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For immediate release

OC challenged with limited space, increasing student enrollment, and trying to answer the call for more qualified workforce in STEM fields

ODESSA (Sept. 23, 2010) – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields are increasingly central to U.S. economic competitiveness and growth, according to an U.S. Department of Labor report. “Long-term strategies to maintain and increase living standards and promote opportunity will require coordinated efforts among public, private, and not-for-profit entities to promote innovation and to prepare an adequate supply of qualified workers for employment in STEM fields,” the report said.

Odessa College has to step up to the challenge in order to meet the growing workforce demand not only nationally, but right here in Ector County, according to Dr. Krista Cohlmiia, OC chair of mathematics and pre-engineering.

“It is no longer sufficient to target only baccalaureate and advanced degree holders. A large percentage of the workforce in industries and professions that rely on STEM knowledge and skills are technicians and others who enter STEM fields through two-year degrees and certificates or workforce training,” Cohlmiia said.

Donna Griffin, OC chair of biology, couldn’t agree more. “Our economic future depends on improving the pipeline into the STEM fields for community college transfer students, those seeking employment, those already in the workforce, and those employed in STEM fields but looking to change careers or have a better earning potential,” Griffin said.

According to Griffin, biology courses feed into a laundry list of STEM career fields. “In Texas, we have more openings in the biology-related fields than professionals to fill them,” she said.

Just a few of the career fields needing qualified professionals include athletic trainer, physical therapy assistant, emergency medical services, radiologic technologist, registered nurse, forensic scientist, health information manager/administrator, diagnostic medical sonographer, biotechnologist, veterinarian, research scientists, radiation therapy technologist and more.

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While some of the STEM career fields are more obvious like advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, chemical engineering, energy, actuarial science and healthcare, other industries like construction, retail, transportation and hospitality are not as obvious.

“Changing technology and expectations of the workforce in these fields make STEM knowledge important even in the less obvious career fields,” Cohlmiia said. “For example, mechanics in the trucking industry deal with computer technology, and the increased importance of math and technical knowledge on construction sites and in business offices has become an obstacle for those wanting to enter into these career fields.”

With the workforce demand and career opportunities trending more toward STEM fields, Odessa College is trying to meet growing enrollment demands in the mathematics and science courses, but is challenged with providing classroom and real world settings with the ongoing space limitations.

“In math specifically, since 2008 we have added three full time faculty positions to fill the course needs for our students,” Cohlmiia said. “We are out of office space and currently have full-time employees sharing an office. We have consistently added sections of math courses to meet the demand. Currently, many of our faculty members are teaching up to nine sections – a required load is five sections. To accommodate these extra sections, we have had to remove our dedicated computer-equipped classroom to allow for more desk space. Also, two portable buildings are being used as classrooms.”

According to Dr. Tanya Hughes, OC chief of staff, Odessa College has been examining the community needs in an effort to be ready for the future.

“We found that community members and students want us to provide facilities that mirror modern work environments that train workers for our business and industries,” Hughes said. “They want improved transfer programs that prepare students to attend other institutions with quality general education courses, especially in math and science programs.”

Odessa College’s Facilities Master Plan, which includes major safety repairs, renovations and modernization of the nearly 64-year-old campus will provide the space needed to accommodate Odessa College’s new and expanding programs, said Dr. Gregory Williams, OC president.

“Phase one of the Facilities Master plan which would be funded by the bond measure will ensure that Odessa College can add more classroom and educational buildings throughout the campus to meet the growing demand for higher education by Ector County students. These students are seeking educational options not only in the STEM fields, but in many other career fields as well,” he said.