

A TIME FOR JOB TRAINING

With economy in recession, displaced workers are retooling for the upswing

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Though a tough decision, Carrie Richesson said she left her job teaching high schoolers at Kearsarge Regional High School because she wanted to create and build things.

Now, in the midst of a recession, she's a first-year welding student at Manchester Community College. She's certain she made the right choice.

"You could see where the economy was going," said Richesson, 37, of Concord. "I was teaching graphic design, which unfortunately is the first to go when schools make cuts.... Everyone got pink slips at Kearsarge, so my position could have been in jeopardy."

When she graduates with an associates degree next year, Richesson will be stepping into a field in great demand. According to the American Welding Society, there is a shortage of more than 200,000 welders nationwide, and that was before Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which promises federal tax dollars for infrastructure projects — good news for welders.

Manchester Community College of 1066

Front St. currently has about 140 students enrolled in its day and adult education programs for welding, according to Jack Paige, program coordinator for the Welding Technology Program at the college.

"When the economy is tough, welders are hired to rebuild and keep things running," he said. "When the economy is good, they're building new infrastructure machinery and things like that."

Welders are employed at nuclear facilities, wind farms, to build pipelines and for highway bridge projects, he said. They're also needed for aerospace construction, the bio-tech industry and in shipyards.

Workforce Training Resources LLC of 848 Elm St. also has a welding program and a computer aided machine operators program, which

Carrie Richesson, a former teacher, is taking welding courses to change careers. (Express Photo/Andrew J. Manuse)

is seeing unprecedented demand from dislocated workers and those needing retraining, according to Patrick van Rooyen, chief executive of the company.

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Come March, the company, which works closely with Manchester Community College, will employ a \$150,000 mobile welding training unit to take training booths for eight around the state, van Rooyen said.

“With the economic stimulus focused on construction, we see during 2009 a growing demand for construction welders and construction skilled trades,” van Rooyen said. “Employers are telling us that they need new employees with relevant skills, and even at an entry level, the applicant with skills that shows knowledge of the industry is more likely to be hired.”

Welding is not the only skill in demand, however.

Van Rooyen noted labor demands for the health care, food services, tourism and hospitality, construction, high tech and precision manufacturing industries.

At Manchester Community College, nursing programs are very popular and nurses are in very high demand, according to Darlene Miller, president of the college. Also, there is demand and the college offers training for health information management specialists, home weatherizing experts, accountants, electricians and heating, ventilation and air conditioning technicians, she said.

“During a recession is a really good time to go back to school and get new skills and training,” Miller said. “It’s also a really good time for employers to upgrade the skills of their workforce.”

Because of the economic situation, there are scholarship dollars available through New Hampshire Works and the federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998, she said.

“Be ready to be first in line when the economy turns around with the skills needed as soon as the jobs are available,” she said.

It seems, many students are already taking Miller’s advice.

Enrollment is already up 10 percent from last year for the spring semester, said Janet Phelps, director of marketing for the college. The school received about 400 applications for 64 slots in its Fall 2009 registered nurse training program, she said.

Laura Gagnon, who received her licensed nursing assistant degree from the college already, is one of the 400 hoping to get into the registered nurse program, according to her husband Michael Gagnon, 48, of Londonderry, who is in the school’s accounting program.

Laura was a store manager for a department store, but it went out of business, so she went back to school. As for Michael, he has been in manufacturing his whole life, but started to worry that he wouldn’t be able to keep up the hard labor much longer.

“I would much rather work with my brain than my back, because I don’t know how long I’ll have my back,” he said. “I was doing 10- and 20-year plans for our future, was taking a look at my parents and how they are in their older years, and asked if I would be able to do my job with their limitations. I felt it would be wise and prudent on my part to at least have the opportunity to change and start preparing for that now.”

Gagnon’s steps to become a certified public accountant appear to be prudent. While still employed in a manufacturing job at Anheuser-Busch Inc. in Merrimack, his future there is uncertain because Belgium-based InBev bought the company for \$52 billion earlier this year. He’s attending night classes for his associates degree, and when finished, he can get an entry-level position in the lucrative field for experience, then move on to Southern New Hampshire University for his bachelor’s degree and prepare to take the CPA exam.

Manchester Community College was the



Michael Gagnon

first college in the state to get accreditation from the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs, a very difficult standard, according to Micheline West, a CPA and CMA, and professor of accounting and finance at the college. Because of the accreditation, students who graduate with an associates degree can move right on up to Southern New Hampshire University for the final two years of a bachelor’s

program, she said.

According to West, accountants are the most demanded professionals out there.

“Accountants are the backbone of any organization ... every organization needs them,” she said. “Every single sector employs accountants. ... We’re recession proof.”

Currently, more than 100 students are involved in the college’s program.

Besides the college’s associates degrees, the college also has programs for continuing education to help make people more marketable for the job market, according to Kathy DesRoches, director of the college’s Workforce Development Center.

The classes are usually short, do not come with a degree or certificate and are geared toward helping people learn work-ready skills, she said. Programs focus on HVAC, home weatherization, English as a second language, office software and even welding.

“Hopefully, it will whet their appetite and they’ll come back for a degree, but we’re really trying to get people back to work ... with skills that pay well,” she said.

The college has two upcoming job fairs for people who are already trained, but may be between jobs, according to Phelps. Both on Saturday, April 18, from noon to 2 p.m., the college is hosting electrical technology firms as well as heating, ventilation and air conditioning companies. Questions? Call 668-6706.