustainable energy and other high-demand fields “to stimulate the local and regional economy.”

Mountain Empire Community College, in rural southwest Virginia, has a key role in training more than 600 workers who are building the new \$1.8 billion Dominion Hybrid Energy Plant.

And in north central Arkansas, which sits atop a massive reserve of natural gas, almost 200 students at the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton are working toward completion of associate degrees in petroleum technology. A study produced

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last year by the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville projects that gas production will create 11,000 jobs and contribute \$17.9 billion to the state's economy over four years.

"The most important thing is to continue to assess the program as the industry changes," says Mary Clark, a college spokesperson. "We can't let our program become stagnant."

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