

College starts programs to fill area's skills gaps

MCC officials seek to address need for students with training in STEM

By NATE DOUGHERTY

Monroe Community College has unveiled a new slate of programs and events this academic year to guide more students into science and technical fields. The effort is part of a push to fill skills gaps for local employers.

MCC officials see the effort as an investment in the area's future, combating a national deficit in students entering the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

"This is really about providing exposure to some in-demand occupations, which are heavily focused on STEM and applied STEM," said Todd Oldham, MCC vice president for the division of economic development and innovative workforce services. "We see that we don't have an educational pipeline robust enough to get students into those fields, and we want to address that."

In recent years MCC officials have been intent on filling the skills gaps that exist with local employers. Many of the openings are in "middle-skills" jobs, those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

Last year the National Skills Coalition of Washington, D.C., released a report, "New York's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," predicting an increase in middle-skills jobs. These jobs account for nearly half of all jobs in the state, and the percentage is expected to grow with economic recovery, the report states.



Todd Oldham

File photo by Kimberly McKinzie

"The idea ... is that with this program we work closely with employers to see how we need to deploy it and what skills those students need," Oldham said.

MCC also is partnering with Junior Achievement of Rochester, New York Area Inc. to sponsor the World of Work program, which is aimed at enhancing students' perceptions of work opportunities in the region.

The program is open to students in grades six to 12, who are guided through a process that promotes better understanding of their skills, interests and values, MCC officials said. The students are taught about career choices and instructed on using MCC's Career Coach, an online resource that allows them to peruse job openings and learn the requirements for these jobs.

"We've come up with tools like Career Coach to help support the workforce of the future," Oldham said.

Another program, the TRIO Upward Bound Math and Science Program, starts this month in partnership with Northeast College Preparatory, Northwest College Preparatory and World of Inquiry schools in the Rochester City School District. Students who are disadvantaged are prepared for a successful transition to college.

The program is funded for five years through a \$1.25 million U.S. Department of Education grant.

In spring, MCC is putting on a conference that will bring together educators, policymakers and leaders from business and industry to discuss how to get more students into STEM fields. The national conference will feature speakers and presenters from some of the field's leading experts, MCC officials said.

The keynote speaker for the conference is Freeman Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

"This program will address STEM issues and especially about getting underrepresented students into these fields," Kress said.

The programs and events collectively represent MCC's attempt to meet the needs of the local workforce quickly, filling the skills gap and allowing more workers to qualify for unfilled jobs in these fields.

"We're trying to work as quickly as we can but don't want to move too quickly," Oldham said. "But we want better-informed students and parents who know where the jobs are out there and what it will take to get into them."

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One new course brings students into workplaces to introduce them to technical careers.

MCC's programs aim to fill the large share of these jobs currently unfilled. In 2009, 46 percent of all jobs were classified as middle-skills, but 39 percent of workers had the requirements to fill them.

This year MCC has introduced academic programs intended to get students interested in STEM fields and fill skill gaps identified by local employers. These programs, which work with high school and MCC students, follow up on a more compact set of summer courses the college offered in STEM disciplines.

"It's really the reflexivity and responsiveness of community colleges that's perfect to address these areas," said Anne Kress, MCC president. "That's what makes community colleges such an important part of the recovery of this nation."

One new program, a course called "Career and Technical Education Professions," aims to get student into high-demand careers by introducing them to key regional and national industries, including applied technologies, engineering and information and computer technologies.

For this course, students visit real-world career environments. MCC officials hope the program leads these students to enroll in the college's CTE program to earn a degree or certificate.