

Hands-on Higher Education

Behind classroom doors, students learn to install solar panels, drive semi trucks, nurse patients and assemble parts for jet engines.

These aren't the run-of-the-mill college courses, but Cincinnati State's Workforce Development Center isn't a typical institution. Nonetheless, the WDC will train between 6,000 and 7,000 people in the Tristate this year to prepare for an economic paradigm shift.

The WDC creates custom programs to train businesses' employees, and is also a sought-after destination for displaced workers seeking employment in up-and-coming industries.

"We really do try to focus on emerging industries and helping people to re-engineer, recalibrate what their skill sets are and get them back into the workforce," says WDC Executive Director Dennis Ulrich.

The downturn has actually skyrocketed some fields to the forefront, with green technology, home weatherization and energy auditing being very popular for individuals and businesses alike. The center pairs with the Building Performance Institute (BPI) to teach students how to perform home energy audits, while other programs show how to install and maintain solar panel systems.

In the halls of the WDC, students are likely to brush shoulders with Ivy League-educated General Electric jet engineers, who come to get a practical backing to their academic experience. The engineers don work boots and goggles to get acquainted with the machinery that creates their designs. An off-site GE program called JETS also has first-year GE engineers tear down and reconstruct jet engines for hands-on training.

"It allows them to see design flaws and maybe other ways of doing maintenance on those jet engines," Ulrich explains. "We've put about a thousand GE engineers through the JETS program."

The WDC also keeps its ear to the door of local and national business trends, making sure to keep programming relevant. The organization tailors its training to whatever clients need — but, in an ailing economy, not all companies seek training as the antidote to their pains.

"Unfortunately, in turbulent economies the first thing that usually goes is training and development, which is a big mistake," Ulrich says. "A lot of organizations find that it's an easy thing to cut, but from what I see, the world-class organizations take that downtime to re-invest in their people and get them skilled-up and trained, so when the economy does turn, these people are ready to go."

— GRETCHEN KEEN



TOP: The WDC's first Solar PV Installer class and 1 kW PV system class project

MIDDLE: The WDC offers HAZMAT training as a new skill, as well as refresher courses.

BOTTOM: A BPI energy auditor instructor demonstrates a Blower Door to test the air tightness of a home.