

# Legislator fights to boost community college's portion of state budget

BY TIM RICHARD  
STAFF WRITER

"They couldn't be in Lansing because they had new jobs. But two Oakland Community College students let a state Senate panel know how an advanced technology program changed their lives, their fortunes and the state's tax picture."

"A gift from Heaven," one mother called the 18-week intensive training course at OCC's Pontiac Center.

"Sen. Harry Gast, R-St. Joseph, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee, promptly announced he will try to boost the Engler administration's proposal that community colleges be kept at \$271 million next year — a zero increase. "We're gonna get static from the front office," said Gast, who wants to boost community colleges by 3.5 percent.

The students' letters were read by OCC Chancellor Richard T. Thompson.

## A living wage

"Before I got into the ATP, I was working part time for only \$6.35 an hour," wrote Kaye Burill, the 23-year-old mother of an 18-month-old girl.

"Most of the time I was not qualifying for assistance. Because I was 'making too much money,' I wasn't receiving child support and was often borrowing money from my mom and dad."

"But now I am earning a living wage and am able to take care of both of us ... The advanced tech program ... for me means independence, skilled training, job placement, success ..."

With clothes, day care and car help, she was able to "attend school full time, work part time and spend time with my daughter. Without this program, I would probably still be on state aid and dreaming going to work in the morning. But now," she concluded, "I look forward to

going to work every day."

Melissa Edwards, a mother of three now working at EDS in Troy, said her son now sees her going to work instead of receiving food stamps in the mail.

At EDS, she wrote, "My team and I were responsible for the recovery of millions of dollars of misplaced equipment ... We implemented the installation of the Novell Client on over 4,500 desk tops in southeast Michigan."

"I am a member of the monitoring team (for the Global Microsoft Exchange Project). My position is very critical," said Edwards, who is certified in administering MS Windows NT 4.0, the first step toward becoming a Microsoft certified systems engineer. She intends to complete college through EDS' tuition assistance program.

## Started as pilot

Thompson said ATP started in 1995 as a pilot welfare-to-work program, the first of its kind in the state. It is funded by state and corporate grants.

The second ATP class, 13 students, graduated Feb. 9. Students spent 15 weeks in preparation, training and internships. Tuition cost was \$3,700 per student.

Spearheaded by Rep. Hubert Price, D-Pontiac, ATP was developed by the college, Greater Pontiac Consortium, the bus agency SMART, Pontiac Urban League and two state departments — Family Independence and the Jobs Commission.

Corporate sponsors were Kelly Services (which placed them in jobs), Fanuc Robotics and Deo Technologies.

"In its first year, the program reduced state welfare benefits for grants, food stamps and day care by \$189,000," said Thompson. "This program represents an incredibly wise expression of

**'We're going to get static from the front office.'**

**State-Sen. Harry Gast**  
—R-St. Joseph

public policy and a particularly astute investment of shared resources."

Commented Sen. Jackie Vaughn III, D-Detroit: "I can't think of anything more important than the saving of a human life."

## Goal: 3.5 percent

Gast, who chairs the appropriations subcommittee on community colleges as well as the full committee, said he parted company with Gov. John Engler's proposal to keep the 28 community colleges at a total of \$271 million with no increase from the current year.

"We're going to ask for 1.5 percent more (\$4.1 million)," Gast said. Half will go into an across-the-board increase for all colleges, half for formula increases. In addition, Gast said, he will try to pry 2 percent more (\$5.4 million) from the current fiscal year's surplus for a "supplemental" appropriations bill. The funds would be earmarked for technology, infrastructure and maintenance.

Currently, OCC gets a bit more than \$20 million of its \$100 million-plus budget from the state.

"This is no guarantee," said Gast. "How much will prevail, I don't know. I think it's attainable. The money is there, but there's going to be a big scramble to get it."

"We're gonna get static from the front office (Engler). And whatever we do, the House will maneuver to change it."

## Star Theatre to host awards night party

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