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From the Teacher's Desk: HACC Invests in Region Via Agricultural Education

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By Dr. MeeCee Baker, Ag Education Coordinator

HARRISBURG - Al Wenger, program coordinator for the Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) agribusiness program, recently sat for an interview about the institution's educational offerings. Questions can be directed to Wenger at amwenger@hacc.edu or 717-361-8083.

Baker: Explain the genesis of the HACC agriculture program.

Wenger: The agribusiness program at HACC began two years ago. The major specifically targets adults in job transitions, those already in the industry looking to upgrade their skill sets, and also high school graduates looking to further their educations in agriculture and/or agribusiness. We define agribusiness as pertaining to the entire food system, a value chain that begins with the farmer and ends with the consumer. Our objectives are twofold: to provide continuing education to prepare learners for specific training offered by industries in this region of the commonwealth and also give students a bridge to four-year degrees. The full program is being offered at Harrisburg's Wildwood Campus with several classes now available at the Lancaster Campus.

Baker: Where will HACC students land after earning an associate's degree in agribusiness?

Wenger: Some of the jobs these students can gain include farm managers for companies like Hatfield, retail store management for industries such as Weis, general marketing positions for food processors such as Sauder's Eggs, or food distributors for Sysco-type businesses. Additionally, some of our students will return to their home farms.

Baker: What makes this agribusiness program unique?

Wenger: One of the most exciting aspects of the major is the 'College in the High School' effort that allows qualified high school juniors and seniors to select special courses taught by their local agricultural educators who have been qualified by HACC. Students who successfully complete the class work earn three college credits which can be transferred to approximately 70 percent of the colleges and universities throughout the United States. Five high schools currently provide this option (Chambersburg, Garden Spot, Greenwood, Manheim Central and West Perry). This academic year about 100 students are enrolled with over 50 registering for the college credits. The number of participating schools is expected to double for the 2007-2008 academic year. 'College in the High School' allows students to follow an advanced academic track, which is often available in other disciplines.

Baker: Is there any financial support offered to students?

Wenger: In support of the agribusiness program, local government and businesses have donated in excess of \$45,000 in scholarship dollars. In addition to scholarship money, businesses have also provided carefully directed paid internships for students.

Baker: What challenges face this project?

Wenger: The continuing challenge remains outreach through schools and farm organizations in order to make students aware of this affordable and valuable opportunity offered by HACC. Efforts are made through teachers, guidance personnel, and agricultural leaders. High school junior and seniors are also encouraged to enroll in courses taught on HACC campuses.

Baker: Does HACC have expansion plans for agriculturally-oriented education?

Wenger: HACC will offer an associate's degree in ornamental horticulture, one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture, beginning in the fall of 2007. This program is a collaborative effort among HACC, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA), the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association (PLNA), and industry. While working on their studies, students will earn PLNA certification. Dovetailing with all these initiatives, Delaware Valley College will be delivering an MBA of Agribusiness starting the spring of 2007.

Baker: Do you have any final thoughts?

Wenger: The continued partnering between HACC and agribusiness industries regarding career opportunities lies central to the success of HACC's agricultural education movement. The cooperative efforts of agencies, institutions and businesses have brought the program to the level of success it now enjoys and will carry forward. The HACC experience is educationally-unique, in that over 70 percent of all HACC students accept jobs or return to within 20 miles of the institution. Investment in HACC programs and students ultimately is an investment in the economic health of the region.