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Richmond Community College Receives FIPSE Grant from Department of Education

Richmond Community College is one of 29 community colleges and universities nationwide to receive a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant from the Department of Education in the area of “Innovative Strategies in Community Colleges for Working Adults and Displaced Workers.”

The FIPSE program is designed to help institutions develop original solutions to local issues while providing model solutions that advance all of higher education. A central and unique feature of the RCC proposal is integrating WorkKeys assessments into selected curriculum programs to measure and document skills and knowledge acquired by students.

The \$500,000 grant will also enhance student support services to improve retention and job placement of dislocated workers and other unemployed or underemployed adults. Completing the path to jobs, the proposal incorporates employers in curriculum design and in job placement for graduates.

“This is a highly competitive grant, but when the request for proposals was announced in June, I knew RCC could make a strong case for retraining our displaced, unemployed, and underemployed workforce,” said RCC President Dr. Sharon Morrissey.

Morrissey appointed a committee with representatives from curriculum programs, student services, developmental education, and pre-employment training to develop the grant proposal. After researching the topic, they determined that modifying curriculum programs to teach employer-defined skills and assess and certify student learning through ACT’s WorkKeys was the most effective way to make sure graduates were ready for the jobs of today and tomorrow. An additional aspect of the program is to provide “micro-credentials” issued throughout the student’s courses that certify mastery of specific job-related skills.

“The Ft. Bragg base realignment and expansion will bring jobs to our region over the next decade. We want our graduates to be prepared to successfully compete for those jobs. Both ACT, the testing company that created the WorkKeys pre-employment assessments, and the BRAC Regional Task Force will participate in this three-year project,” said Morrissey.

Vice President for Instruction Johnnie Simpson said selected Associate in Applied Science, diploma and certificate programs will be evaluated for ways to improve instruction. Since BRAC projections indicate the accounting field will have the greatest number of job openings in the future, RCC’s Accounting curriculum will be among the first selected for review.

“ACT specialists will help us design assessments and incorporate the skills they have identified as essential to a job field into the program outcomes in our related curricula. We have active advisory committees that keep us abreast of current trends, but any additional information is essential. We may incorporate the assessment as part of a capstone course taken by students during their last semester of study. Current capstone courses assess the skills students should have attained during their two years of study. This expands upon that concept,” she said.

Simpson said WorkKeys is now widely recognized and used nationwide by businesses and industries when hiring employees.

“They want people with proven skills as identified by this assessment. We want to be assured our graduates have all the essential skills they need to get into the job market and that includes this certification added to their portfolios. It will give them a competitive edge over other graduates,” she said.

Dean of Development Bill Council said although the grant targets displaced and unemployed workers, all students will benefit. Additionally, there is a nationwide effort to assess and document student learning in higher education as well as to incorporate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) into learning objectives to improve America’s competitiveness in a global economy. These elements will be incorporated into the selected programs.

RCC’s efforts will provide a model that can be utilized by institutions across the country. He also said enhanced student support services will be offered. Many dislocated workers finding themselves back in the classroom after years on a job can find the changes overwhelming.

“Many of these students need to take developmental courses in mathematics, reading, and English to be able to succeed in college-level courses. The grant provides a retention specialist to help create a community of learners supporting each other. Our Guided Studies Center will provide tutors to supplement the classroom instruction. All students will benefit from the results of the grant. We look forward to the experience,” said Director of Counseling Sharon Goodman.