

Edison State serving a growing market

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By Patricia Alex (7/27/09)

Jul. 27--It's one of the state's largest, but little-known, colleges.

Thomas Edison State College enrolls 17,000 full- and part-time students. While you may never have heard of it, for thousands of adult learners -- people beyond the traditional 18- to 24-year-old college age group -- the school has given them a way to earn a degree.

Founded in 1972, Thomas Edison was one of the pioneers in adult education. The school offers students credits for prior training, usually of the military or corporate variety, and accumulated knowledge. It has also been at the forefront of the now-mainstream movement toward online education.

Michael Molinaro had completed a number of college courses while serving in the Army in Texas. When he returned home, he found the New Jersey Institute of Technology didn't accept all his credits. Already in his 40s, he wanted to move things along.

"I'd been going to school forever," said Molinaro. "I didn't want to be 90 when I graduated!"

Edison took his transfer credits, and also gave him credit for some of his Army training, including the year he spent in electronics school, significantly shortening the time it would take to get a degree. He earned a bachelor's degree at Thomas Edison.

"I wouldn't have gotten the job I have without it," said Molinaro, a senior information security officer for an insurance company. He is now pursuing a traditional master's degree at NJIT.

Nearly half of Edison's students are serving in the military.

Wendy Dondo Lanski recalls corresponding with classmates deployed in Iraq. Lanski of Hackensack earned a master's degree in management at Thomas Edison, while working full-time.

"I had done my undergraduate degree in the traditional way and, like a lot of people, I was skeptical about what I was going to get out of it," said Lanski. "But it was a fantastic experience. ... It's accredited and it's as much of a New Jersey state school as if I went to Ramapo."

Indeed, Lanski and other students say the coursework is rigorous, the teachers are involved and the online experience forces more student involvement. Testing is done at proctored locations around the globe. The school says students' prior training is carefully reviewed, and students are often tested on the material, before credit is given.

There is no standing faculty at Thomas Edison, and many of the instructors are professors at other schools or specialists in their fields with day jobs. They are called "mentors," and currently there are about 340 of them. Flexibility is the name of the game.

"We can adapt to the market quickly; we are constantly adding new mentors to our roster," said Mary Ellen Caro, vice provost. All of the mentors have advanced degrees and at least two years' experience teaching online, she said.

The school was one of the first to focus on the adult learner, offering correspondence courses in the days before widespread Internet use. Now, it seems everyone is getting in on the act, from successful for-profit schools like the University of Phoenix to traditional colleges and universities that are expanding continuing education offerings.

Thomas Edison offers associate, baccalaureate and master's degree programs in more than 100 areas of study. Undergraduate courses begin each month, meaning there are 12 chances each year to start 12-week courses.

Some of the programs are highly specialized and crafted toward those enrolled. For instance, the school's second most popular major is Nuclear Engineering Technology, a program in which students can earn credits for their prior experience working on nuclear submarines. Graduates generally get jobs with utilities, said Joe Guzzardo, spokesman for the college.

The tuition is half that of other state colleges and, unlike those schools, there are no parking hassles. "Adult learners don't want to sit in classrooms," Guzzardo said.

The average age of a Thomas Edison student is 35.5 years, and there are students from every state in the union and 70 countries. The school began offering online courses in 1994.

Criticism of Thomas Edison has been muted as now even traditional colleges have embraced online education. "As the marketplace has changed, the college has become more mainstream," Guzzardo said.

And for those who have had misgivings about the college's practice of "prior learning assessment" to give credits, Guzzardo said the proof is in the pudding. "Our graduates have given us credibility; they have had entrance and success in traditional graduate programs."

Students discount the notion that Thomas Edison is less of a school than traditional colleges.

"I was kind of a little leery," said Cecilia Ferrera of Clifton, a public school art teacher who completed a master's degree at Thomas Edison. "But after the first two or three courses, I realized this is serious business."

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