Workforce Development
Institutions of higher education are delivering a wide array of training.

By George N. Saliba, Managing Editor

These days, at both social and professional gatherings, one will discover bright and articulate individuals who are nonetheless coping with the acute stress of unemployment. Whether one analyzes the dynamics of globalization, examines the intricacies of Americans’ individual heavy debt loads, explores the nation’s obstinate housing market woes, or scrutinizes Wall Street, the many causes of this economic downturn and its resulting unemployment are in some ways dissimilar to those of historic recessions. Economists generally predict a slow employment recovery.

However, against this dim backdrop, experts report that some employers are actually spending money training their current workforces, so that their employees can be more agile and multi-skilled, and those businesses can compete more effectively. Overall, New Jersey’s institutions of higher education are simultaneously improving the skill sets of incumbent workers, as well as those of the unemployed and underemployed.
Basic Workforce Skills Training

Employers who wish to hone their workers’ skills have several options in the Garden State, including the NJBIA Basic Skills Workforce Training Program, which is a partnership between the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA), the New Jersey Community College Consortium and the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Companies can have their employees improve skills in: verbal, written or customer service communications; mathematics and measurement; English as a Second Language; or computer applications such as Microsoft’s Excel and Word. With training provided free of charge, classes can be held at a work site or a nearby college campus.

Since July 2007, more than 16,000 workers have been trained in these subjects with the assistance of the state’s 19 county colleges. Regarding the computer training portion, Bob Rosa, chief operations officer at the New Jersey Community College Consortium, says: “The whole nature of work has changed, and every worker needs to have at least some rudimentary sense of a computer. That has really put pressure on a lot of people who have no computer training to at least understand what a computer is: ‘How do I access that spreadsheet that shows inventory?’ and ‘How do I access the inventory that shows my call or client list?’”

Meanwhile, Rosa also underscores the importance of employees using proper grammar when communicating verbally or in writing, since this is a reflection on the businesses for which they work.

Christopher Emigholz, director of education policy at NJBIA, says the basic skills training program has not only been promoted and marketed, but is now more flexible. “Thousands of businesses around the state are aware of the program, and thousands have been able to access it because we made it easier for them, especially small businesses, to access,” he reports.

Other County College Roles

New Jersey’s county colleges also have the ability to train workers via customized training, or, separately, through a brand new program known as training on demand. In the latter case, the county colleges and the Department of Labor research job openings. Then, training is conducted for those specific skill areas and matches are made between qualified workers and hiring companies.

Meanwhile, customized training is just what it sounds like. For example, MCR Direct Mail (Direct Group) of Swedesboro was in the market to increase employee skills, and a $446,030 Department of Labor grant procured through Gloucester County College’s Business and Industry Training Center provided the resources. This was the largest customized-training grant developed by the College’s Continuing Education Division.

The grant, which ran until January, improved the technical and leadership skills of the company’s 932 employees. Courses approved by the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development included customer service, time management, problem solving, computer-training skills, team building, English as a Second Language, six sigma green belt, lean manufacturing, industrial equipment maintenance, business communications, electrical safety and business administration. Direct Group invested more than $950,000 in employee wages during the training sessions.

At the opposite end of the state, Paramus-based Bergen Community College has conducted training with numerous companies including
Whole Foods, the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority and The Prudential Center arena in Newark.

Speaking broadly, Bergen’s president, Dr. G. Jeremiah Ryan, adds, “The more entrepreneurial companies that really want to make sure they stay in business during these tough times can continue to invest in training, as opposed to some other companies that think training is an overhead cost and not an investment, and so they do away with it. Companies that have seen training as an investment – the companies that we are dealing with – are flourishing. They are doing very well.”

Bergen Community College has clients in industries that also include: service; utilities; telemarketing; unions; healthcare; pharmaceuticals; biotechnology; and manufacturing, to name a few.

Four-Year Institutions
Private, four-year institutions such as Morristown-based College of Saint Elizabeth (CSE) also educate incumbent workers. Of the college’s 2,000 students, more than 70 percent are adults and over 30 percent of those adults are involved with off-site CSE programs occurring at their places of employment. These workplaces include hospitals, schools and pharmaceutical companies.

The college’s director of recruitment, Michael Szarek, reports that CSE’s overall curriculum remains consistent, regardless of the participating company or its location. However, CSE’s faculty do adjust the programs to suit the needs of both the employer and employees.

He explains, “The actual on-the-job, day-to-day issues are discussed in the classroom. Doing the program onsite and at the person’s place of employment is a nice experience for the person. They are not worried about getting to another location and the conversation they are having in that classroom is directly related to who they are and what they do … they can very much relate to the classroom experience.”

The college offers a reduced tuition rate for its corporate partners, and among other benefits, performs a needs analysis to determine if college credit can be awarded to employees, for instance.

During 2002 and 2003, CSE began actively organizing these cohort programs at hospitals and school districts. Szarek says, “[People were saying] ‘Wait, if you have 10 or 15 employees who are all coming to College of Saint Elizabeth’s campus, why don’t we discuss the possibility of letting the program, or a version of the program, take place [at your corporate facilities]?’ The organizations were very receptive to that.”

Szarek explains that, in the future, higher education and corporate America will increasingly understand each other and create better programs. What is hard to predict, he explains, is precisely how these programs will develop. “Like most colleges, we are built around the idea of a bachelors and a masters degree. More and more, we are having conversations about, ‘Well, what about this specific set of courses? I want my employees to know how to do this.’ Or, ‘My employees need this certification or certificate or licensure.’ Or, ‘Can you teach this part of that degree?’ The question becomes, ‘How do higher education institutions continue to respond to certificate needs, to specific groups of courses, and to licensure needs?’”

Improving an Individual’s Skills
Meanwhile, for individual workers continuing their education without the support of an employer, Bergen Community College’s Ryan explains, “[Workers] have the sense that they had better get some more skills or they are going to be in trouble. So, our adult enrollment has grown over the last three semesters.” In fact, college enrollments have increased at most institutions, as is typical during recessions.
New Jersey City University’s Dr. Sandra Bloomberg, who is dean of the college of professional studies, says students are seeking graduate certificates in financial management or financial planning. Others are pursuing masters programs in accounting, a field which may see employment growth during the next five to 10 years. Nursing programs remain popular, although Bloomberg reports that field is experiencing a temporary slowdown in New York and New Jersey. Students are also returning to gain proprietary skills sets for computer programs such as Excel, QuickBooks and Peachtree, for instance.

Beyond these skills, Bloomberg says, “People must have a fundamental understanding of the field that they are in, certainly. But it is the ability to think critically and communicate well in writing and oral communications that employers are asking for all the time. These skills are just so integral to everything [workers] do.” While NJCU offers classes in writing, the practice of thinking critically is woven throughout curricula via case studies and other activities.

**Conclusion**
NJBA’s Emigholz explains that workforce development is an “umbrella term” which encompasses preschool, K-12 education, higher education and beyond. He says continuing education is a more immediate way to improve workforce development, while other aspects of workforce development are more indirect, and address society 20, 30 or 40 years in the future. Regarding New Jersey, he believes higher education and economic development must be connected for the state to flourish.

Clearly, New Jersey’s higher education institutions are training workers and others in a wide array of skills and knowledge sectors. Regardless of how long it takes for the economy to improve, by all reports, higher education is doing its part.

“Higher education is critical to the workforce of the state because they are training the current workforce and they are preparing the future workforce,” Emigholz concludes. NIB
NNJ-ASTD is “Voice of Workforce Learning”

>With headcounts being reduced, remaining employees take on leadership roles.

The Northern New Jersey Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development (NNJ-ASTD) is a 200-person strong organization comprised of workplace learning development professionals from the business world, education and government. NNJ-ASTD meets monthly and holds workshops and other programs throughout the year.

One NNJ-ASTD theme has been “leadership development,” according to the chapter’s president, Jack Appleman. He explains that with headcounts being reduced at corporations, employees are being asked to handle new leadership roles. He says, “They really need to be trained on how to do this - how to be more effective leaders.”

Overall, Appleman adds, “People in New Jersey need to step up [at their jobs] and do more than they did before. People probably have less time to get up to speed, to learn a specific skill. That’s why it is so important to better prepare the workforce.”

Examples of other NNJ-ASTD themes and programs include: how to influence people; e-learning and social networking; distance learning; how to measure the value of training; and communication. On the latter point, he says, “There is growing evidence that a lot of people are skilled at what they do – maybe as engineers, accountants, or financial professionals. But, they are not skilled at communicating, whether in writing or for a presentation.”

Appleman says, “When the economy turns around in a couple of years, even more workers will be entering the workforce and they will need to be trained to a larger degree. An unprepared workforce can reduce profits, lower market share, create inefficiencies, lower morale and increase attrition.”

As for NNJ-ASTD, he says the organization is the “voice of workplace learning in New Jersey” and seeks to enhance its membership experience via “terrific programs” that are being planned.

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