

Educators find students ill-prepared for college courses

by Mary Ellen Godin, Record-Journal staff (Meriden, CT)-September 14, 2008

SEPTEMBER 14, 2008 MERIDEN, CT – Educators find students ill-prepared for college courses

Financial and time commitments also factor in.

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Three years ago, Middlesex Community College adjunct professor Joseph Kardos, addressed nine potential students in a precision manufacturing class. "If you feel that this is what you want to do, here's what you're committing yourself to – 4-hour classes on Monday and Wednesday nights through the months of July and August," Kardos explained.

"And there's a very bad word here – it's math," Kardos told the reluctant students.

At the end of his presentation, only three students signed up for the program at Middlesex Community College's Precision Machining Institute. The program's goal is to provide low-income young people, parents and other individuals with the skills needed to improve their earning potential.

But the required math skills needed to learn the job can scare off potential learners.

Educators who work in similar training programs, community college professors, and members of the business community are finding more students woefully underprepared for college-level classes that could improve their careers and quality of life.

"It's not a system-wide problem, but a problem throughout the country," said Frank Ridley, chairman of the state Board of Governors for Higher Education. "We need to look at education as a cradle-to-grave proposition from early childhood to college."

Locally, Gateway Community College in North Haven puts the number of students in need of some help at 60 percent, according to Evelyn Gard, director of public relations and marketing. Middlesex Community College, based in Middletown with a branch in Meriden, reports about the same amount," said Mx CC President Wildfredo Nieves. Even Southern Connecticut State University, which doesn't share the same open door policy that community colleges do, is reporting a 42 percent remediation rate.

And nine out of 10 people coming to the Jobs First program administered by the regional Workforce Alliance have some academic difficulty.

"The need for remedial English is the single greatest indicator of eventual failure to win a degree," said William Villano, executive director of the Workforce Alliance. "Only 17 percent of students who take remedial English ever finish college."

The numbers are troubling to educators and worker advocates, because of studies showing that the state's future workforce is coming from urban areas where schools are lower-performing and drop-out rates are higher. Included in the report are census studies showing that the exodus of 18- to 34-year-olds leaving the state for greater opportunity in the South and West is continuing.

"Businesses are becoming more concerned," Nieves said. "They need stronger and better trained employees. We all have a vested interest."

The Workforce Alliance, the agency contracted by the state Department of Labor to assist in employee training and job-placement, recently released a report about the state of the labor market focusing on post-secondary education.

"Where we once used to say you need a GED or high school diploma, we now say a diploma plus a certification or an associate's degree," Villano said.

Students in need of remedial classes lose out in terms of time and money, educators said.

With many students eligible for Pell grants, the cost of remedial classes takes a chunk out of their annual awards. With awards averaging about \$4,500 per year, remedial classes are gobbling up the finances and the students earn no credit for those classes.

The scenario is frustrating for students, many of whom have little time and resources to waste. Community college students, with an average age of about 27, also have jobs, families or other obligations outside of school. According to the Workforce Alliance study, despite increases in enrollment, graduation rates have fallen as students give up because of time and expense.

The Workforce Alliance report about the unpreparedness of the future workforce was a harder sell years ago, when chamber of commerce types in wealthier towns, who can afford to send their children to the best schools, didn't feel the impact of the problem.

Asking the state to spend more money to help educate and train the poor doesn't always go over well in such areas. But Villano and others counter that state taxpayers are already paying a greater percentage of these costs in incarceration, or welfare and other social programs. Those in tonier communities are also likely to start to feel the impact when their children can't afford to buy homes in their hometowns, and when they start noticing a significant drop in service levels in the present workforce.

Villano and others said the state needs to do more to prepare all students for college or a certification program that combines remedial class work with on-the-job training that doesn't eat away at college grant money. Ridley agrees, as does Donn Friedman, director of Meriden's Adult Education Program.

Although no one advocates that students leave conventional high schools, educators recognize some students don't function as well in a conventional setting but thrive in alternative high schools or Adult Education settings. High schools are also known to push some chronically absent students into the program with a parent's signature if under 18.

Conventional high schools spend about \$9,000 educating each student as opposed to \$2,000 on an adult education student.

"If we put more dollars into adult education, the bang for the buck in Adult Ed is really phenomenal in what we can provide for the student," Friedman said. Friedman is in workshops with the state Board of Education about providing transitional services to prepare students to move forward with a certificate or to a college program.

The business community is also getting involved in middle and high school levels to instruct teachers and students on employer expectations.

Adult Education has added more independent and Internet high school diploma programs to give students more flexibility and less classroom time. Summer math programs funded by the Cuno and Meriden foundations have also been introduced to help struggling students.

Middlesex and Gateway have both started new departments aimed at addressing the needs of students who struggle with basic math and English. Gateway's Department of College Advancement Studies and is led by faculty who provide curriculum and guidance designed to help students master skills needed for academic success.

The programs put the students in teams that attend the same classes throughout their study program. The teams, similar to master's degree programs at universities, offer a support group in which team members encourage and challenge each other to succeed.

The courses cost as much as other classes, and while the students can earn college credit, they may not be transferable to other universities.

But it's a start, as are collaborations by the business community, adult education centers, and volunteer groups such as Literacy Volunteers, which is now recruiting tutors for math. Friedman said the Adult Education Center is now cramped at its current home on the second-floor of the Women and Families Center and its evening diploma program is off a bus line at Platt High School. He believes more could be done if the services were consolidated in a central location downtown.

"If we could find more space where we were adjacent to the community college we could do more joint programming," Friedman said.

"On the other side of the coin, there are things you can experience in a high school that we can't provide in adult education. Our doors could be blown open because we've become such a stepping stone. But we need to continue to do things to keep our students in high school."