

## GTCC class teaches in-demand job skills

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Community colleges are uniquely qualified to teach the economically disadvantaged that success in a changing economy results from acquiring in-demand job skills. A program at GTCC successfully producing such results has earned well-deserved praise from a national education organization, which accurately describes it as a "bridge out of poverty into well-paying jobs." The San Francisco-based Workforce Strategy Center also lauds North Carolina's community college system for expanding its long standing practice of linking customized local business training needs and low-cost, short-term career training programs.

It makes sense for community colleges to be at the center of work force development. They offer comparatively low tuition, conveniently located campuses, admit a cross-section of students and are able to train large numbers of people. Beyond that, GTCC and its predecessor, Guilford Technical Institute, have enjoyed for decades a symbiotic relationship with area employers.

The latest success story is a 12-week course that helps former welfare recipients, the unemployed and people re-entering the work force to train for new careers as high demand medical or computer office specialists. Traditional classroom instruction is followed by an on-the-job internship at a local business

and skill-maintenance workshops. The success rate proves the combination works. Over a two-year period, 89 percent of the 218 students passed the course with 96 percent finding work, many at starting salaries in excess of \$20,000 annually. Training for better-paying jobs is important because the nation's experiment with welfare reform too often moves people into the ranks of the working poor without making them self-sufficient.

The GTCC program, however, focuses on training for high-tech jobs that make a real difference over the long term. Last year, the school also introduced a 12-week manufacturing skills training curriculum for low-income adults in partnership with local industry that leads to a metal working certification.

Students aren't the only winners. Employers get help with recruiting for hard-to-fill openings, retraining to upgrade current skills and input into the learning process. Even so, ties between business and the state's community college network should be strengthened. A rapidly changing state economy demands a more systematic approach to providing career pathways to higher-paying jobs with a future.

Despite nagging budget shortfalls, the economically disadvantaged need comprehensive short-term career training programs. GTCC's program is a commendable example of bridging the gap between employer need and employee economic self-sufficiency.