

COPING WITH THE RECESSION

Training for the new economy**Colleges demand funding and a more flexible system as laid-off workers seek new skills****KAREN HOWLETT AND ELIZABETH CHURCH**

JANUARY 13, 2009

Dennis Barlett, a job-placement co-ordinator who helps laid-off steel workers in Hamilton, says nearly two-thirds of the unemployed coming through his door are signing up for training programs.

"They've had enough of the layoff environment and they're looking for second careers," Mr. Barlett said in an interview yesterday. "The manufacturing sector is not the place to be."

People are applying to learn such construction-related skills as welding, operating heavy equipment or driving large rigs, he said.

Canada's manufacturing heartland began shedding jobs five years ago. But the global economic crisis has accelerated the pace and spread the pain to other sectors right across the country.

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The widespread expectation is that many jobs have vanished forever, a trend that is forcing laid-off workers to find new careers and government leaders to retool training programs to equip individuals with the skills needed for a rapidly changing economy. Those on the front lines say the current system needs to be revamped to allow more people to participate in government-funded retraining programs. Community colleges across Canada are anticipating an influx of students seeking training for new careers.

"We are going to be under enormous pressure to deal with economic and social issues in our communities and

colleges have traditionally been the ones who have responded to that," said Jim Reed, who represents college leaders in British Columbia.

Last week, B.C. College Presidents, a consortium of 12 community colleges, wrote to Prime Minister Stephen Harper urging him to make any new money for training more flexible so that colleges can respond to changing conditions and to make sure that any money that flows to the provinces is specifically earmarked for training.

"We have to ask, is the current way we deliver training, is it going to do the job?" Mr. Reed said.

Mr. Harper plans to meet with Canada's premiers on Friday in Ottawa, where they will talk about spending more money to retrain the unemployed. As Ottawa is poised to pour more funding into retraining, the question is whether it will attempt to exert more control over those dollars and get credit for its investment.

The current system of training is a complex web that relies on federal and provincial money and involves volunteer groups, businesses and public institutions. It spans a wide range of programs from language and literacy training to apprenticeships and skills upgrades.

In the past decade, the system has gone through major changes as the federal government handed delivery of these programs to the provinces, which in turn have contracted out employment counselling to a range of agencies. Retraining support under the federal employment insurance program also has led to the growth of private career colleges offering courses.

Bill Summers, vice-president of research and policy with Colleges Ontario, said any investment in retraining will be a complex proposition because it must involve the delivery of services to individuals, including guidance on career options.

"You are now supposed to figure out where the jobs of the future should be," he said - a difficult call even in the best economic conditions.

The Ontario government has first-hand experience with the challenges associated with developing new programs. In its budget last spring, it earmarked \$355-million to enable 20,000 laid-off workers to enroll in one- or two-year training programs. But very few sought funding under the "Second Career" program, so the government allowed workers laid off as far back as 2005 to apply, as well as those who have taken temporary jobs to make ends meet. To date, 3,300 have applied to community colleges and career colleges for such eligible programs as massage therapy, industrial design and bookkeeping.

John Milloy, Ontario's Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, is also urging the federal government to open up EI-sponsored training programs by allowing those not eligible for benefits to participate.

"Retraining is a major priority for the government and we would welcome additional support from the feds," he said.

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