

Job skills in a new era

Going back to school may be the answer

By Jenn Smith
Berkshire Eagle Staff

Today's job market is like shopping at a yard sale: a clutter of people trying to find what they want, but few ending up with what they need.

Due to the recession, layoffs and double-digit unemployment, it's tougher for people to find jobs in their fields of expertise or familiarity.

"We're seeing this happen now more than ever," said William "Bill" Mulholland, Berkshire Community College's dean of lifelong learning and workforce development. "But it has always paid dividends in times like these to take the opportunity to look at a whole new field and dive in, or to think about climbing the ladder in a current industry. Short-term training will help, but education is sustaining."

In 2009, the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board surveyed 75 local businesses about their work force development needs. A key conclusion: Businesses said a lack of skills among job candidates is an employer's greatest challenge in recruiting qualified employees.

So what's a job-seeker to do? If you're willing, it may be time to learn a new skill or career.

Degree and certificate programs for either a new or advancing career are offered at BCC, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams, and the Mildred Elley School in Pittsfield. Other organizations — such as the BerkshireWorks Career Center, adult learning programs, and more than 60 organizational and private consultants — offer skills training,

workshops, consultation and professional development.

For the past 50 years, one of BCC's core missions has been to help non-traditional students get ahead through new career training or in additional career training.

In the past year, BCC established a program that allows low-income, unemployed and dislocated workers to receive free manufacturing and green job training under a federal Pathways Out of Poverty grant. Beginning this spring, the college will add several new certification programs to its course offerings, including an electrocardiogram technician program and a real estate licensing program.

BCC and MCLA offer adults with significant career training or other experiential learning hours under their belts the opportunity to use their experience to waive program credits where applicable. Both have a formal application and portfolio process to do so.

The two colleges also offer non-credit courses and workshops from Microsoft software applications that range from art to grant-writing training programs.

In addition to offering graduate-level teacher training programs, MCLA now offers three degrees under its Fast-Track program. Sociology recently was added to bachelor's degree offerings in business management and interdisciplinary studies; the program allows adult learners with an associate degree or training to earn a bachelor's at an accelerated pace — 20 months.

New programs

Berkshire Community College

- Electrocardiogram Technician, 50-hour certificate program, starts June 21.
- Medical billing and coding, 80-hour program, starts June 22.
- Fiber optics program, starts July 19 and again on Oct. 4.
- Real estate licensure program starts in the fall.

Info: Call Linda Pierce at (413) 236-2112.

■ A business software systems "mini-certificate" program starts July 19.

Info: Call Denise Johns at (413) 236-2125.

For general program information at BCC, call Admissions at (413) 236-1630 or visit www.berkshirecc.edu.

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

■ A new certificate program in green building construction will be offered under the Environmental Studies Department in the fall.

For general program information at MCLA, call Admissions at (413) 662-5410 or visit www.mcla.edu.

Free programs

■ Pittsfield Adult Learning Center: Get a GED, basic literacy, computer literacy and English-language courses,



Student Erin Cebula practices stylist techniques at Mildred Elley's Cosmetology Clinic.

Kayla Galway / Berkshire Eagle Staff

self-improvement programs, and more at <http://mail.pittsfield.net/adulted> or (413) 499-9530.

■ Northern Berkshire Adult Basic Education Program: Get a GED, basic literacy, computer literacy and English language course, self-improvement programs, and more at <http://abeged.com> or (413) 662-5314.

■ Literacy Network of South Berkshire: Literacy and one-on-one tutoring programs at www.litnetsb.org or (413) 243-0471.

More resources

■ Berkshire County Regional

Employment Board: Find employment data, links to career Web sites, training programs and more at www.bcreb.org.

■ BerkshireWorks Career Center: Find jobs (more than 160 in Berkshire County listed as of March 11), training and apprentice programs, application and unemployment services and more at www.berkshireworks.org or (413) 499-2220.

■ Berkshire Creative: Find more than 50 jobs (as of March 10) in the creative economy at <http://berkshirecreative.org/category/job-opportunities>.

This year, MCLA designed a professional master of business administration, or MBA, program, which is up for review and approval by the state Board of Higher Education.

"We also have a pretty aggressive summer college program planned with evening classes to give adult learners another way to move forward," said Christine Katchmar, the associate dean and director of continuing and professional education at MCLA.

At Mildred Elley, Campus Director T.J. Elder said enrollment is "higher than we've ever had," as is the school's retention rate. The school had about 160 students enrolled at this time last year, but now has around 255.

Elder said recent changes in the economy and job market have raised the expectations for stu-

dents, faculty and administrators.

Lori Houlihan, Mildred Elley's dean of academic affairs, said the school has hired between 15 and 20 new faculty members during the past year. The new students are of a "higher caliber," Elder said.

Houlihan said the clinical medical assistant certificate program has become the school's most popular. For the past two years, Dr. Jesse Spector has been an instructor for this program. The retired hematologist/oncologist has 32 years of practical medical experience and local connections in the field.

"If my students go to the medical practices in town to work for the doctors I know, those doctors will personally let me know if I've taught [the students] right," Spector said.

Not only do returning students bring a strong work ethic, they

maintain a high level of professionalism, from the way they dress to their people skills, he added.

Arthur Milano, vice president of human resources for Berkshire Health Systems, agrees with Spector's assessment.

"We look for education and the experience required for the job," Milano said. "But we also look for the softer skills, like people's ability to take care of our patients in a compassionate and caring manner."

Technical skills such as computer and software knowledge, along with the mastery of a second language other than English, can be a boon for people looking to branch out in their careers.

"This is a wide-open field that has a future," Milano said, "but people won't find it easy without doing any re-training."

Berkshire businesses having to adjust to a smaller, less robust U.S. economy

ADJUSTING from Page 16

was cutting the equivalent of 130 full-time employees in two phases that took place in July and September. A \$16.2 million reduction in payments from two separate health plans led to the second work force reduction. Approximately a dozen administrative posi-

tions remain unfilled.

BHS also has renegotiated contracts with suppliers and opened an employee pharmacy in order to reduce benefit costs.

But even with a mid-year cut of \$3.5 million in state aid, BHS still managed to net a profit of nearly \$1.3 million in 2009 and maintain

cash reserves of \$130 million, which includes the non-profit's investment portfolio.

"The reality," Phelps said, "is we will always figure out how to meet the needs of our community."

Phelps said BHS' sustainability in these tough times can also be credited, in part, to a

decade of financial and clinical success. Net assets doubled to \$187 million and overall staffing increased by 800 employees between 1999 and 2009.

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