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Sunday conversation: State must have a trainable workforce, Birdwell says

In Louisiana, the Board of Regents oversees these systems of higher learning: Louisiana Community and Technical Colleges, LSU, Southern, and Louisiana University system. The LCTCS includes seven community colleges, two technical community colleges and the Louisiana Technical Colleges in eight regions that encompass 38 campuses. Region 6 includes: Alexandria campus, Avoyelles campus, Huey P. Long campus, Lamar Salter campus, Morgan Smith campus, Oakdale campus, Shelby M. Jackson campus. The Web site is www.region6.ltc.edu.

At the time of his interview last week, the newly confirmed director for the seven Louisiana Technical College campuses in Region 6, Mervin Birdwell, was preparing for a region-wide examination of all the campuses for regular renewal of accreditation.

The Council on Occupational Education is examining the schools' operating policies and procedures, instruction and program curriculum to ensure the schools are accomplishing the council's requirements. Accreditation is also important so students will be eligible for Pell Grants.

Question: What are the challenges facing workforce development in Central Louisiana?

Answer: What I've observed over the years is that when an industry comes to town and says "we can't find a trained workforce," a lot of times they mean they can't find a trainable workforce. Meaning that they can't find employees with the basic skills to train them for the skills set they need. A few years ago we implemented this developmental studies program to help that. If there is any challenge ahead of us right now in Central Louisiana it is that area, and going back to K-12 because they are involved in that as well. We need to get these people trained in basic skills so they can be trainable when that industry comes. We get a lot of students who come to us whose skills are pretty low, and think of the ones who are not coming to us.

Q: How are we doing in preparing students for the workplace?

A: First of all, we try to make sure our curriculum is what it needs to be. We are tied closely to business and industry from an instructor standpoint. There is a statewide curriculum committee of instructors that help to develop that. We also have region-wide advisory committee composed of seven or eight people. They meet twice a year but they talk constantly. These instructors bring from their industry partners the kind of skills that are needed. And even though it is a statewide curriculum, they do have some flexibility at local schools if there is a local industry that needs something specific ... So, the first thing we do is make sure our curriculum is in line. And, we do our best to make sure the equipment is on par so when they get a skill here they can go out and go to work. The next thing is to lay out to high schoolers and the general public what we have.

Q: Who decides on the curricula offerings at a particular school?

A: That's up to the individual school to initiate it. It is reviewed in the system office and put to the board for approval. If it involves an associate degree it has to go to the Board of Regents.

Q: Does the curriculum vary any across the state for individual courses?

A: No, like if it is carpentry, it is the same curriculum across the state.

Q: Who enrolls in these schools?

A: Our average ages are in the mid-20s or just above that. We get people who are looking for more specific skills. Most are job oriented, looking for a job. That's why I say that some students enroll and after six to eight months they have gained enough basic skills that an employer might say he needs someone and they go to work. Some might be laid off and need to be retrained.

Q: What is the most popular program here?

A: I'd have to say nursing with welding following pretty close. Nursing is in high demand with nursing homes and hospitals hiring nurses. Every one of our campuses has a nursing program and every year we are producing LPNs but the demand continues with all the home health agencies and doctors offices. Welding is also popular. Before Union Tank Car there wasn't a big demand for welders but the students would come to the programs to go out on pipeline jobs ... or offshore or in a shipyard somewhere. But they would get training locally. The business programs are probably next in demand.

Q: What happens when a student first comes to the school?

A: When the students come to us we have an assessment that lets us know what their levels are within math and reading and we direct them into developmental studies courses if they need them. ... The primary thing is to get those basic skills up so they can perform in the technical programs. They can go into those programs (except for associate degree programs or specialized areas that require state licensing) without a high school diploma or GED.

Q: What does it cost to get enrolled in a program?

A: The basic tuition is the same. For a Louisiana resident it's \$462.20 per semester for 12 credits and there may be other fees depending on the curriculum. There is a difference in programs because books, supplies and fees may be different.

Q: How many students on this campus?

A: I think it's about 400. It's an average number. Last year we broke the 500 mark. In the whole region we broke the 2,000 mark between the seven campuses.

Q: How many students are typically in the community and technical college system's 38 campuses?

A: In the system it is around 50,000. The Louisiana Technical College portion is roughly 20,000 of that.

Q: So most of your programs stress preparation for the workplace?

A: Right. Most of our programs are aimed at workforce development which don't go to the associate degree level.

Q: Short of an associate degree, what does a student get?

A: We have a Technical Competency Area certificate ... then a Certificate of Technical Studies (for all those who complete at least the first two levels of training.) If they stay with us at the end they get the Technical Diploma. In certain programs we go to the associate degree level, but there are few of those.

Q: What about students coming from high school?

A: We do have a percentage coming direct from high school. You find that a lot in nursing or in welding, for example.

Q: What kind of connection do you have with the high schools?

A: We have a memorandum of understanding with all the parish schools that stipulates what high school courses we will accept for credit here. Dual enrollment is a hot item right now. For example, at Tioga and Buckeye high schools we have welding students. But those students are gaining credit with us for our program. ... Also we have two people in our region with one who is our college and career transitions coordinator. Her job is to work between high schools and our system, as well as working with the LSUAs and other universities.

Q: So, do you feel good about students' understanding of their options in preparing for careers, particularly with your system?

A: I feel good about it but I also think we have a lot more work to do. We have a lot of room to grow in that area.
