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Education

On track for good jobs

A report cites PCC's success in creating paths for better careers

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For more than 20 years, Brenda Haworth assembled electronic components in Oregon's up-and-down high-tech industry. She never made more than \$9 an hour, sometimes less.

Now, Haworth, mother of five children, draws and processes blood and handles patients at Kaiser Permanente medical offices. She makes more than \$12 an hour, has health insurance again and looks forward to continuing her education and making more money.

"This is a great improvement for me," she said.

Haworth graduated from a PCC career pathway program that targets displaced workers and the chronically underemployed and guides them toward fields that promise a middle-class income. The program, about 11/2 years old, has graduated about 100 students.

Too often, according to a new national report, community colleges do a poor job of creating paths to good jobs, even though work-force training is one of their missions. However, the report cites the PCC program as a positive exception.

"Community colleges have a huge array of remedial courses and quick-hit training on one end and high-level skill training on the other but virtually nothing to bridge the two together into career pathways," said Julian L. Alssid, co-director of the Workforce Strategy Center of New York, which produced the report. The center creates work-force training programs to move low-skilled workers toward careers offering decent salaries and opportunities for advancement.

The report, "Building a Career Pathway System," found that up to 50 percent of students in community college remedial courses never move beyond the basic level. It also found that students remain in noncredit certificate courses because the colleges resist incorporating noncredit students into their academic programs. Further, the report said, there isn't enough cooperation between community job-training agencies and community colleges.

Chris Mazzeo, a co-author of the report, said researchers were impressed by the regional approach in the PCC program. It includes Mt. Hood Community College and Worksystems Inc., a Portland-area public-private partnership involved in work-force training.

Mazzeo praised the program's regional commitment and the leadership at PCC. "Work-force training is a regional issue," he said, "and there's no better institution than a community college to deal with it."

Nan Poppe, dean of continuing education at PCC, said the program tries to boost its success rate by concentrating job-training on fields with growing employment. Health care is one of them, and the college also has trained students in machine technology, accounting and bookkeeping, corrections work and manufacturing. Poppe said the idea is to steer students toward growing and stable careers.

Another is trying to ensure that courses in work-force training carry college credit and can lead to a certificate or a degree, she said.

The Workforce Strategy Center also praised PCC for a related program that helps workers with limited English improve their language skills while training them in health occupations, food service and office work. About 300 students have completed that program, Poppe said.

Haworth, 43, who lives in Hillsboro, started taking classes last February at a PCC site in Washington County. She attended an evening phlebotomy class for 12 weeks, moving to Tuality Community Hospital late in the course to learn how to deal with blood in the lab.

"At my age, it was not a breeze," Haworth said. She passed but said it required a lot more concentration and study than when she was young.

Students such as Haworth who have never been in college or haven't been there in a long time get help from educational coordinators Lori Silverman and Frank Brown. The two team-teach a course in how to find a job and help students arrange for child care or solve logistical problems, such as travel needs. Federal job-training funds pay for the program.

After she graduated in May, Haworth landed the job at Kaiser. She is a "floater," moving among Kaiser medical offices to handle blood sampling where she's needed. She likes the change in routine, learning new techniques and meeting new patients.

"I'm a people person," she said. "I'm always meeting new people."

Haworth said Kaiser will help pay for the further schooling she'll need to become a medical lab technician, which would boost her pay. It's a two-year program.

"I don't want to stop where I'm at," she said.

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