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Quick route to better prospects

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BY VIOLET SNOW

The Record

SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

With New Jersey unemployment at 9.8 percent and the economy still wobbling, students and workers are flocking to higher-education certificate programs to boost their employability.

For those preparing to graduate from college, an extra year of study can give them an edge once they're out in the job market. People who have lost their jobs, fear the possibility of layoffs, or are ready for an upgrade may find certificate programs just the ticket to job security, a promotion or a career change.

Ramapo College of New Jersey in Mahwah says 43 percent more students are entering certificate programs through their Center for Innovative and Professional Learning. Most popular is the certificate in business essentials, said college President Dr. Peter Mercer.

"The program is interesting for our own students, since a nursing student might want to go into management someday. We're also finding adult learners who want to return to college are interested. Their jobs might change, or they might want to pursue a more business-oriented position. People are taking a good look around and saying the more credentials and more substantive learning they can acquire, the better."

Twenty-one-year-old Lindsay Goldstein of Suffern, a communications major at Ramapo, is in her second semester of the business essentials program. "My family has a business background," she said, "so I've always been interested in business, but not in going into the family business. I wanted to open some horizons outside the communications field. This course has helped me see how many options there are." She plans to apply to a business graduate school with the goal of going into marketing and sales.

Ramapo also offers certificates in Web development and in middle school preparation for elementary school teachers. "Students learn at their own pace," said Mercer, adding that the employed may take as many courses as their workload allows, with most students spending one to three years earning a certificate. "It's less expensive than a bachelor's or master's degree because there aren't as many components," he added. "I think the numbers have gone up partly because of the economy, but also because of the general phenomenon of lifelong learning. People have become more interested in continuing their education."

Ana Maria Schuhmann, dean of William Paterson University's college of education in Wayne, said her school is also seeing a surge of interest in certificate programs this year, partly as a result of the New Vistas grant from the U.S. Department of Education, designed to encourage transition into teaching.

"We get mostly people from the business field, from banks, Wall Street, MBAs — people who have lost their jobs or decided to change careers," she said.

The grant pays each recipient \$5,000 to prepare for teaching in the understaffed fields of math, science, special education, English as a second language, or bilingual education. Applicants must commit to work for at least three years in high-needs schools, defined by the number of students receiving free or reduced-cost lunches. "If you have a B.A., you could become a teacher in three semesters, including the student teaching," Schuhmann said.

William Paterson student Alison Uszenski, 23, of Hillsdale is supplementing her elementary education studies with a certificate in special education. "I'll be more marketable because I can be in any classroom with three to four special needs kids. Now with mainstreaming, teachers are in demand. I can be the main teacher or a collaborative teacher, not just an aide."

Constantine E. Theodosiou, dean of Montclair State University's graduate school, said certificate program enrollment there has grown 11 percent over last year. "My previous experience shows that when the economy's going south, people go back to school," he said. "This year we feared that even loans would be unavailable, but that's not the case."

Montclair has 371 students in 30 certificate programs spread over the university's five colleges. The most popular subject is child advocacy. Others include health education, paralegal, advanced counseling and molecular biology — this last topic thanks to the many pharmaceutical companies in the region.


Ann Wyanez is pursuing a certificate in nutrition at Montclair and plans to use her credits toward a master's degree in the field. "I had been out of college for 20

years when I enrolled," she said. "I had a B.A. in education, but I'd been raising my kids and doing volunteer work. A certificate program seemed like a more manageable way of starting the process. It's only five courses."

To qualify for the program, she had to take several undergraduate prerequisites. "I was older than some of the students' parents," she said, laughing. "It was a new experience, but I adjusted fine. The second time around, I really appreciated what was being said much more. Now that I'm in the certificate program, I'm taking graduate-level courses with people of all ages and backgrounds. We have great discussions!"

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