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Moraine Park addresses need for 'middle skills'

Training is offered for vital part of work force

For The Reporter

With the baby boomer generation retiring or heading that way, there is an ongoing need for skilled workers to replace them, particularly at the "middle-skill" level.

Middle-skill jobs require training above a high school degree but less than a four-year degree, the type of career tracks that are taught at community and technical colleges.

The term "middle skill" isn't a reflection of one's abilities; instead, it means the amount of formal education and training required to enter an occupation. In Wisconsin, middle-skill jobs account for 54 percent of the job opportunities, yet only 46 percent of Wisconsin residents possess the required skills necessary to fill those positions, according to a Moraine Park Technical College news release.

"Middle-skill jobs are key to our state's health, its infrastructure and its economic growth," Dr. Josh Bullock, Moraine Park Technical College's vice president of strategic advancement, said in a press release. "Many of these jobs cannot be outsourced. They include the care of our sick and elderly, the repair of our computerized cars, the running and maintenance of our factories' advanced machinery and the construction of our bridges and buildings."

According to the 2008 Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) Graduate Follow-Up Report, more than 23,000 individuals were trained in critical technical skills necessary to the success of Wisconsin's economy. These graduates fill vital roles within communities. In 2008 alone, communities in the state gained 6,560 nursing assistants, 2,738 nurses (registered nurses and licensed practical nurses), 1,396 emergency medical technicians, 1,002 police officers, 590 information technology workers, 594 accountants, 308 welders, 217 automotive technicians and 149 firefighters through programs offered by Wisconsin's technical colleges.

"Thirty-one percent of Wisconsin's workers possess a high school degree or less, while only 26 percent of jobs require that skill set," said Bullock. "The future success of our state depends on elevating these workers' skill sets to fill the middle-skill void, and Wisconsin's technical colleges are critical to making this transition happen."

In addition to the more than 100 associate of applied science degrees, technical diplomas and certificates offered by Moraine Park, various programs at the college are designed to address the need for middle-skills training, including Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE), Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (I-BEST) and FLEx (Flexible Learning Experience) degrees.

RISE

Funds from the Joyce Foundation's "Shifting Gears" program are being used for the RISE initiative led by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the WTCS. RISE focuses on developing industry-driven career pathways throughout the state and providing new career-ladder footholds to low-wage workers with limited skills. It's a win-win all around for workers and employers, according to the news release.

The first RISE initiative at Moraine Park involved a welding curriculum developed by Moraine Park, Gateway, Milwaukee Area and Waukesha County technical colleges that is flexible and responsive to both the industry and the individual learner. Employers from different areas can choose the welding

processes needed for their particular industry, while students can transfer their credits to welding programs at any of the four partner technical colleges.

I-BEST

I-BEST programs are team-taught by occupational and basic education instructors. Students are not required to have a completed GED or meet college entrance exam scores, but they must meet pre-determined criteria based on academic difficulty or special requirements of the occupational instruction, according to a Moraine Park news release.

Last January, Moraine Park launched an I-BEST Baking Essentials certificate. Area employers such as Festival Foods identified the courses that were needed for employment. This I-BEST program exceeded goals.

In a poor economic climate, four of the 12 students were employed even before the certificate was completed. Five more were employed within two months. In addition, the courses articulate into the Culinary Arts Associate of Applied Science degree, giving students the opportunity to further their culinary education.

In spring, Moraine Park will offer two new I-BEST programs in welding and online instructional assistant. Moraine Park also is considering I-BEST programs in health care and industrial maintenance.

FLEx

Fourteen Moraine Park programs are being offered as FLEx degrees, specially scheduled programs designed for the needs of the adult learner.

The FLEx degrees use accelerated on-campus courses, online courses, blended courses and/or a mixture of these models that provide greater flexibility. Recognizing that one size doesn't fit all and that adult learners often have work, family and community commitments, the College set up the FLEx scheduling models to offer more choices, according to the press release.

Some program starts are available every eight weeks, based on enrollment. Some credits earned at other colleges may transfer into a Moraine Park FLEx program, or in some cases credits may be granted for existing knowledge and skills that relate to the curriculum. For more information, visit www.morainepark.edu/flex.

Additional Facts

ON THE WEB

To read a recent report on middle-skill jobs in Wisconsin, go to www.skills2compete.org/Wisconsin and download a copy of Wisconsin's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Meeting the Demands of a 21st-Century Economy.
