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Green is color of future for NJ college students

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STAFF WRITER

Students on New Jersey college campuses are clamoring for environmentally-friendly classes, all the better to prepare for an expected wave of green-collar jobs.

“Students are very interested in sustainability issues,” said Ramapo College President Peter Mercer. “It starts in their own lives, with recycling and their own use of resources. That, in turn, has led them to focus on sustainability in the job market.”

It’s more than solar panels and installing the latest water-filtration system. Students at all levels of higher education are combining environmental concerns with science, technology and political know-how to prepare for the changes ahead.

Anticipated new “green” jobs will range from construction and architecture to legal services and government. As the U.S. pours billions into sustainable construction — including through the fiscal stimulus package — such employment is expected to grow. One estimate, by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, projects 4.2 million green jobs nationwide by 2028, compared to 750,000 today.

At Bergen Community College in Paramus, a new catalog declares “Bergen Goes Green.”

The school partnered with a local electrical workers union to create a solar-energy class to teach licensed electricians to install and service solar panels. Bergen also has introduced classes in energy-efficient home construction and sustainable interior design, said Walter Hecht, the school’s dean of continuing education.

A new four-week class aimed at real estate agents and home inspectors covers the state's environmental rules, including lectures on underground storage tanks, radon testing and offgassing from those sought-after granite countertops. The college will soon offer test-prep classes for contractors who want to be certified in environmentally sensitive "LEED" building practices.

Interest is high, Hecht said.

"The federal government has put an emphasis on it for stimulus dollars, and people want to be on that cutting edge," he said. "The technology is changing so quickly, and it's hard for people to keep up on their own. These are new skills that they need. Their customers are asking for this."

The New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark recently created a "green careers" database and job search for its career services department. Students can click through all 100-plus college majors to search what green careers they lead to, as well as search listings of current jobs.

"Our students are interested in green everything," said Gregory Mass, executive director for career development services at NJIT. "The students who come here are very career-minded, and this really has become a way of life and a value that they hold very much that carries forward into their life's work."

Student Lori-Ann Sciachitano, 28, is finishing up a degree in science, technology and society at NJIT in Newark. She said her classmates are going green, with an eye on the job market.

"Green technology is the future of technology," she said. "If we're not taught the most leading technologies, we're not going to be able to compete with students who are."

Students engaged in post-graduate study also are combining hard science with the social sciences in new "sustainability" degree programs. Sustainability science studies the interaction of humans and their environment in the hopes of influencing business practices and public policy.

The goal: graduates who can link human practices with their ecological effects and handle new business and government demands for sustainable practices. Such practices provide goods and services without degrading natural resources, such as by using efficient new technologies, non-polluting manufacturing processes or easily replaced materials.

Ramapo in Mahwah is about to open a new sustainability education center on campus, and is awaiting approval for a new masters degree in sustainability studies. Kean University in Union recently introduced a new bachelor's degree in sustainability. And at Montclair State University in Little Falls, officials are developing new undergraduate and graduate programs in sustainability science. Doctoral candidates there recently began a new PhD program in environmental management.

"We humans are interested in maintaining our way and quality of life — but how do we balance our ecology and economy?" said Michael Weinstein, director of the Institute for Sustainability Studies at Montclair State University in Little Falls. "The big issue for this century is reconciling human use of natural resources with the ability of the natural ecosystem to provide those resources."

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