

The New York Times
August 15, 2009

On This Campus, Focus Is Jobs

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

DAYTON, Ohio — When Todd Sollar was laid off after 11 years at [General Motors](#), he enrolled at Sinclair Community College in downtown Dayton to study robotics.

“Hopefully, with a degree I’ll be marketable for a job,” said Mr. Sollar, 32, who has overcome his nervousness about not fitting in because of his age. In fact, he is thriving, getting A’s and B’s, far better than in high school where he said officials had wrongly pegged him as having a learning disability.

As legions of displaced autoworkers and others face the prospect that their onetime jobs may be gone forever, many like Mr. Sollar will need training for a fresh start.

And perhaps the best place for them will be [community colleges](#), long the workhorses of American higher education, workhorses that get little respect. In an unforgiving economy, these colleges provide lifelines not only for laid-off workers in need of a new career, but for recent high school graduates who find that many types of entry-level jobs now require additional skills.

[President Obama](#) has embraced the nation’s community colleges, arguing that they are vital bulwarks against the decline of the

middle class — and of America's competitiveness.

Speaking last month in Michigan, Mr. Obama placed the nation's 1,200 community colleges at the center of his ambitious plan to increase the number of college graduates by five million over the next decade. The goal is to create a higher skilled, more prosperous work force.

Sinclair Community College, widely acclaimed as one of the best such colleges in the nation, is at the vanguard of such efforts. The college is retraining thousands of laid-off G.M., Delphi and other workers. It is also working closely with city, county and business leaders to identify and nurture growth industries and to train the workers those industries will need. In turn, many of its goals are being achieved with the help of generous local funding from taxpayers.

This year, Sinclair's enrollment jumped 25 percent over last year, to 37,000, because of rising unemployment as well as its unusually low tuition of \$2,000 a year, an innovative scholarship program and its 170 academic programs and certificates.

Sinclair is such a magnet that 50 percent of the adults in surrounding Montgomery County have taken courses there. Without the stigma that many community colleges have, it can also attract many solid students, who are eager to take advantage of low tuition for two years before moving on to a four-year college.

To expand enrollment, Sinclair offers an unusual scholarship to thousands of students who might never have considered college. High school students who take technical courses and achieve a C-plus average in their junior and senior years are offered a \$3,000 scholarship — worth one-and-a-half year's tuition — giving many less-than-stellar students a warm embrace that pulls them into Sinclair's classrooms.

Casey Benedict, 23, took advantage of that scholarship to study manufacturing processes and lightweight composites. Today, he holds a good-paying job at a high-tech composites factory housed inside a defunct Delphi auto parts plant.

Sinclair has worked with 53 high schools to upgrade their technical courses to make it easier for students to transition to college. It has even made a \$4 million grant to help plan and build a public "career technology" high school in Dayton that will offer electronics, broadcasting and industrial engineering courses and serve as a feeder school for the college.

"For most 10th-graders there's a societal assumption that you'll go on to 11th grade, and for most 11th-graders there's an assumption you'll go on to 12th grade," said Steven L. Johnson, Sinclair's president. "We're trying to create a societal assumption that 12th-graders will go on to college."

Long a center of auto and auto parts production, Dayton has been battered by Detroit's woes, and Sinclair has become an important

engine of economic development for the area.

“We can bring a lot of jobs to the area, but if we can’t put the work force in place to fill those positions, it’s unrealized potential,” said Jim Leftwich, president of the Dayton Development Coalition.

“Sinclair has been with us every step of the way in helping prepare the work force we need.”

With a nod to the giant Wright-Patterson Air Force Base nearby, community leaders have identified aerospace research and development, advanced materials and manufacturing, and health care as industries to help the area rebound.

Along with the advanced manufacturing degrees that Mr. Benedict and Mr. Sollar have pursued, Sinclair offers an unusual degree in advanced technical intelligence (to prepare students to interpret remote sensor data, like those from satellites, perhaps for jobs with the Air Force or the [C.I.A.](#))

Sinclair has another strategy for strengthening the region’s economy. Its Advanced Integrated Manufacturing Center has a staff of consultants that advise many local businesses on increasing productivity or expanding operations. The center’s robotics experts often help design manufacturing processes and develop prototypes for new products.

Sinclair also provides traditional training for police officers, firefighters, chefs, nurses and auto mechanics.

After working for eight years in human resources at a now-closed Delphi auto parts plant, Kelli Martin, 41, has enrolled at Sinclair, hoping to become a nurse in pediatric oncology.

“In this community, Sinclair’s nursing program is considered the tops,” she said. “Sinclair has the buzz.” She said Sinclair’s flexibility was crucial for someone like her, with two toddlers. The college has five campuses, offers many courses both day and evening, and teaches 5,000 students in online courses each quarter.

“We help people go from \$8-an-hour jobs to \$18-an-hour jobs,” said Mr. Johnson, the college president.

He added: “It’s not the college’s fault that they might go from a \$28-an-hour job at G.M. to an \$18-an-hour job. That’s just the new normal.”

An unusual source of revenue gives Sinclair a leg up over many community colleges. Every 10 years since the 1960s, Montgomery County’s voters have approved a real estate levy to help finance the college. That assessment provides \$34 million of Sinclair’s \$135 million annual budget.

“We’ve used that levy to create a massive tuition discount,” Mr. Johnson explained. Sinclair’s tuition levels are half those of many other community colleges.

At this spring’s commencement, Mr. Johnson asked the

assembled students whether anyone had ever told them they were not college material. More than one-third of the graduates raised their hands.

Mr. Sollar certainly falls into that category. “I was scared to death of school,” he said. “I thought I wouldn’t fit in.”

A tour of the campus, though, reassured him that there were many other, older laid-off workers in search of retraining.

Sinclair makes extra efforts with at-risk students like Mr. Sollar, monitoring their progress and offering free tutors. Mr. Sollar has used tutors regularly for his English classes, but not for his robotics courses.

In his core area of study, he has built a miniaturized assembly line and programmed computers to run factory robots. He hopes getting his robotics degree will persuade [Volkswagen](#) to hire him for the factory it has planned for Chattanooga, Tenn.

“Sinclair has given me self-esteem,” Mr. Sollar said.