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SCHOOLS

These Students Are Guaranteed $70,000 Jobs Upon College Graduation

Jersey City, colleges team up with high-tech millwork company

By Tyler Blint-Welsh

A new apprenticeship program in Jersey City is offering a solution to help students avoid crushing student-loan debt: Free tuition and the promise of a $70,000 job when they graduate college.

The Jersey City government, an advanced-manufacturing firm in the city and two colleges have developed a partnership to give jobs to a group of high-school graduates while they attend college part-time. The five students, who will be in the apprenticeship's inaugural class, will start working for the Jersey City firm, Eastern Millwork, in July.

Modeled after Germany's system of apprenticeships, the five-year program will have students work on-site at Eastern Millwork three days a week, where they will train to become engineers. They will attend classes twice a week—one day at Hudson County Community College in Jersey City. The second day, they will participate in an interactive class at Eastern Millwork, where they will be taught remotely by professors at Pittsburg State University, which is based in Kansas. Each year their salary will increase, and when they earn a bachelor's degree from Pittsburg State their pay will hit $70,000.

Andrew Campbell, president of Eastern Millwork, said the program is a response to his company's inability to find college graduates with suitable skills for his firm, which uses automation and robotics to create and install custom wood millwork for clients that include Goldman Sachs. "This is a business transaction," he said. "The kids

Amber Gutierrez, 18 years old, is one of five students accepted to the apprenticeship. PHOTO: TYLER BLINT-WELSH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Paul Weeks, left, chats with the Andrew Campbell, the president of Eastern Millwork, at the company's office in Jersey City, N.J. PHOTO: TYLER BLINT-WELSH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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A machine operator works on the factory floor of Eastern Millwork in Jersey City, N.J. PHOTO: TYLER BLINT-WELSH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

work for me, their job is to go to school. And I think that makes it more efficient."

Mr. Campbell said he worked closely with both colleges to develop a curriculum, and will spend about $30,000 on each student's education during the five years. The students will get medical benefits and a salary, starting at $24,500.

"It's the best way to deal with college affordability, instead of layering these kids with loans and having them graduate without any sort of jobs," Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop said.

Nationwide, student loan debt totals nearly $1.5 trillion, and the average New Jersey student has a loan balance of $37,370—the sixth highest average in the U.S., according to Experian, a consumer credit-reporting company.

Amber Gutierrez, 18 years old, initially planned to study computer science at Hudson County Community College. She developed an interest in technology while attending Union City High School through a gifted-and-talented program. But she didn't want to go into debt. After applying to college last fall, she heard about the apprenticeship at Eastern Millwork in December through her high-school adviser. She learned she was accepted to the apprenticeship in March.

"I knew that once I graduated high school my main focus would be taking care of myself," she said. "This opportunity is giving me the ability to do that."

Public colleges and for-profit universities joining with businesses to develop curricula isn't uncommon. The idea that graduates are later hired by the same firm, however, is what sets apart the Jersey City apprenticeship program, said David Staley, an expert on higher-education innovation.

Mr. Staley said he sees programs similar to this one becoming more common, but expressed concern that they may limit the opportunity for self discovery that makes college valuable for many. "This transactional experience is one that basically says I pay you money, you certify my skills, and I'm essentially the same person plus skills," he said. "The most important philosophers on higher education have always emphasized that higher education, whatever it is, higher education should be transformational. I don't see that necessarily happening in this model."

Andrew Klenke, the chairman of the Technology and Workforce Learning program at Pittsburg State said he is hopeful the program will help develop a talent pipeline for Eastern Millwork. For the program to be sustainable for his university in the long term however, he said other companies eventually will need to buy in.

Mr. Klenke and Mr. Campbell said discussions are under way to involve companies based in California and Florida, but no agreement has been reached.

Paul Weeks, 19, said he initially planned to go to college but instead chose the apprenticeship program. The Saint Peter's Prep graduate said he scored a 1330 on the SAT and had applied to Saint Peter's University in Jersey City and Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. But he said the benefits of a traditional college experience didn't outweigh the cost of student loans, especially as he watches some of his family work to pay down their own debt.

"The most important question about college besides 'Do you like that college?' is 'How much is it?' It's looming over everyone's heads," he said.

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