

Stimulus Money to Help Jobless

**Added federal funds allow adults
to take more classes for free**

Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board offering free community college and technical school classes to laid-off workers

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By LYNN OLANOFF; The Express-Times

Christina Pesce faced a dilemma this fall.

Should she continue to deplete her savings or continue her accounting courses at Northampton Community College with the hope of getting a job?

In the end, the Northampton Borough resident didn't have to choose.

Pesce is one of about 70 Lehigh Valley residents receiving free community college tuition through federal stimulus money given to the Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board Inc.

With \$2 million in stimulus money, the board is seeking more unemployed residents looking to take classes at community colleges or technical schools, Executive Director Nancy Dischinat said.

"We have enough money to put a lot of people into training programs," she said. "Right now is the time to dig in and get some skills and up your education level."

The program expands upon the free semester both Northampton and Lehigh Carbon Community Colleges are offering to residents who have lost their jobs.

"This is just a great thing to enable these folks to continue their education," Northampton Community College spokeswoman Heidi Butler said. "It can be so important to people who lost their jobs."

In New Jersey, state programs are in place to provide free tuition at community colleges for laid-off workers. Centenary College in Hackettstown also is offering dislocated workers discounts in its adult accelerated programs.

Since Northampton started its free semester program in January, 443 students have enrolled, Butler said. So far, 32 have continued classes through the workforce investment board program.

That number will likely grow with students enrolled in the college's free semester being told about the program.

Pesce, 48, said she wasn't sure if she would have continued past her free semester if she hadn't learned of the free tuition through the workforce investment board. She was laid off two years ago from a financial data services company and is looking to change fields to accounting.

"It's a big plus most definitely," she said. "It keeps my mind off 'Oh, that's another \$1,000 I have to pay.'"

Bethlehem resident Joe Alfonso is enrolled in a free semester at Northampton and said he would like to continue in the spring through the workforce investment board program if he doesn't find a job first. The 50-year-old computer technician is taking classes in HTML and JavaScript to update his skills.

"I decided to go back to learn all the new technology, the Web development skills," he said. "I'm quite interested in continuing."

Lehigh Carbon Community College also is telling its students enrolled in the college's free semester for laid-off workers about the workforce investment board program, spokeswoman Paula Hannam said.

"We try to get them to continue and complete their degree," she said.

COLLEGE HELP

**Anyone interested in
seeking money for
community college or
technical school classes
can call CareerLink
Lehigh Valley at
610-841-1035.**

Reporter Lynn Olanoff can be reached at 610-867-5000 or by e-mail at lolanoff@express-times.com.