

Enrollment Surges in Colleges' Quick Prep Courses

By PAT WIEDENKELLER

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LIFE'S demands have so far kept college and a career out of reach for Monica Juarez. She is 19 and a single mother of two. She works two jobs -- at a Waldbaum's supermarket in Hauppauge, on Long Island, and a Teachers Federal Credit Union in Amityville -- and shares a one-room apartment in Central Islip with her boys, Alexavier, 2, and Jeremiah, 3 months.

That hasn't kept her from yearning for something better. "It's too hard," she said last month, standing outside a community college classroom in Sayville. "I need a bigger place for my kids. Everything is for my kids."

What brought her to the Sayville Downtown Center, a branch of Suffolk County Community College, is not the usual quest for an associate's degree.

Instead, Ms. Juarez has spent most weekday evenings since mid-September with eight other students as they hustle through the college's Pharmacy Technician/Pharmacy Technician Assistant Program. That eight-month, noncredit course will prepare them for a national certification exam. If they pass, they can make \$11 to \$25 an hour as a retail or hospital pharmacy assistant.

It is one of the fastest-growing occupations in the country, according to the Department of Labor, and Ms. Juarez has decided it is her path to a solid future. "Everyone's going to need medical care, right?" she said.

Students across the region, and the country, are swelling the rolls of community colleges, seeking a two-year associate's degree as a bridge to a four-year university or as a way to retrain after a job loss. But in these shaky economic times, more students are skipping a degree and heading straight for the colleges' noncredit training and certification programs -- courses that end in months or weeks, designed to propel them swiftly into the job market.

Once viewed more as a way to learn flower-arranging or how to work your new computer, noncredit programs have been steadily shifting their focus to the workplace. First-time students use them as a jumping-off point for a career or an entree to higher education (some noncredit courses can be used toward a credit degree). Some take skill-boosting classes to help insulate themselves from a layoff or to chart a new career path.

The courses are generally listed under the heading of Continuing Education or Lifelong Learning and are sometimes created in cooperation with local industry, labor departments and unions. (Local 338 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union is paying for Ms. Juarez's program.)

Although the classes meet in college buildings and are administered by the college, the teachers are paid through the noncredit class tuition and the programs are not subject to the same lengthy state accreditation process required for degree programs. As a result, courses can sometimes be set up in weeks.

"Continuing education has changed," said Andrea Morville, assistant dean of Continuing Education at Westchester Community College. She said career programs had gone from about 25 percent to 40 percent of the classes in her division in the last 10 years.

Other administrators put their numbers even higher. In Connecticut, about 50 percent of noncredit courses are aimed at job training, said Mary Anne Cox, assistant chancellor for the System of Connecticut Community Colleges. And in New Jersey, the number of registrations for noncredit professional training increased by 20,000 between 2005 and 2007, said Jacob C. Farbman, spokesman for the New Jersey Council of County Colleges.

Lifestyle-enhancing courses are still popular, of course (Suffolk Community offers basket-weaving this fall), and predominate at some colleges. But at many others, the shift toward job training has broadened into a significant role in stocking the work force.

Noncredit offerings increasingly read like a roster of where jobs are. Of the 30 occupations for which the Labor Department is predicting the largest national growth in the next eight years, 22 are in areas that do not require a college degree. Most are directly addressed by continuing education.

Courses in health care, high-skills manufacturing, management, hospitality and culinary arts, and -- as always -- computers are booming, regionally and nationally. But so are many other continuing education programs tailored to the needs of the surrounding community.

"Instead of designing those courses to get state aid, we design courses that will travel well in the workforce," said G. Jeremiah Ryan, president of Bergen Community College.

Program directors scan the job landscape like doctors seeking a pulse. A new industry requirement, a government regulation, a lifestyle trend or a product release, like the Microsoft Office 2007 program, can send droves of workers back to class.

"I don't plug into my crystal ball and imagine what industry might be interested in, I ask them," said Lynn Lederer, director of professional community programs at Middlesex County College in New Jersey. "I check with industry experts, census figures on demographics, watch the classes that have increased enrollment and maybe add a section of something similar."

A program on beginning an animal-based business was successful, for example, so she added a veterinary assistant program. Real estate licensing classes may be down, but enrollment spiked in a course on buying foreclosures, Ms. Lederer said.

At Westchester, "green" lifestyle classes are beginning to migrate to the workforce side, Ms. Morville said. Next spring her college will offer a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification program to builders and others seeking accreditation by the United States Green Building Council, she said.

Costs vary depending on a course's length and intensity, but tuition for a noncredit program is far less than for an associate's degree. The seven-month Computerized Healthcare Billing and Coding Certificate Program at Bergen Community College in New Jersey, for example, runs \$2,995, while a two-year degree program for a medical office assistant costs about \$8,500.

"It takes much longer to get a degree, where with a noncredit course I can have them in the work force in 16 weeks making between \$13 to \$18 an hour," said David Chrzanowski, director of extended studies at Norwalk Community College in Connecticut.

While classes are often aimed at entry-level access to the job market, students take them for all sorts of reasons.

"Some of them have bachelor's or master's but now they want to learn about information systems," said Jennifer Dudley, the continuing education director at Passaic County Community College in New Jersey. Enrollment is up for English as a Second Language study and in a citizenship training course she runs.

At Essex County College, one of the Labor Department's One-Stop Career Centers is situated at the Newark campus to match the underemployed with noncredit programs, said Mitra Choudhury, director of Training Inc. at the college. Allied health courses are particularly popular, she said.

Among the biggest areas of growth is customized training for businesses or government agencies, coordinated by the colleges and held on campus or at the business site. Connecticut's 12 community colleges provide such programs to about 600 businesses a year, said Ms. Cox, the assistant chancellor.

Designed to help workers upgrade skills in a downsizing job market, company-subsidized classes can offer targeted training in areas like management, business writing and high-skill manufacturing.

Programs can be started in as little as a few weeks, said James Polo, associate vice president of lifelong learning at Nassau Community College, which recently ran a medical coding program for employees of Winthrop-University Hospital in Mineola. Work force training programs also help prepare workers for shudders in the local job market -- for example, when a large hotel breaks ground or a major employer moves out.

When the Peter Paul plant closed in Naugatuck, Conn., last year, Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury worked closely with the Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board, a private, nonprofit organization constituted by the General Assembly that administers federal and state funds to dislocated workers for retraining.

And when Executive Greetings closed its New Hartford offices several years ago, "we were able to take a host of those people and turn them into health care employees because they had computer graphic-type skills; you look at a CAT scan and it's a computer graphic," said Catherine Awwad, the board's executive director. "Re-educated at the community college level."

PHOTOS: UPGRADING Above, Judy Guertin teaching at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury, Conn. Cheryl McClymon, carrying a medical dummy, teaches Keisha Varnado and Michelle Swanson at Essex County College in Newark. Below, Art Taibe teaches at Westchester Community College in Valhalla. Below right, Monica Juarez, seated, in class at Sayville Downtown Center. (PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE, BY THOMAS McDONALD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; TIMOTHY IVY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; MAXINE HICKS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; ALAN ZALE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)