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■ EDUCATION

Students learn about career paths

Quick Jobs Center focuses on skills needed in Colleton County.

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There was no sign to greet the almost 30 students from Colleton County High School who visited the Quick Jobs Center Monday morning. The center for training a skilled workforce, however, is open and the 23,000 square feet of space is designed to be flexible to meet the needs of area employers.

"One of the reasons we have problems here is we really don't have a highly skilled workforce," Rhonda Johns, coordinator of the facility, told 14 seniors, students at the neighboring Thunderbolt Career and Technology Center. Another group of Colleton County High School students, those participating in the Jobs for America's Graduates program, arrived a little later for the talk and tour.

Johns said there is no sign because a name, to better reflect the purpose, is in the works. Quick Jobs Center was required to obtain the grant that helped fund construction of the county-owned building operated by Technical College of the Lowcountry.

The goal of the center, Johns explained, is getting that skilled workforce, by training older adults and those still in and just completing high school, "to entice employers to come back to Colleton County."

Johns herself returned to Colleton after the financial division she worked for in Texas was shut down.

The center, she said, is important for another reason too — the cost of an education. A four-year college in-state, she said, is easily \$20,000

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'Think it through'

QUICK JOBS

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a year.

She asked the students why they would go to college and go into debt and after graduation, in this economy, perhaps not find a job that pays enough to settle the loan and live. "It's critical," she said, "that if you are going to college, you know what you want to do. Think it through."

There are alternatives to college. She mentioned truck driver because the center's first offering, a Commercial Driver License course, started Monday. Fees for the one-month course, she said, are \$3,900 and once a person passes the test, he or she could get a job paying \$50,000 a year; there is a shortage of truck drivers nationwide, she said.

Eventually, the center will have facilities management, warehouse logistics and pre manufacturing classes. The center partners with community businesses. Carolina Visuals, a company in Smoaks that makes flags, is having trouble finding workers, she said. "We need to teach those basics."

Students asked about a welding program and Johns said TCL is limited by funding and start-up costs for a welding program would be at minimum \$130,000.

TCL has four locations, the Colleton campus is the only one that is strictly workforce development. The others are Hampton campus in Varnville, Beaufort campus and New River campus in Bluffton.

Wendy Walls, a recruiter for TCL, explained that there are 70 programs of study, including a two-year transfer program that saves costs by allowing students to take the general college courses without the expenses of a four-year college.



Photo by LINDA SALSBERY

TALKING ABOUT TRANSFERS. Shantanique Givens, a Colleton County High School senior, talks to Wendy Walls with Technical College of the Lowcountry about the two-year transfer program. It would save tuition costs and Givens, who wants to become a pharmacist, has many years of education to go.

"The average age is 28," she said of TCL students. One student asked about an auto mechanics program. Walls said TCL doesn't offer it because there is not a need, the same reason the school doesn't offer a program for dental hygienists.

Walls took each group to the computer lab to guide students to www.tcl.edu and prepare a custom info packet online to send to their personal e-mails. She suggested the students consider taking a class during spring semester. Registration begins Nov. 13 and ends Jan. 9.

Dani Daniels, director

at TCTC, who had toured the facility before, said Monday's visit was the first for students. It is an effort, she said, to expose them to what is offered and to generate questions. Johns agreed, saying she wants events and tours "to get as many people as we can so they know we're here."

Johns said a focus group representing area businesses will visit Nov. 9, an opportunity to "get a better handle on what we need."

She led the tour of the facility, showing off the four industrial bays, one with a loading dock, and classrooms

that can be configured in various ways to accommodate different needs. One bay, for example, now houses wall frames for training on installing electrical service during construction of a home.

Upon return to the conference room, Johns continued to stress the need for students to think about what they want to do, the cost obtaining that education and the return (pay scale) for a position in that field. She also stressed skills for education, and eventually, employment, "showing up, participating, being responsible and having a good attitude."



Photo by LINDA SALSBERY

TAILORED INFORMATION. Students at Thunderbolt Career and Technology Center visited the computer lab at the Quick Jobs Center this week and signed up to receive information customized to their career interests from Technical College of the Lowcountry, which operates the workforce training facility.