

## The first jobs to be filled

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by Heather B. Hayes



Dr. Darrel W. Staat doesn't know when the economy will emerge from its doldrums. But the president of Central Virginia Community College (CVCC) has a pretty good inkling of which jobs will be in demand when the economy rebounds. All he has to do is look at the school's schedule of classes and certificate programs.

Enrollment is up at CVCC in Lynchburg. Staat estimates that 10 to 20 percent of his students are acquiring skills in fields such as nuclear support technologies, dental hygiene, engineering technology, cardiovascular stenography, medical laboratory technology, machine technology and welding.

"We work very closely with the business community and, as a result, we have a pretty good notion of what they're looking for," says Staat, who serves on the board of Central Virginia Industries Inc., a group of local senior executives. "As soon as things turn around economically, companies have indicated that they're going to really begin expanding, and that means they'll be looking to hire a lot of the students that have enrolled in our courses and prepared themselves to work in those jobs."

Community colleges have always been important in supplying companies with technically skilled employees, and observers say that role is becoming even more critical. Companies also are turning to the colleges to meet unique training needs. As a result, Staat says, community college programs have become a kind of bellwether of an economy in transition. Many skills being taught in these programs today will be the first ones required in the recovery.

This summer, the Obama administration paid homage to the importance of two-year institutions by proposing \$12 billion in grant money. The plan calls for \$2.5 billion infrastructure improvements, which college officials say are sorely needed to accommodate their growing enrollments. (Congress hasn't acted on the proposal.)

Based on information from the first week of classes, the Virginia Community College System expects its enrollment to hit the equivalent of 99,249 students this fall, up 13.7 percent from last year.

The jump in enrollment is even more dramatic at some colleges in the system. [Tidewater Community College](#), for example, saw a 20 increase, says President Deborah M. DiCroce. Many new students, she says, are career switchers looking for jobs that have better prospects in a changing economy.

In putting together the college's programs, DiCroce and her staff get input from local employers plus information from the Virginia Employment Commission, U.S. Department of Labor and Economic Modeling Specialists Inc., a company that provides regional labor market statistics. "Nobody has a crystal ball that's 100 percent accurate, but by taking the approach we have, we're getting as rich an analysis of projected needs in this area as possible," DiCroce says.

Christine Chmura, president and chief economist for Chmura Economics and Analytics in Richmond, says jobs requiring an associate's degree are expected to grow at a faster rate than those that typically requiring a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree or a graduate degree. Her analysis shows that jobs requiring a two-year degree will see a net increase of 40,000 jobs by 2018 over the 144,000 jobs that existed in 2008.

"Having said that, though, jobs that require only an associate's degree will still only be about 4 percent of all jobs in the state," she says. Occupations requiring a bachelor's degree will make up 14 percent of all jobs while occupations requiring a high

school diploma and some on-the-job training (which could include courses at community colleges) will make up 37 percent of the work force by 2018.

Steve Fuller, director of the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University, isn't quite as optimistic regarding the immediate job prospects of students now enrolled in community colleges in Northern Virginia. He thinks the majority of jobs fronting the recovery there will be in professional and business services, health and education. These fields likely will require at least a four-year degree.



Robbie Hall says Commercial Metals Co.'s Rebar Virginia plans to maintain a long-term relationship with Central Virginia Community College

Community college students, however, are not wasting their time, he says. "Community colleges are very important in the sense that they allow young people to continue their education at a modest cost or people who are older to retrain themselves and become repositioned in the work force," Fuller says. "So technical skills and what I call intellectual skills are definitely going to make them more competitive for the initial hire, because it's going to be tough to get into a job unless they can demonstrate that they have up-to-date skills."

In the Lynchburg area, Staat says, he is seeing some movement toward expansion among some major local employers. Nuclear energy company Areva LP and electric utility Dominion Virginia Power have indicated that they will soon begin hiring radiation safety and nuclear technology specialists. Babcock & Wilcox, a power generation company, already is hiring machinists.

Commercial Metals Co.'s Rebar Virginia in Madison Heights outside Lynchburg is working closely with CVCC officials to hire students steeped in engineering technology and draftsmanship skills. The company plans to give new hires advanced training to become rebar detailers. CMC has held its own during the recession in part because of a shift in demand. Instead of making steel reinforcement products for commercial buildings, the company is producing rebar for bridges and other infrastructure projects, some of which are being funded by federal stimulus money.

Robbie Hall, technical manager for CMC's new training center in Madison Heights, says that working with CVCC has allowed the company to establish an effective pipeline of job candidates. "The goal is to supply our training initiatives with qualified candidates that have the right background in terms of construction knowledge and CAD skills they would need to gain entrance into our program and excel," he says.

The relationship with the college will continue no matter when the economy recovers. "This is really a long-term initiative that is critical to the long-term growth of the company and meeting the needs of our clients," says Hall. "Nobody really knows whether the job market will ramp up or slow down in the short term, but in the meantime, we need to make sure that we're developing and maintaining that knowledgeable, highly skilled work force we'll need for the future."