Technical college program offerings respond to employers

Each year Wisconsin’s technical colleges add and drop dozens of educational programs in response to the changing workplace environment. This effort to match program offerings with employer needs contributes to high placement rates for graduates of Wisconsin’s technical colleges.

In response with the projected growth of employment opportunities in the health care industry, Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College has added health information technology and medical office specialist programs to its list of 2012 offerings.

Health information technology (HIT), which will be offered at each of WITC’s four campuses, teaches the skills necessary to code records for reimbursement, research and statistics and gather health information for multiple purposes.

“I think with HIT, there’s so much you can do with that credential,” says Lisa Ekman, assistant director, health information, Memorial Medical Center in Ashland, Wis. “With coding you’re a little more limited. But HIT you’re getting a well-rounded background. With experience you can take on a directorship role, and even with just a little experience you can take on a supervisory role.”

Career paths for graduates of this associate degree include work as a health information technician, reimbursement coordinator, privacy and/or security officer, and data quality and integrity monitor.

A medical coding specialist diploma will be embedded into the HIT program. This will allow students to earn a diploma after one year and enter the workforce while they continue the final year of the program to earn the associate degree. The program is also ideal for those currently working in medical and clinical offices who would like to advance in the field.

Offered at all WITC campuses, the medical office specialist technical diploma combines medical office skills with computer skills to prepare graduates of the program for employment on the administrative side of health care working in physician’s offices, clinics, hospitals, nursing homes and other health organizations.
“This program is a good option for people who are looking at the medical field, but want to work in an office or customer service capacity rather than in a lab,” says Leslie Bleskachek WITC academic dean, business division.

Graduates of this program can grow their technical diploma into the medical administrative specialist associate degree offered through WITC’s New Richmond and Rice Lake campuses. The medical office specialist technical diploma combines medical office skills with computer skills to prepare graduates for employment on the administrative side of health care working in physician’s offices, clinics, hospitals, nursing homes and other health organizations. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment related to this field is expected to increase by 11 percent through 2018.

“We’re going to be seeing a big wave of retirements in all the professional areas in probably the next five years,” said Dan Adams, vice president, chief operating officer, Memorial Medical Center. “So there will be opportunities created that maybe will exceed what we’ve seen the in the past. Plus the growth in health information technology has outpaced a lot of the other areas most recently as facilities have gone to electronic health records. And part of that has just been stimulated by development in the industry and part is mandated as part of health care reform. So having experts in managing patient information and supporting the transition from paper to digital management is real important for us.”

Before programs are approved, colleges must meet criteria established by the State Board to ensure strong market demand, high-quality curriculum and sufficient fiscal resources to deliver the programs.

Advisory committees, consisting of business and industry representatives, advise on the establishment of new programs, evaluate on-going curricula, inform the technical colleges on the latest industry skills and technology and recommend when program changes need to be made.

Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College serves the educational and career needs of more than 25,000 residents of Northwestern Wisconsin each year. With multiple campuses, WITC offers career-focused associate degree programs, technical diplomas, short-term certificates, customized training, and a wide array of courses for personal or career enrichment. WITC is a member of Wisconsin Technical College System. For more information, call 800.243.WITC or visit witc.edu.