



# GETTING CREATIVE ABOUT COLLEGE

Big industrial projects need a big pool of workers. Can Newfoundland and Labrador provide it?

By *Stephanie Porter*

It is no secret there's a shortage of skilled workers, not just in Newfoundland and Labrador, but right across Atlantic Canada. There is also a long list of industrial developments underway and just-about-underway that needs thousands of people. Where will they all come from?

"Those companies seem to be hiring all the time," says United Steel Workers staff representative Boyd Bussey. "They

always *seem* to find enough people." That said, Bussey has his antenna up, alert for signs that any company he deals with is contracting out or bringing in labour from abroad.

"It's great that all of this development is going on. It provides employment to families, good, steady jobs, that pay higher than most," he says. "It's great to see the economy of Newfoundland booming like

that ... and we need to be able to take care of our own.

"That might mean more training facilities or more use of the College of the North Atlantic – that was created by [Premier Joey] Smallwood many years ago to make sure that Newfoundlanders got consideration for these jobs. I don't think there's any job for these companies that a Newfoundlander can't do."



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Anne Marie Vaughan  
President  
College of the North Atlantic



**ANNE MARIE VAUGHAN** is doing her part to make sure Bussey is correct. As president of the College of the North Atlantic, she knows exactly how important the College’s network of 17 campuses (15 on the island of Newfoundland and two in Labrador) are right now.

“It’s a really critical time to be in the college sector,” she says. “Colleges have never been so important, not at any time since the 1960s when the college system first came to Newfoundland. There is industrial growth in the province like we’ve never seen before.” A benefit, perhaps a requirement, of the college system is that it can be flexible and responsive to the needs of industry in a way that universities and other institutions cannot.

Vaughan says she and her colleagues are rising to the challenge, using creativity and careful big-picture planning to give Newfoundlanders and Labradorians the skills that are needed by the labour market.

Having a number of campuses around the province allows for some mobility. By moving existing courses to campuses where they are needed, and developing

new ones as required, even short-term and immediate labour needs can be met efficiently.

Vaughan uses the example of the College’s campus in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. The College is preparing to offer four new courses there, which are directly related to skilled worker requirements at Muskrat Falls. But College officials have realized that Nalcor won’t be the only one looking for workers. That’s why carpentry and cook programs will also be launched.

“We know there’s a need for housing,” says Vaughan. “There are infrastructure needs. It’s not just a fly-in, fly-out situation; people want to move in, and have a home.”

Likewise, “the worksite will need cooks. And, as the community attracts more and more workers, there will be a need for cooks, restaurants, all the service industries need people too ... The student demand exists. Industry demand exists. We have to make sure it is all matched up.”

In addition to moving new programs to the locations they’re most needed, Vaughan says the College is aggressively tackling its waitlist to get the students

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who want training ready to work in as timely a manner as possible. A strategic management committee of senior College employees, including the president and the registrar, meet weekly to ensure programs are moved to where there is a waitlist. "We do not have empty seats," she says.

Perhaps most notably, the College has been getting creative with the way it is delivering new programs. Labrador West (Labrador City and Wabush, close to major mine sites like IOC and Wabush Mines) has a distinct need for heavy equipment operators. But there were a couple of roadblocks to offering the training program at that campus: it's expensive to bring in the equipment; and those already working or in an apprenticeship are loathe to leave work to head back into the classroom.

Innovative use of technology and a partnership with industry eliminated both of those issues. The students in Lab West were connected with those in Stephenville Crossing (where there is a regular heavy equipment program) for classroom work via video conferencing. For hands-on experience, local industry provided the equipment and the worksite, ensuring the most relevant training possible. Students were able to go to class in the morning and to work in the afternoon.

The proof of success? The 100 per cent success rate in the apprenticeship exam. "We were able to minimize the time our students had to stay away from the community," says Vaughan. Not only that, but they managed to efficiently offer classes between campuses, without unnecessary duplication of infrastructure.

Another example: when word came down that one of the crucial transmission lines from Muskrat Falls would be situated along the Northern Peninsula, the College decided to offer a powerline technician course at that campus. Doing so means there will be skilled individuals ready to step into any jobs that become available.

Vaughan has been working closely with her counterparts across Atlantic Canada to coordinate efforts and share data about industry's needs and the evolving local capacity. Does she think it will be enough to meet the huge demand?

They're definitely getting there.

"We are making tremendous inroads, especially in the last year," Vaughan says. "We are mounting programs that are

needed where they are needed ... The more we talk with industry the better we will be at meeting their needs. We are producing quality graduates who are ready to put their skills to work."

**IN THE MEANTIME**, all is not smooth sailing as companies act to fill the positions they need filled. "My office has become an employment counselling office," says Labrador MP Yvonne Jones. "The province cut all employment offices in Labrador, now people are turning to us."



Apprentices in Labrador City are able to do their block training in their hometown thanks to a blended learning delivery model developed by College of the North Atlantic. Students in Labrador learn from an instructor in Stephenville Crossing using video conferencing technology.

Jones says she and her staff keep a database of workers and resumes. As of July 2013, there were well over a hundred names in the list, most with training and specific skills. "We're connecting companies with local workers," she says. "It's not our job but we're investing a lot of time and energy in doing this."

Jones is monitoring Nalcor and the other companies working in Labrador to be sure they are hiring as many local workers as possible. She's heard of cases where workers have been brought in from elsewhere in Canada, or from another country, to fill positions. Her concerns echo those of union representative Bussey.

On a positive note, Bussey says wages in Newfoundland and Labrador in the industries he represents are generally very competitive. "In the industrial sector, the iron ore workers, we're as good as most provinces or better. We did lose a few people from the [Come by Chance] refinery for a few dollars more in Alberta, but that's happening less and less.

"We're signing contracts and we're seeing nice improvements in wages and benefits and working conditions."

As long as the economy is going in the right direction, Bussey says that should continue. "When the economy goes down, we go to the table and there is an expectation to start accepting less. Let's hope everything stays good." | ABM