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Community Colleges Want You

By [ELIZABETH OLSON](#)

AS they begin to hit retirement years, baby boomers are expected to flood community colleges for the credentials and training they will need to reposition themselves for second careers.

The nation's 1,200 community colleges see the wave coming. They are scrambling to create new programs to help this older generation choose their second acts, and they are strengthening existing courses to make them more relevant to these students.

John J. Kennedy, a resident of Clinton, N.J., who will be 50, is one of those students. Mr. Kennedy, who was a truck driver and a trucking company manager for 25 years, got a jump on his peers by retooling his skills before he hit retirement age. A former marine, he was inspired by the volunteer work he did with disabled men in a veterans' hospital and decided to switch to nursing. Last year, he enrolled at Warren County Community College in Washington, N.J.

"I was looking forward to where I would be at 55," he said, "and I saw myself working in a V.A. hospital, and not retired."

For community colleges, accommodating students like Mr. Kennedy has become a high priority. In fact, during the summer the American Association of Community Colleges, an advocacy group in Washington, joined with [AARP](#) to review ways to meet the upcoming need. This need became clear to both groups after a recent AARP mail survey of 30,000 respondents ages 42 and older found that 26 percent who had begun a new career in the last year said they had taken courses toward a college degree or certification in the same period.

Retirement-age students are a familiar population in community colleges, which have long been the bastion of work-force retraining and personal enrichment programs. The difference is that while there is still an audience for staples like painting and gardening, the generation heading for retirement today is more interested in staying in the workplace, and willing to go back to school to get the credentials needed to switch careers, or to learn skills to make themselves more useful as volunteers.

While most community colleges are still trying to figure out an approach for the population they serve, a few have moved ahead. "We began noticing older people moving here from suburbs closer to New York," said William Austin, president of Warren County Community College. "So two years ago,

we created 'Power Pack,' which allows people who are still working but thinking about changing careers to take a course, such as computers, on the weekends."

At the college, retirement-age students make up about 12 percent of total enrollment, an increase of 30 percent from 2003 to 2006, and the number is expected to grow. Nursing is the most popular area of study for this age group.

Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C., has set up the Lifetime Learning Institute, dedicated to people seeking a second, or "encore," career. The institute offers counseling services and career assessment programs. "We are helping them look at their whole transition," said Dr. Lyndall Hare, the institute's director, "and especially a career transition."

This fall, Central Piedmont offered about 50 courses for those 55 and older. And in spring 2007, the college will be offering a new program to earn accreditation from the International Coach Federation to become a personal or business coach.

The college also has programs for those who want to volunteer. It is one of several community colleges being advised by Civic Ventures, a group in San Francisco that promotes meaningful second careers for older people, and helps colleges create courses to help retirees update or learn skills.

But most community colleges have a long way to go, says Mark Freedman, founder of Civic Ventures. "Not nearly enough headway has been made so far," he said.

Another group, Atlantic Philanthropies, a global foundation that focuses on social issues, "is in the early stages of seeing whether community colleges can serve as a retooling organization," said Laura A. Robbins, director of the group's United States aging program. These colleges are "so attuned to the needs of the community they serve" that they are the logical places for older workers to get credentials, she said.

Community colleges across the country are grappling with how to meet the needs of this aging population.

"We have a whole big challenge in front of us," said Mitzi Werther, director of the Richland College Emeritus Program in Dallas, which allows adults 65 and older in Dallas County, Tex., to waive tuition for college-level courses. But Ms. Werther is worried that traditional offerings in classrooms are not going to reach many retirees in transition.

"Boomers want things on their own time, on their own schedules," she said. "I think we are going to have to reach out and go to them, whether it's starting classes in coffee shops or churches or other places."