

## Contra Costa Times

### Third in a four-part series: Community colleges lack link to industry

By Matt Krupnick

staff writer

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John McCormack teaches a bilingual cabinet-making class at Laney College in Oakland, Calif., on...



The once-dying aerospace industry has started taking off again in the Los Angeles area, but it's hard to build an airliner without nuts and bolts.

The firms that make the specialized fasteners that hold planes together can't fill their shifts.

"If you gave me 1,000 machinists right now, I would have jobs for them," said Victoria Bradshaw, the state's secretary of labor and workforce development.

This is a clear-cut job for community colleges. California's schools, however, are failing to clock in as they strive to keep up with technology and struggle to attract qualified vocational teachers.

Despite the colleges' open-enrollment policy, which allows nearly anyone to attend, high-demand vocational programs such as nursing sometimes have hundreds of students waiting for seats.

The system's funding problems leave schools without the money to draw instructors in specialized fields or to pay for the expensive equipment needed to train students. It's not easy to persuade a nurse or electrician to take a \$30,000 or \$40,000 pay cut to be a full-time teacher.

Like companies in many industries, manufacturing firms have had trouble finding skilled employees, and the shortage is worsening across the board.

In terms of workforce shortages, there is the health-care industry, and then there is everything else. No shortage threatens the state's aging population like the dearth of nurses, therapists and other skilled health workers.

Some of the 200 allied-health fields, for example, will need nearly six times more workers to meet California's needs by 2020 as retiring baby boomers seek more medical care, according to one study.

But community colleges also are the state's training grounds -- and, more than ever, the only ones -- for hundreds of other occupations, as high school vocational training in areas such as car repair and metal working has dwindled steadily over two decades.

The community colleges and industry have begun to recognize their mutual needs. Laney College took extra steps after hearing from the high-pay woodworking industry.

It's slow going in John McCormack's cabinet-making class, but that's what happens when you teach in two languages.

In a Laney College workshop on a January weeknight, about 20 Spanish-speaking students listened to McCormack explain

the basics of woodworking, planks laid out in front of them.

"So, a little about lumber," McCormack said, each sentence repeated in Spanish by assistant Rosendo Del Toro.

"Obviously, we're talking about part of a tree, so here's a cut-off part of a tree," he said, hoisting a chunk of wood.

The slow bilingual pace isn't ideal -- it runs the risk of driving away bored students -- but Laney's "carpenteria fina" program is doing exactly what a growing chorus of voices say community colleges haven't been doing: confronting California's severe worker shortage.

The key to Laney's brand-new program was communication. Instructors and administrators spoke to cabinet-makers, who said they needed more skilled workers.

But it takes months for Laney to find professors with both the required educational and occupational backgrounds. And the longer the worker shortage persists, the harder it's going to be to find instructors.

"We don't have people prepared to teach in our classrooms," said Kim Schenk, a Diablo Valley College dean and president of the state's occupational-education association. Job candidates are "highly, highly skilled, but often they never worried about formal education."

Even as college programs have died out, industry has stood by without providing financial support or alerting academia to its dire need for workers. Although more constructive conversations between the two groups have developed lately, trade associations are focusing much of their attention on re-igniting high school programs.

Part of the problem is free-market competition, said Jack Stewart, president of the California Manufacturers & Technology Association.

"The trick is going to be getting companies to collaborate on this," he said. "There's such a distrust between them that they're often reluctant to work together."

There are some signs of change.

At Southern California's Cerritos College, area car dealerships teamed up with the school to help pay for a new vehicle-repair facility. Some health-care companies have helped supply colleges with nursing faculty, paying the salary differences themselves.

At Los Medanos College in Pittsburg, several Contra Costa County companies donated about \$370,000 to help build a laboratory for the school's developing electrical-technician program.

Among them was Pittsburg steel company USS-POSCO, which grew weary of looking out of state for trained technicians, said Jason Cox, the company's organizational-development manager.

The Los Medanos program's first students start in the fall, will graduate in 2010 and could immediately step into well-paying jobs, Cox said.

"Two years over at Los Medanos, then you walk across the street, take our test and start at \$70,000," Cox said. "People think they need to go to a four-year school to get a good job. We've sort of shot ourselves in the foot over the past 20 years."

Still, most other discussions between industry and colleges are just that: discussions.

"There's a lot of smoke, but not much fire," Cox said.

Even if schools could solve their considerable staffing shortfall, they would still face other obstacles -- a lack of money, first and foremost.

The state pays community colleges mostly based on the number of students they enroll, much as in kindergarten through high school. But a student in a low-cost course -- say, history -- generates the same funding as a student in an expensive nursing program, even though nursing courses cost significantly more.

The state puts the cost of instructing a full-time student at \$4,850 for health-related classes -- which include nursing -- compared to \$1,900 for psychology. Recent infusions have provided more money to nursing and other expensive programs, but the funding structure remains the same.

The system's poverty has hurt programs such as automobile repair and machining, which need the newest computerized equipment to prepare students. Unable to pay for state-of-the-art equipment, Diablo Valley College gave up its machinist courses, despite a growing need in high-tech and traditional industries.

State legislators and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger -- himself a former community college student -- have begun paying more attention to vocational programs, pumping money into certain courses and ironing out wrinkles in the system.

Even with money and qualified staff, colleges face major burdens on the learning end. Among them: finding prepared students who won't drop out.

When Laney College ran a Spanish-language radio commercial advertising its new cabinet-making program, the response overwhelmed organizers. Nearly 100 people called in the first few days.

Instructors were stunned when 46 students showed up on the first day of class. As in most community-college courses, enrollment plummeted after that first evening as some students quickly decided that college just wasn't for them.

Nearly all the students are Mexican immigrants. Some, worried about the language barrier, brought their wives to the first session, said Ron Mackrodt, chairman of Laney's wood-technology department.

"A big part of this is (about) not scaring them off," he said. "I think anybody who had any apprehensions about school looked around and got out of here."

One student who stuck around, Miguel Camarillo, commutes to class from San Jose with two friends. Camarillo, who grew up in Mexico City and was laid off from a sign-making job in October, said he was introduced to carpentry by his uncles, who built movie sets.

"Not many colleges give you this opportunity to become a cabinet-maker," he said as he marked off chalk measurements on a plank. "After this, maybe I can get a good job. I applied for a couple of jobs, but they asked me if I know how to make cabinets."

Job placement hasn't been a problem for Laney or most vocational programs. Actually, it has been too successful, instructors said. Students often "job out" of a program before earning a degree or certificate, which costs the school funding because of the lost enrollment. It also costs the students training in computer systems and other subjects they'll need to know for long-term success.

"Industry is so hungry that we keep (students) for a semester or two and then they're dropping out," said Peter Crabtree, Laney's dean of vocational programs.

"We would like them to get a broader base of knowledge before they move on."

### **The nurse crunch**

- At least \$100,000: Typical salary, experienced Bay Area nurses:
- \$52,692: Starting salary, Contra Costa College nursing instructor:
- 28,410: Eligible applicants for all California nursing programs, 2005-06:
- 11,000: College spots available for those applicants:
- 50 percent: Community-college nursing students who graduate after two years:
- 25 percent: Nursing students who never graduate

Matt Krupnick covers higher education. Reach him at 925-943-8246 or [mkrupnick@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:mkrupnick@bayareanewsgroup.com).