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Community colleges ready for 'Green Economy' grants

BY SCOTT FITZGERALD, The Southern | Posted: Wednesday, September 28, 2011 8:00 am

Area community college officials responded Tuesday to news a day earlier from the U.S. Department of Labor and U.S. Department of Education that \$19.3 million has been awarded for job training and workforce development in green economy industries throughout the state.

Schools included as grant recipients in the 17-school Illinois consortium being lead by College of Lake County of Grayslake are John A. Logan College, Rend Lake College and Southeastern Illinois College.

The grant is being administered through the Illinois Green Economy Network, which has designated the community colleges as "hubs" where services and resources can be shared regionally.

The grant is for developing training programs and services for workers who need education for career transitions.

"It took us by surprise," said Sustainability Coordinator Tim Gibson of John A. Logan College about JALC and Illinois in particular being among the first round recipients for the grant money that had hundreds of applicants participating in a competitive bidding.

Gibson said he has been working closely with Program Director Stephen Bell of the Illinois Green Economy Network administrative team at College of Lake County to get the grant.

"One of the big selling points we had here is the employer partnerships already established for post-secondary and educational training," Gibson about major employers throughout the region.

At Southeastern Illinois College in Harrisburg, SIC President Jonah Rice said he was elated with the news and is looking at the additional money to expand the school's biofuels program.

"Biofuels is already a proven energy source. SIC has worked closely with regional biofuel production facilities in three states as well as developing a first class curriculum," Rice said about the school's on-line program with 17 students in 2010.

SIC Vice President Dana Keating estimates enough funding from the grant will allow the college to add three more classes to its biofuel curriculum.

Rend Lake College administrators said they are awaiting notification of the dollar amount they will receive from the grant.

"We are thrilled about the opportunities these funds will bring to Southern Illinois. RLC is one of only a few community colleges in Southern Illinois to be a part of the Career Pathways Consortium. I'm delighted we are involved in such unprecedented collaboration. The Illinois Green Jobs Survey showed that nearly 30 percent of most green employment in the future will require at least some college. We are confident our proposed curriculum will help build a transformative workforce for Illinois and potentially the nation," said RLC President Charley D. Holstein.

RLC Architectural Technology Professor Kevin Weston, who headed RLC's portion of the IGEN grant proposal, said Rend Lake College will use the money to build two new online programs - sustainable design and facilities management.

"These two new programs will teach students how to design energy-efficient buildings using sustainable materials and learn facilities management to upgrade existing facilities to make them much more green and energy efficient," he said.