

Quad-Cities Online, September 27, 2011

Lt. Gov. Simon's visit to BHC focuses on math, ag programs

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Posted Online: Sept. 27, 2011, 9:08 pm

Black Hawk College has some programs that could help college students across Illinois.

The state is pushing for 60 percent of Illinois' working-age adults to have a college degree or certificate by 2025, according to Illinois officials. Only 41 percent now have one; reaching the goal would require higher education institutions to increase the statewide count of graduates by 4,400 every year.

On Tuesday, Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon's "Complete College" tour came to BHC. The tour is aimed at learning how community colleges are helping students complete college careers and at gathering ideas to help the state reach its goal.

"I want to be able to highlight what you are doing well," Lt. Gov. Simon said Tuesday morning at a round-table discussion with BHC faculty, staff and students. She was particularly interested in BHC's new math course designed to help potential students brush up on skills and its agricultural programs.

The free computerized math course targets potential college students who test near the necessary level for college, according to a course description provided by BHC. The grant-funded course focuses on a student's weak points, letting them get up to speed quickly, said Bettie Truitt, dean of instruction and academic support.

The readiness of potential college students is a concern. BHC's math course is a program that could have value to higher education institutions statewide, Lt. Gov. Simon said later.

She also complimented BHC's agricultural program, saying she has heard its agricultural graduates can be found all over the country.

Bill Good, professor of agriculture economics, said the nationally-recognized hands-on program has strong ties to the agricultural industry. It has developed the ability to adapt as the industry adapts, said BHC agronomy professor Andrew Larson.

For instance, BHC agriculture students are working in ethanol production, he said. The program also has an initiative focused on locally grown food, with BHC-grown organic food being sold to Whole Foods in Chicago.

Lt. Gov. Simon said increasing the number of degrees and certificates among the state's working adults is significant not just to those who would earn them, but to the whole state. Building a reputation as a state that provides quality education would help attract companies and jobs to Illinois, she said.

"That's a wonderful goal, and I think, from our perspective, it's doable," said interim BHC president Gene Gardner.

State funding also was discussed. Illinois' ongoing budget problems are translating into late payments and a lack of funds for education.

"We're making do with what we're given," said BHC Board of Trustees Chairwoman Evelyn Phillips. But college officials at the roundtable said it would be good to have more state funding.

Lt. Gov. Simon said the state should be paying its bills, but the budget is tight.

"I can't promise anything any time soon," she said.