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Itch to educate proves to be infectious

*Debra Gruszecki
The Desert Sun*

Dennis Larney had been involved with investment banking for 40 years when U.S. AID sent him to Europe to set up standards for lending and commercial banking in Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland and other Eastern European countries.

"It was my epiphany," he said. "I realized there were more important things in life than making a (buck)."

Upon his return to the states, Larney flipped to a new ledger sheet — teaching.

Along the way, he met a kindred spirit, John Caldwell.

Caldwell had been a 30-year computer industry veteran with the lifelong goal to teach, as part of his semi-retirement.

As both earned their master's degree at Cal State San Bernardino, they discovered a niche for a fast-tracked academic program in the Coachella Valley to turn skilled or academic professionals and retirees into credentialed teachers.

Called the "Designated Subjects Vocational Education Teaching Credential," the certification program is co-taught by adjunct professors Larney and Caldwell at the Palm Desert campus of CSUSB.

The premise: Put teachers with real-world skills in classrooms across the valley.

With some professionals struggling because of the economy, this class could be viewed as a window to new career opportunities, Caldwell said. It comes at a crucial time.

The course involves six four-unit classes that can be taken in two to three consecutive quarters at the option of the student. "Because it takes two quarters, or a half-a-year to go through this, you'll have other options out there when things turn around."

As they recruit candidates for the fall session that begins Sept. 24, we spoke with Larney about why

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professionals are entering the teaching field, and the certification process.

QUESTION: What types of professionals are you recruiting?

ANSWER: What we do is certify and gain license for people with different business backgrounds to enable them to teach under state certification or standards that are acceptable to junior or community colleges.

Our mission is to equip the many people who could be teaching at places such as College of the Desert: Its new real estate school is opening, and we've trained and certified people who can teach mortgage lending, appraisals and banking credits there.

We've also trained teachers in what we call the hard skills areas like heating and air conditioning or auto body repair. Two of our students have gone on to teach in the academies.

What type of career professionals is this program attracting?

We've had business people, structural engineers, media people, authors, artists, lawyers and dentists — all kind of career professionals coming through. We've had six MBA's and Ph.D. taking the course, but most with bachelor's degrees. We've even had a Ph.D. in statistics who never taught before. He went through the program and is now teaching statistics at UCR's master's of business administration program.

How long has this fast-track certification program been in place?

This is our fourth year. It's a spin-off of the Cal State San Bernardino program that's been in operation at least 12 years.

A department head there, Ron Pendleton, is known for the text he's written for that program that forms the basis of our course material here. The program in San Bernardino has graduated thousands over the years. We have certified or are in the process of certifying over 100 students.

What of teaching prospects are possible after certification?

Prospects range from the state Regional Occupational Programs and adult schools to community colleges, police and fire academies, private schools, commercial institutions and nonprofit organizations.

Three people are teaching life skills and GED at Martha's Village. Others are teaching in nonprofit organizations like the Braille Institute and the Stroke Center of the Desert. We have teachers in faith-based locations, too.

If you wanted to teach a non-accredited course at College of the Desert, and you have background in subjects taught there, a program like this could help you become a teaching candidate. It would make you more employable.

How is the stimulus money affecting workforce training here?

Stimulus money is flowing to College of the Desert in grants for training, and it's likely that it can be used at places like the Center for Training and Development. It's a marvelous environment to train individuals; classes include heating and air conditioning, solar technology. There's also a facility there to train people for jobs in the natural gas industry.

Does this cost less than a master's degree in career and technical training?

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A straight credential program, with six courses or 24 credit hours, would cost about \$2,800. If you were to go on for a master's degree, you would have to log another 30 credit hours, for a credit unit cost of \$6,500.

What skills are picked up in this course?

We offer instruction on how to motivate a class, the elements used to put a lesson plan together. The class shows how computers are used to teach the class — Power Point, video, white board — along with ways to use word-processing programs for instruction. There's supervised field work, lesson planning and an actual teaching experience that a supervisor evaluates.

Why does it make sense to do this now?

From a personal enrichment point of view, you can only play so many rounds of golf. You can sit back and watch the world go by; or you can do something to enrich the lives of others.

There can be economic motives, too. It can supplement an income, or be a launching point for a full-time career.

With education budgets being as they are, and teaching cuts occurring, why is this a good time to consider entering the field?

We believe our certification program is a cost-effective way to put teachers with real- life experiences in the field. If someone's been involved in accounting for 25 years, they're much more focused on what it takes to do the job.

But generally, the people who come forth say they always wanted to teach at some point in their life.

Additional Facts

A word from a student

John Murray taught for 16 years in New Mexico.

After retiring to the desert, the air conditioning instructor and veteran in the field got restless.

He rejoined the teaching ranks at College of the Desert.

"My wife is not retired," he said. "I got tired of staying home."

Murray said the certification will not only get his credentials in order. He has a chance to move up the pay-grade matrix with these six credits.

About the fast-track program

It requires six classes, all taught at the Cal State San Bernardino's Palm Desert campus.

There are three classes per quarter, optional online instruction.

Classes typically are held Fridays and Saturdays.

To learn more, call (760) 341-2883 Ext. 78157.

E-mail program advisers John Caldwell, jcaldwel@csusb.edu, or Dennis Larney, dlarney@csusb.edu

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