

Journal Gazette & Times-Courier, July 15, 2011 (Page 1 of 2)

Simon: Community colleges are key

By HERB MEEKER, Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, July 15, 2011 5:00 am

MATTOON - Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon knows the importance of community colleges to Illinois.

Her husband, Perry, is an instructor at John A. Logan Community College in Carterville. She knows what that college does for people seeking new jobs or improving their education.

On July 14, Simon came to Lake Land College, the 25th college in her effort to visit all 48 community colleges in the state as part of her duties as Gov. Pat Quinn's "education reform point person." Simon said her tours of the community colleges will serve educational reform in Illinois.

"They [community colleges] are really the key connection," Simon said. "We need to call more attention to the job they are doing. And focus on how we can do it better."

Simon was impressed with how Lake Land College is doing a good job in various aspects of education, ranging from effective tutoring, creating new curriculum for new career fields like green energy and also saving money with innovative energy projects.

"There's the greening of the campus. That includes environmental and educational opportunities and also cutting costs. They are also helping students continue in school and have tech programs with 100 percent place rates," Simon said after the tour led by Lake Land College President Scott Lensink; Tina Stovall, vice president of student services; and longtime instructor John Bennett.

The tour included the tutoring center that helps many college students succeed in their early semesters. The trip to the library highlighted the new LED lighting in some areas - one third of the energy bill at Lake Land concentrates on lighting - and computer virtual server stations that generate more than 50 percent in energy savings since the renovated library reopened.

Former LLC student trustee Blake Leitch also commented on how the college encourages input from students, leading to constructive ideas, not just complaints.

Leitch is an Iraq War veteran and recalled how coming to college after he returned to Mattoon was a little intimidating.

"In high school I didn't do so well. I could have probably made A's. So I went into the Army and when I came back I decided on Lake Land. To be honest, 10 years ago, college wasn't an option to me," Leitch said.

Simon said her husband has been impressed with the determination of veteran students at John Logan. "He says they have an advantage because of their experience," Simon said.

Lensink said the efforts to try to take Lake Land periodically off the electric grid or gain a full payback on energy costs with a combination of geothermal, solar panels and huge wind turbines started out with a lot of engineers shaking their heads. The college is committing to renovations and new equipment to cut climate control and other energy uses dramatically. The plan in the near future is to take the college off the grid during low-electricity usage times.

Journal Gazette & Times-Courier, July 15, 2011 (Page 2 of 2)

"Some engineers told us we wouldn't see a payback for 20 years. Then we went to one contractor and they said it might take more than seven years. That sounded right to us," he said. "But now it is down to just over five years because our electricity rates have gone up. So after all that we are looking like geniuses. And we have \$300,000 in annual savings right now. That means \$3 in savings for per-credit charges for students."

Some of these energy programs will provide training to Lake Land students in the future. They can enter new careers created by energy-saving innovations.

"We need to improve our higher education system today so that the next generation of students can graduate on time, with less debt and ready to fill the jobs of tomorrow," Simon said.

Before the tour started, Simon received a connection to the past. Lensink gave her a copy of a news account and photo of her late father, Paul Simon, speaking at the first commencement ceremony for Lake Land College more than 40 years ago.

It was a reminder the Simon family of Illinois has deep roots in supporting education.