

## BUSINESS

### LET'S TALK BUSINESS

# Community colleges offer 'tools for change'

Janice Fortes was near tears when I met her last month in the Great Hall at our Warwick campus.

#### RAY DI PASQUALE

Laid off from her customer service job in late November, she was feeling discouraged and disconnected as she searched for jobs from her Providence home. She heard that the Community College of Rhode Island was hosting an event geared toward adult learners and she said she was excited about coming.

Janice was one of nearly 300 people who headed to our Warwick campus instead of the beach or the park on that sunny Saturday. They came for many reasons, but with one common purpose: to learn about their options at CCRI at an event called "Education Expo: Showcasing the Tools to Change Your Life."

Janice told me she had been feeling isolated, like she was sending résumés into a void because she seldom heard anything — even a rejection — from the companies to which she applied. So she was thrilled and overwhelmed with gratitude when she found the help she was looking for from nearly 100 staff and faculty members who volunteered their time to help

prospective students at the expo. Janice said she felt like she had turned a corner. She became excited at the prospect of returning to school at age 58, now that her children are grown. She also said the expo was perfectly timed: "This needed to be done now. There are so many people in my situation out there."

Just a week before the event, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics released its May regional and state employment and unemployment summary, in which Rhode Island tied for the third-highest unemployment rate in the country at 12.1 percent. When planning the expo, we considered the challenging job market and wanted to provide an opportunity where adult learners, as well as traditional-age students, could explore ways they can earn a degree or certificate, upgrade job skills or just take a credit or noncredit class.

Janice is just one example of the many stories heard that day. Another man told one of our staff members that he had driven to our Flanagan Campus in Lincoln about a year ago to get some information. He said he sat in the parking lot watching the students come and go. They looked so young, he said, and he was

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sure that he would stand out in classes. But at the expo that day, he looked around and saw so many people just like him. The average age of our part-time students is 29, making the college an inviting place for adults looking to re-enter the work force or change or advance their careers. In fact, the oldest member of the Class of 2009 graduated with a degree in paralegal studies at age 70 this May.

At the expo, we also included partners such as representatives from the Rhode Island Student Loan Authority, the College Planning Center of Rhode Island, the state departments of Education and Labor and Training, the Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority and

more to provide a true "one-stop shopping" experience. And we found that people weren't just coming to pick up information, go home and think about it; they were there to take the first step toward changing their lives here at CCRI. We waived the usual \$20 application fee for those who applied for enrollment that day and processed 83 applications from the event.

One of those was Janice. When we followed up with her a few days later, she had just been looking over the college's catalog. She had an appointment with a financial aid counselor and was coming in to get help with her résumé. She plans to begin the Office Skills certificate program this fall and continue on to earn an associate degree in our Paralegal Studies program. Judging by her enthusiasm at the expo, I have no doubt she will achieve her goals.

More than ever, citizens are realizing the value of community colleges. Nationally, more than 6.5 million students — nearly half of the entire country's undergraduate students — attend community colleges. In times of economic downturn, enrollment at community colleges has traditionally increased. In fact, last fall, we enrolled more than 17,500 stu-

dents, and we expect to serve more than 18,000 students in September.

I have often said that I believe CCRI is perfectly positioned to be part of the solution to the state's economic difficulties. We're committed to providing the degree and noncredit programs that will help Rhode Islanders gain meaningful employment, allowing them to contribute to the well-being of the state. We're also dedicated to serving our business community by offering training, certificate and degree programs that match their hiring needs.

We know that in times like these, people look to their community college for help and for hope. The road ahead remains challenging for many of our neighbors, but it's one that we will navigate together.

*Ray Di Pasquale is president of the Community College of Rhode Island, New England's largest community college enrolling more than 17,000 students at its four campuses, including the Newport County Campus, and two satellite locations. He wrote this piece for the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, which provides this monthly column. For more information, log on to [www.newportchamber.com](http://www.newportchamber.com).*