Economy prompts shift in Plus 50

By Matthew Dembicki

The slumping economy and increases in layoffs have prompted community colleges that are part of a new national initiative to engage older learners to tilt their programs for that population more toward job training than other types of programs.

The Plus 50 Initiative, managed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) with funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, is designed to benchmark and showcase innovative programs at community colleges to engage learners age 50 and older. Fifteen community colleges are participating in the three-year grant program.

Proposals from the participating colleges have included job training, lifelong learning and civic engagement. But several colleges in the initiative have refocused more on job training and education for new careers as an increasing number of older learners come to the programs because they need to continue working past traditional retirement age or were laid off.

Last semester, Wake Technical Community College (WTCC) in North Carolina offered retirement planning courses and personal enrichment classes, such as gourmet cooking. This semester, the college is emphasizing courses for students to land jobs and to help older learners stretch their income. It even hired a career coach to help retirees who have seen their investments sink with the stock market to prepare to reenter the workforce, said Martha Williams, WTCC's dean of community projects and educational programs.

Joliet Junior College (JJC) in Illinois has seen a significant change in what older learners are looking for, said Kelly Lapetino, the college's workforce skills manager. When it started its Plus 50 program last summer, most older students were looking for short-term programs or workshops to update skills, such as computer skills, she said. Now, about 30 percent of those students—most of whom were laid off—are signing on for long-term training and education programs after completing the shorter programs in order to prepare for new careers, she said.

JJC has also added weekly career assessments for older learners and provided more opportunities to work with career advisors, Lapetino said.

St. Louis Community College-Meramec (SLCC) in Missouri originally planned to offer workshops to help current retirees explore and gain skills for civic-engagement and volunteer jobs, said Heather Ellison, SLCC's program planner in the continuing education program. But now dislocated workers looking for new careers comprise half of the older learners in the program, she said, adding that it may grow as layoffs continue.

In October, Chrysler closed a minivan plant and cut a shift from a truck plant in SLCC's service area, affecting about 2,500 jobs. The college's Plus 50 Initiative team was invited, along with its workforce development and enrollment management staff, to present career and job fairs at the plant, promoting the college's transitional workshops and short-term interview skills, computer training and career planning courses.

According to preliminary results from a national survey of community colleges, 86 percent of two-year colleges with programs serving older learners are focusing the programs on academics, enrichment or personal interest. Fifty-eight percent said their programs are geared to helping those students re-enter or advance in the workplace.

But many of those career programs are existing projects that are simply marketed to older students and not specifically developed to serve plus 50 students, according to the survey.

"By redesigning or redeveloping new offerings, colleges could ensure that they meet the needs, objectives and learning styles of the population," according to a summary of the survey.

A challenge that SLCC and other community colleges face is that many of the dislocated workers don't have the required skills to work in other fields and are intimidated by assessment tests.

"We're finding a lot of folks don't have transferrable skills that fit into today's economy," Ellison said.

Remedial education requirements can hamper the quick completion of a certificate program for a worker who wants to finish training and get back to work, Ellison said during a presentation last month at AACC's Workforce Development Institute.

Another barrier to creating short-term training for workforce needs is the academic rigidity of offering classes over a series of semesters, which can make it difficult for older learners who are eager to complete their training and coursework, Ellison said.

One solution could be to create modularized, noncredit courses through continuing education that would provide skills training without requiring an excessive time commitment, she said.

A similar idea was proposed in a new American Council on Education (ACE) report on higher education for adult learners. Instead of delivering linear certificate and degree programs, colleges and universities should deliver education in chunks, or "skill-ettes," so older adults can easily acquire education for new careers or existing jobs, it said.

Cost is one challenge for older learners at all higher education institutions, according to the ACE report. Older learners are often unaware of financial assistance mainly because colleges and universities don't promote it, the report said. It said that of the institutions offering tuition waivers for older adults, most reported that 50 or fewer students took advantage of the waivers as of 2006.

Christine Donnolo, associate dean of continuing education at Luzerne County Community College (LCCC) in Pennsylvania, agreed that often colleges don't make older students aware of financial assistance because colleges have traditionally focused on freshmen. She noted that often older learners may not qualify for student aid because they enroll part time and take noncredit courses. But older students who enroll full time in credit courses usually don't know the courses could qualify for financial help.

At LCCC, residents 62 and older can enroll in classes for free based on availability, Donnolo said. But "unless you're really good at research, you probably don't know that," she said.

Several of the Plus 50 colleges include financial assistance as part of the program for older learners.

For more information on the Plus 50 Initiative, visit http://plus50.aacc.nche.edu.