Preparing a workforce for the future

By: CHARLES HALLMAN | November 30, 2015

Summit Academy trains low-income students for living-wage jobs

(l-r) Felicia Clomon and George Garnett

A 2012 Wilder Foundation research report forecast that 900,000-plus jobs will be need to be filled in the Twin Cities over the next 10 years. The Minnesota Demographic Center also points out that a five percent labor force growth is expected to occur annually through 2045.

Summit Academy OIC (SAOIC) officials say they are training students to help meet the region’s labor needs. “We built a system that is preparing for the future. The real story here is that we built an institution and a pipeline of people who will be positioned to take advantage of this demographic shift,” proclaimed SAOIC President Louis King of the school, located just outside downtown Minneapolis on the city’s north side.

King said SAOIC can meet the area’s “employment goal that is shifting now to ‘labor force replacement’ because the current work force is aging out.” In the last two fiscal years, the school has had a 95 percent overall graduate-placement ratio — a 75 percent average placement rate in construction-related jobs, and 70 percent in health care.

“If we place 100 people, 70 of them must be in industry-related jobs,” explained King.
Career Services Manager Felicia Clomon added that SAOIC uses a “retention cycle” reporting on a three months, six months, and one-year basis. “Our overall retention rate in fiscal year [20]15 was 63.5 percent,” she pointed out — 301 students were placed in jobs in 2014.

SAOIC’s 20-week training, which is accredited by the Atlanta-based Commission of the Council on Occupational Education, is divided in two 10-week phases, the first classroom work and the second hands-on instruction. The “100 Hard Hats” construction program consists of core and specialties courses such as pre-apprentice carpentry, electrician, heavy equipment and welding. The healthcare programs include community health worker, pharmacy technician, and a certified nursing assistant option.

“There is no cost to the student,” said Strategic Development Director George Garnett of the SAOIC’s $5,400 tuition and fees. There is federal and state financial aid available along with other grants. “We [have] raised upwards of about $2 million now in philanthropic support. We don’t believe in sticking students with any debt.”

“All we ask for from students who attend here is that they need to be here and be committed to being here,” said Garnett. “They know that if they are not showing up here at Summit Academy, they are not going to get a job.”

“It is very intensive,” Garnett continued. “It is a highly demanding, rigorous and aggressive training program. Our theory is if you can get people in quickly so they can start to earn, that’s better than taking a year or longer and end up taking on debt.”

There are “supportive measures” to help students as well, such as regular brown-bag-lunch sessions for female students and graduates, mentoring sessions, and its “Freedom to Succeed” program, added Clomon, for “anyone who has been in jail or has gaps in their résumés. We meet with them once a week to talk about any insecurities...and how they are going to be able to attain employment after [training] and really building their confidence so that they are ready at week 20.

“We also do work-readiness evaluations on week two with each student. We [also] build “individual barrier reduction” plans with each student,” noted Clomon.

King pointed out that many SAOIC students aren't considered or seen as traditional students: “The people who come here have such overwhelming pressure — they’re poor. Families, housing, money, health, transportation, abuse relationships, trifle friends... we can’t do anything about that. All we can do every day is give them a little hope,” he said.

Garnett said that SAOIC's marketing efforts, which include television and radio spots along with historical "word-of-mouth," have proven successful. "Our whole approach to marketing is to make sure that the community — through cable TV and newspapers and radio — that people are hearing it a lot," he said.

Clomon cited starting hourly wages for SAOIC graduates as $15.67 in construction and $12.98 in health care.

“You are going to find the majority of our placements are people of color,” said King on the school’s partnerships with 229 local employers. “Eight years ago we were begging employers — now that’s not the case,” he noted. “Now they need us. They didn’t need us before.”

Asked what separates Summit Academy from other such local schools, King replied, “They [the students] get a clear sense that we actually care. They are not just numbers or just students. They are part of a family here. We have standards and values, but we care about every individual to support themselves and their community, and to maximize their ability to function in society.”

“We are here to support them through it all,” said Clomon.

Charles Hallman welcomes reader responses to challman@spokesman-recorder.com.