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Technical college offers updated degrees that lead to jobs

BY PATRICIA MCKEOWN

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National, state and local press have put technical education in the forefront, touting the positive impact it has on people's wage earning capability and the economy. The Bellingham Herald's Sept. 4 article, "Study: Tech certificates can yield more than 4-year degrees, college major matters more than alma mater," makes this case loud and clear. Bellingham Technical College is the regional resource to help students complete a major that matters.

BTC has a rich program mix, and while we are one of the smaller colleges of the 34 in the Washington State Community and Technical College System, BTC is a powerhouse in workforce education. BTC offers 37 degree and 51 certificate programs. BTC awards more than 1,000 workforce degrees and certificates annually, ranking 11th of the 34 colleges in these awards.

My long history at BTC has seen many changes, including an enhanced college image, the addition of sophisticated professional technical programs and the ongoing refinement of programs that have evolved with new technology and processes. Even coming out of the recession, our graduates are in demand with a job placement rate of more than 86 percent. BTC is a valued Whatcom County resource, critical to the economic health of many citizens and the region's business and industry. Businesses have moved to Whatcom County or expanded because they knew there was an educated workforce available here that would meet their needs.

As BTC enters our 57th year, the college's technical and career education has continued to evolve. The sophistication of the college's educational offerings has addressed the need for increased credentialing, licensure and knowledge expectations in the workforce. Automation, robotics and programmable electronic controls are integrated into many fields, and firms are branching out to work with composites and plastics.

Healthcare is going through a monumental revision, with staff needing critical thinking, new skills and knowledge. Hospitals and medical groups rank as the largest private sector employers in the region. BTC ranks fifth overall in the state and graduates the most students in health related majors north of Seattle in our 12-plus degrees and certificates in healthcare. BTC has the third-largest number of students enrolled in programs that address the growing needs of the aerospace and advanced manufacturing sectors.

Manufacturing is one of our region's top industrial sectors and one of the rare national and state sectors that is emerging from the recession in an excellent growth position. Emerging technology in renewable energy has expanded into required skill sets to work on cars and trucks, heating and cooling systems, construction and manufacturing, and our programs have responded.

With more than 250 industry representatives on our advisory committees, the college's program curriculums are in a constant state of refinement. BTC has strong partnerships with business and has met the growing workforce needs by developing new programs to meet workforce needs and provide students a great career.

To be competitive BTC's students need options to move into educational pathways that lead to work and also to a bachelor's degree. In addition to specialized transfer degrees with transfer agreements into a bachelor's degree, BTC has added five new transfer degrees. These new direct transfer degrees in major-related programs were developed to provide the first two years of a bachelor's degree in specific majors. Each degree is connected to BTC's current programs: electronics engineering technology, mechanical engineering, technology, pre-nursing and business. Four of these degrees align with the need for increased graduates in science technology, engineering and math, the so-called STEM fields. All have strong growth, and all are in demand from employers.

BTC has a diverse student body, with students coming to BTC right out of high school and as older adults ready for a career change. Approximately 15 percent of our students already have a bachelor's degree, but need a career-focused major. When layoffs and business closures have occurred, BTC has met the needs of dislocated workers. We have been designated a military-friendly college for our relationships with our veteran student population. BTC serves a broad base of the county's population and diversity is one of our strengths. Many students start at BTC and are encouraged by their success to continue to set and achieve higher educational goals.

BTC staff and faculty are committed to helping students choose the right major for their future. I believe all learning is good and valuable, but it does not apply equally to career goals and earnings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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