

Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board, Inc.
Subsidizing Community College Students

The Lehigh Valley WIB decided that the best use it could make of its ARRA dollars was to further the education and training of the region's residents, particularly those who are already committed to that education and training themselves. According to Esther Wenck, workforce operations director, the WIB recognized that the new high school diploma is an associate's degree – in other words, individuals in the region need to acquire education and training beyond high school if they are to succeed in the Lehigh Valley's labor market.

The community colleges in the state were already providing one free semester of education for unemployed workers, but after that, the students were on their own. The Lehigh Valley WIB decided to step in and cover the tuition, books, and fees for up to an additional three semesters for these students if they wanted to continue their education. Forty-four students who completed spring semester 2009 took them up on the offer, and unemployed workers completing their first semester this fall will be offered the same opportunity for spring 2010.

The Lehigh Valley WIB also is using its ARRA funds to help adult students whose income is just a little above the cutoff for receiving Pell Grants, offering to cover the cost of up to three semesters of community college education for them after they paid for the initial semester themselves. So far, seven adults have signed up for this opportunity.

The Lehigh Valley WIB's community college program is a true partnership with the colleges. The colleges sent out invitations to the eligible students, and the WIB went to the schools to conduct the orientations.

The students are preparing for jobs in a variety of industries, including healthcare, business, and information technology. All programs are in high priority occupations that are part of the region's targeted industry clusters.

The WIB received \$2 million in ARRA funding, all of which will be spent on education and training at the community colleges or other area schools. Cost per student is expected to be \$7,000 to \$8,000.

While no one is happy about the current economy, it does make long-term training much more viable, as unemployed workers are able to access unemployment insurance to help support them while in school.

WIBs interested in replicating this program should work closely with their community college partners and make their program services as accessible as possible to the students. The Lehigh Valley WIB conducted its orientations at the schools, after most classes were over for the day. Case management activities also are conducted at the schools.

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