

*Laboratory and phlebotomy technicians are in high demand, especially during a pandemic*



# Pandemic Accelerates DSU's Workforce Development Efforts

University finds that being nimble drives higher engagement levels **BY MICHAEL CASSON AND PATRICE JOHNSON**



OVER THE PAST YEAR at Delaware State University, we've intentionally accelerated our efforts to better prepare undergraduates, graduate students, and adult learners seeking certifications and new skills so they can excel in a rapidly changing job market. Delawareans especially need the sound information technology (IT) training that employers are demanding.

The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously driven most significant changes in instruction and employment during the past year, as work and education

go increasingly online. The University was developing the infrastructure needed to move more courses to digital platforms before COVID-19 hit, and successfully transitioning 1,400 classes online within five days in March 2020 gave us the experience and confidence to keep innovating.

There are two sides to engaging successfully in the virtual world – one having to do with classroom delivery and the other with finding ways to drive face-to-face engagement between faculty and students. We're



*Socially distanced students work toward technical certification at Delaware State University's Dover Campus*

offering students programs to help them use technology to be effective communicators, present themselves more professionally – particularly within virtual spaces – and we’re working closely with our faculty and staff to deliver content in a very dynamic, real-time way.

Examples abound for how we’ve pivoted. The Graduate School added Adult and Continuing Education offerings at our Kirkwood Highway campus in Wilmington and at our Technology Training Center in Dover and reinforced our focus on the in-demand jobs and certifications needed in areas such as health care, social service, and IT. We are still also working with companies in the construction and trade; hospitality and food services; and logistics and transportation areas where there may be jobs that don’t require as much training. 255 adult learners received certificates or badges in these areas during 2020, even as we completed this transition. We expect to serve many more in 2021.

The University is also expanding the space in which Delawareans will be able to receive this training. We will be opening a similar workforce development facility with REACH Riverside to expand the opportunities available in that community, and a new training and IT program with the Department of Labor by year’s end.

Through our Economic Development Leadership Institute, we’re reinforcing the importance of economic development officials thinking about workforce development as part of their future economic development efforts as they look to attract new businesses to their respective communities.

Meanwhile, the College of Business has been actively incorporating workforce development concepts into undergraduate and graduate learning. For DEEP Day (our annual professional development program), we are helping students understand virtual etiquette and prepare for virtual engagement, including tips on creating a professional background and ensuring they have adequate computer bandwidth.

Our “Garage” (a student-accessible innovation/ideation/maker space in our Bank of America building) operated virtually in 2020, focusing on supporting students to learn how to identify needs and solve problems rather than limiting themselves within a specific discipline. Our Innovation Café teaches students about business operations and product development,

and we’re working with the Departments of Food Chemistry and Food Nutrition to create different snack and beverage flavor profiles and sell them on campus.

Corporate partners like JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, and Barclays Bank have engaged in meaningful, long-term partnerships with Delaware State University to develop innovative career pathways, internships, and enhanced mentoring programs specifically developed to increase workplace and career access for students of color. We are expanding these types of partnerships into all interested industry sectors.

Removing financial barriers is critical to success in any workforce development initiative.

In cases where students lack the financial resources to pay for courses or certification, Delaware State University has been fortunate that organizations like Barclays, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, REACH Riverside, and the Delaware Department of Labor stepped forward to help ensure access. Our students know we’ll go the extra mile to help them be successful.

Both our traditional students and adult learners are excited about the opportunities opening up, even during a pandemic. The University’s challenge is taking their energy and putting it into its proper place while recognizing that 80% of students’ time is spent outside the classroom. So we need to help them find the co-curricular programs that will support their career goals.

Everyone wins when we deliver self-sustaining and career-enhancing programming, and our alumni bring their passions to the table. ■



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