

Belleville News-Democrat, March 8, 2011 (Page 1 of 2)

Simon gets view from 'trenches' at SWIC

BY RICKEENA J. RICHARDS
News-Democrat

Illinois Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon got what Southwestern Illinois College President Georgia Costello called an "in-the-trenches view" of the college's Belleville campus and some of its programs Monday as part of a statewide effort to help more students earn degrees.

"I know all about your mission and how important it is to the students who walk through these doors," Simon said of community colleges' ability to tailor the programs they offer to the needs of the communities they serve. "In Illinois, community college is where it's at."

SWIC was the fourth stop on Simon's yearlong campaign to visit each of the state's 48 community colleges to see how they plan to improve their completion and graduation rates with a particular focus on what community colleges are doing to insure their students a smooth transition between high school and college.

As the governor's point person for education in the state, the campaign is her first step toward the state's goal of increasing the proportion of working adults with college degrees or certificates from 41 percent to 60 percent by 2025, which mirrors President Barack Obama's nationwide goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 to better compete in the global economy.

"Two-thirds of jobs in the future will require a college degree or meaningful certificate, but only 40 percent of our work force has attained that level of education," Simon said. "You can do the math to see our future is at risk."

Following a stop at the East St. Louis Community College Center, Simon toured several buildings at SWIC's Belleville campus to learn about the programs and services it offers students to help them complete the degrees or certificates they pursue, as well as prepare them for the workforce.

Her tour included a hands-on lesson about SWIC's welding technology program, one of 150 degree and certificate programs the college offers to students, and she did some welding of her own. The college established the program in 1975 in response to a local demand for more qualified welders in the area, a move Simon described as unique to community colleges.

"A community college has the flexibility to respond to the needs of students and local businesses," she said.

She finished her tour in SWIC's Success Center, one of the college's tools for improving its student retention and completion rates.

Deborah Alford, dean of success programs, said the center served about 7,500 students last year, helping them with professional and peer tutors, computer and writing labs and workshops. She said the college also has a program called Project Success that allows professors to refer students who may be struggling to the center to get the help they need to put them back on track.

"Like (Simon) said, the more successes people experience, and the earlier they experience them, the more likely they are to complete their programs," Alford said.

Belleville News-Democrat, March 8, 2011 (Page 2 of 2)

She said the center saw a 36 percent increase in the number of students using it last year, "and we're going up again this semester."

Alford said the college is also working on implementing a system by which it can collect data to track students' progress and identify when and where they tend to struggle.

"Our goal is to help them succeed -- every student who walks through the door," she said.

After she visits all the state's community colleges, Simon will report back to the governor with an analysis of what she observed and potential plans as to how the state can move toward its 2025 goal.

"There are exciting things to learn from every campus," she said.

Contact reporter Rickeena J. Richards at rrichards@bnd.com or 239-2562.