

Taking Control

NECC sees increased enrollment in classes that offer financial independence

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Two years ago, Jerry Costello, a computer programmer at Lucent Technologies, was laid off. Not long after, Robert Alman was in a similar situation: jobless after 118-year old Arthur Little Publications filed for bankruptcy.

Combined, the men had 38 years of experience in their respective fields. They'd built their lives around the companies they worked for. And they both had liked their jobs.

Costello said he decided he could either be bitter or start again. Alman, 48, a husband with three children and one in college, said he felt like he was "on the outside looking in."

"I found myself asking, do I want to re-invest my time in another corporation?" Alman said.

Instead, he enrolled in a 10-week class at Northern Essex Community College that helped him to start his own handyman business. Costello combined skills he held after working at Lucent with the NECC entrepreneurial class and began a database consulting company.

Both men say they're confident, but not fearless, about being self-employed. They say being in control financially is where they want to be.

While student numbers in non-credit classes were "soft" this fall, Programs Manager Diane Zold-Isenberg said enrollment in business and professional development classes at the NECC Haverhill campus are on the rise. Employers and employees, those looking to start a business, and professionals, including lawyers and executive directors, are seeking courses to improve their productivity – and the certificates of completion to improve their resume.

Paul Jermain, who teaches the entrepreneurial training class at NECC, said at the end of his course, students hold a completion certificate and a blueprint for their new company, "but the focus is to launch a successful business. The class aims to create a marketing strategy, build a network of contacts and devise a team of advisors for the future business owners," he said.

Part of that team is Jermain, who continues to consult with or "coach" his students for 8-10 weeks after classes end. Mostly age 35-55, his students are "like-minded colleagues," Jermain said. "It's an inspirational, entrepreneurial environment." Everyone is thinking about their business and the business of their classmates, he said.

The mind-set of the students – their motivation – seems to be paying off. According to Jermain, Commonwealth Corporation, a quasi-public state work force development organization has tracked about 2,500 graduates after leaving the business program. About 75 percent of students went into business after school and 65 percent were still in business two years later.

Jermain said his students have gone on to start sales firms and nonprofit organizations. They've gone into businesses from chicken farming to collectible radio retail to health and wellness centers.

Recent layoffs, partly due to a sluggish national economy, have pushed enrollments from eight or nine students in the first class last fall well into double digits in the fourth class slated to begin in September. "Word of mouth, making people aware of a class that can take their lives in a new direction, has helped," said Jermain.

"Sept. 11 made people realize that in order to take control of their lives and their own economic development, many are taking more control over their work life," he added.

Searching for months through the unemployment office and libraries, Costello finally hit upon the NECC program that "far exceeded my expectations," he said. "It's the real deal."

Both program graduates listed confidence as the key to beginning their new careers, confidence that comes from friends, family and within.

"My family and friends just swarmed me, saying this is your time," said Alman of the time immediately after being left jobless. "Even my kids were involved, worried, (saying) 'Daddy, are you going to work today? Are we going on vacation?'"

Looking back, Costello said he was probably better prepared than most at Lucent.

"Those last couple of years, every two months, they'd have layoffs," he said. "I realized when it did happen I needed to give myself the time to deal with it."

Business is steady for Alman and Costello, but both say that if you're starting out in it for the money, you're going to lose. Taking control of your life financially is a risk, but it's worth the leap, they said.

"Being out there every day is a challenge," said Alman. "But a year from now, I'll be where I want to be."

Costello agreed, "You've got to lean forward and kiss your fears."