USNH, Community Colleges Focus On Tech Grads

Holly Ramer, Associated Press

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — Working harder to hold onto already interested students is faster and less expensive than recruiting newcomers when it comes to increasing the number of science, technology, engineering and math degrees, a national education expert told New Hampshire education leaders Tuesday.

Jay Labov, a senior adviser for the National Research Council, was the keynote speaker at a forum hosted by the University System of New Hampshire and the state's community college system. Last year, the 11 public institutions that make up both groups set a goal of doubling the number of so-called STEM degrees awarded by 2025, and as UNH President Mark Huddleston said Tuesday, they're still working to put some "meat on the bones" of that agreement.

Rather than focus on recruiting, Labov urged the forum participants to explore how to better retain incoming students who've expressed an interest in the four fields.

Labov said 60 percent of students who come into college wanting to major in science, technology, engineering or math end up changing their majors. Some switch because the work is too difficult, but most switch because their courses weren't what they expected — they complain about being "just a number" in huge lecture classes and don't feel like the material presented to them is relevant, he said.

"We are losing huge numbers of people because of the ways we teach science," he said.

Increasing that retention figure to just 50 percent would generate three-quarters of the estimated 1 million additional STEM graduates that will be needed in the next decade, he said, though many factors make that challenging. Current students likely will have 10-15 jobs — some of which haven't yet been invented — by the time they reach their mid-50s. And the world of technology changes so quickly that information given to students as freshmen may be outdated time they graduate, he said.

The latter trend troubled some forum participants, who said it appears to be at odds with businesses that complain that colleges and universities aren't sending them trained workers. But several business leaders who spoke later said they want well-educated problem solvers, not necessarily graduates trained for a specific job.

Jeremy Hitchcock, CEO of DYN Inc., said in an industry where companies come and go quickly, being able to reduce the time getting new hires up to speed is essential. Joe Morone, president and CEO of Albany International Corp., agreed. His company is building a plant in Rochester that is expected to employ 400 people and will manufacture light-weight airplane engine blades that will ultimately end up in about

half of all aircraft.

"We have no chance of pulling off this project — no chance — unless we successfully recruit, develop and retain a critical mass of STEM talent," he said.

He described a study that found that when it comes to competitive advantages, retaining a talented workforce pays off much more than lowering prices, introducing new products or building new facilities.

"If you build a lead on talent, it will take the competition more than seven years to catch up," he said. "It's not even close."

Gov.-elect Maggie Hassan, who campaigned on a jobs plan that focused on building the best workforce in the country, told the forum that she will do everything she can to support their work. The group also heard from outgoing Gov. John Lynch, who said nearly every business owner he spoke to during his four terms expressed concerns about finding skilled workers.

He said the goal of doubling STEM graduates by 2025 was laudable, but doesn't go far enough.

"I actually think we have to be more aggressive," he said. "Let's double it in five years or six years."

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