

The Tidewater News

PDCCC preps workers for a growth industry

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Published Saturday, April 3, 2010



Photo by Nicholas Langhorne

Tim Johnson (left), a student in PDCCC's warehouse and distribution operations career studies certificate program, works on a forklift as Wayne White (center) and James Lowe Jr. watch.

FRANKLIN—When the Panama Canal expansion project is completed in 2014, clearing the way for much more cargo to enter the Port of Virginia, demand for warehouse and distribution facilities in the region is expected to skyrocket.

“We’re really geographically blessed being near the Port of Virginia,” said Randy Betz, vice president for workforce development at Paul D. Camp Community College.

To meet the expected demand, PDCCC this semester introduced a career studies certificate for warehouse and distribution operations. The nine-credit-hour certification program provides students with the skills and knowledge needed for entry-level positions at warehouse and distribution facilities, including operations, equipment, procedures and safety training.

“What we want to do is develop the workforce in this area for the future jobs that are coming,” said program coordinator Bob Hayes.

Five students are enrolled in the program, which kicked off in January. The program involves both classroom and hands-on instruction with equipment used in warehouses.

“You can’t really simulate a forklift,” said Al Will, who is helping with the administration of the program.

Some area employers got to see the program in action Wednesday evening. Scott Bauer of Safco Products Co.’s Windsor distribution center said companies are drawn to candidates with skills and experience related to the industry who don’t require extensive training.

“Having someone that’s already there is a big plus,” he said. “I look for that.”

Jessie Verdone of Unilever Lipton said the program would produce job prospects with “job-specific skills,” which he says are vital for companies to maintain their competitiveness.

“The days of hiring people because they have a strong back are over in manufacturing,” he said.

Jeff Jacobs, an instructor in the program, echoed Verdone.

“They have to be able to think and be able to work without a supervisor,” Jacobs said.

Betz said having a program like this in place and producing a well-trained workforce could entice more businesses to the area.

“Our local economic development directors can use this program as a competitive advantage when competing with other port cities outside of Virginia when recruiting new warehouse and distribution centers,” he said.

A number of businesses, including Computerized Inventory Systems Specialists Ltd., Cost Plus World Market, MSC Supply, Material Handling Industry of America, Safco Products Co., International Paper Co. and Smithfield Foods, donated equipment, materials, labor and financial support for the program.

“The warehouse and distribution businesses were tremendously supportive,” Betz said.

Opportunity Inc., the regional workforce investment board, through the Southeastern Virginia Partnership for Regional Transformation, or SEVA-PORT, project and the WIRED grant, has been “instrumental” in the program’s success, Betz said.

Currently, hands-on instruction takes place in the back half of the conference hall at PDCCC’s Workforce Development Center, but officials hope to find a permanent home for the program and even expand it across the Hampton Roads region. There are also additional pieces of equipment officials would like to secure, including a reach truck.

Hayes said the program is a “win-win” for the entire community. The three classes required for certification – Introduction to Business, Team Concepts and Problem Solving, and Studies in Warehouse and Distribution Operation – will be offered every semester.

Jacobs said the program will produce quality employees.

“We can build an employee that I can put a stamp on and say, ‘Yes, I would hire him,’” he said.