

# Fast track your way to a career

By Terri Mrosko

Accelerated programs are becoming ever more popular at colleges across the region.

A "fast track" program allows students to move more quickly through what was once a traditional course that took months, years, or longer to complete. It gets people trained and into the workforce, filling in-demand positions that local employers find challenging to fill due to the lack of qualified candidates.

The difficult economic climate of the past few years and the ever-evolving job market have made it necessary for many people to speed up their education in order to earn the now-essential bachelor's degree to remain competitive. One reason for this is that employers have set the bar high, said Anne L. Lukas, executive director of the Ursuline College Accelerated Program.

"What was once a job that was filled by an employee with a high school diploma now requires a baccalaureate degree. Recent reports indicate that only 25 percent of adults in Ohio have earned such a degree," she said. "Many colleges new to northeastern Ohio have rushed to fill the need with a fast track option for these students."

Ursuline College started adopting accelerated programming several years back and now offers options for 11 majors. Courses are available in the classroom, online or through a combination of both, which is called a hybrid course. The accelerated programs are offered in the evening and on Saturdays, which often means that discounted tuition is available, as well, Lukas pointed out.

Accelerated programs take adult and non-traditional students into account, allowing busy people to more easily balance home, work and

educational needs. Lukas said adult students often say that they perform best when taking one course at a time for five weeks.

Cuyahoga Community College offers several fast-track options through its Workforce and Economic Development Division. The Division helps to retrain dislocated workers so that they can re-enter the workforce quickly. The average student of a fast-track program at Tri-C needs to learn skills as quickly as he/she can, as these individuals often have financial responsibilities to meet at home.

"A large percentage of these workers are dislocated from a previous career that no longer exists," said Shelly Dooley, marketing manager for Tri-C's Workforce Solutions Division. "They need to retrain as a new way to make a living."

## Popular fast-track programs

Tri-C offers accelerated programs in advanced manufacturing, health care, computers, and alternative energy. Some of these training programs include the state-tested nursing assistant-STNA, patient access specialist, patient care technician, precision machining, and CNC training. The programs run from seven to nine weeks and are offered in half-day or full-day sessions. The evening courses run from 14 to 16 weeks.

At Ursuline, accelerated programs include a bachelor's degree in accounting, business management, healthcare administration, healthcare informatics, human resources, humanities, legal studies, management information systems, public relations/marketing communication, psychology, and nursing. Students with a bachelor's degree in non-nursing areas can also earn an accelerated nursing degree through the Breen School of Nursing.

In addition, many of these same areas of

study are offered as certificate courses for an even speedier education-to-work career path. Students then have the option to pursue a bachelor's degree after first attaining the certificate.

Other options include bridge courses, which are selected courses that count toward both a bachelor's and master's degree simultaneously.

## What you need to know before enrolling

Students should be cautious when choosing a college for a fast-track program, advised Lukas. Make sure the college you choose offers strong support, especially if you are balancing the demands of job, family and education.

"Students tell us that they hesitated to go back to college because they were concerned about successfully balancing all of those responsibilities. Some come to us directly from colleges where they received little student support or worked with faculty who were too busy to pay attention to them. They have often endured lower educational standards," Lukas said. "These are all important aspects to consider before you choose a program."

Additionally, said Lukas, when employers evaluate college education, they now more closely question the quality of education, the qualifications of the faculty and the college's reputation. The employer wants to know, up front, whether the education they may be paying for helps to develop valuable competencies, as well as how long it takes to complete a degree.

"Although many students are in a hurry, they should check with their Human Resources Department, their department heads and others who are enrolled at various area colleges before choosing the right one for them," Lukas said.