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Preparing women, minorities, veterans for construction jobs

LMCCC spearheads program at Borough of Manhattan Community College



Peter J. Ruffini, chief estimator for Kreisler, Borg, Florman, a general construction company, teaching a class in construction cost estimating at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. (Photos: Terese Loeb Kreuzer)

When a building goes up, a cost estimator has to think about the materials, the labor and the design elements and prepare a budget. The topic on a recent evening at Peter Ruffini's cost estimator class at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) was "roofing, doors and finishes." His students pored over blueprints as Mr. Ruffini asked them to consider what the doors were made of and how big they were before coming up with a price.

Mr. Ruffini, chief estimator for Kreisler, Borg, Florman general construction company, has been in the business for more than 28 years. "A company could go broke if you miss things and the estimate is off," he told his class.

BMCC's construction cost estimator training program was developed at the instigation of the Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center (LMCCC).

"An organization called the Building Trade Employers Association did a survey that revealed that a lot of construction workers were aging out," said Beverly Bobb, manager of Opportunity Downtown Programs for the LMCCC. "They found there would be a need for certain skill sets."

These included job schedulers, cost estimators, project managers and site superintendents. Using funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, LMCCC asked the Borough of Manhattan Community College to create and administer programs to prepare people for this work.

Job scheduling was the first program offered. In 2007-2008, around 85 people graduated from the course. This year, there are 19 people in the cost estimator class, with a second class scheduled for the fall.

Nine of the students in the current class are female. "Five years ago in any kind of construction-related program you would find nine men for every woman," said Patrick Dail, director of continuing education at BMCC. "The recruitment that Beverly has pioneered for the LMCCC/BMCC has specifically sought out female candidates from pre-apprenticeship programs and other organizations in the city as well as minority candidates from lower-income communities and non-profit groups." The program has also "reached out to veterans," in Ms. Bobb's words, through an organization called Helmets to Hardhats.

Salaries for job schedulers and junior cost estimators start at \$55,000 a year. "We get two applicants for every seat we could offer to a qualified candidate," Mr. Dail observed.

Applicants for the class are required to have a minimum of five years of prior employment in a construction-related or engineering-related field plus either journeyman papers or a minimum of two years of college. Among the students in Mr. Ruffini's current class are a general contractor, a union carpenter, an architect and a structural engineer. Students range in age from their mid-20's to their mid-50's. Though most of them live in New York City, some commute from New Jersey or Connecticut to attend the program.

The cost of the 18-week course, which meets twice a week, is \$1,495. Graduates get a continuing education certificate and help from BMCC in finding a job. The assistance includes resume preparation, interview coaching and internship placements.

"Other schools offer a similar class but without the job placement skills that BMCC provides," said Ms. Bobb.

Mr. Dail said the college has "some concerns about the slowdown in construction work due to the economy," but added, "we're crossing our fingers." The curriculum for the cost estimator course was developed with the help of an advisory board of senior cost estimators, so, said Mr. Dail, "we have a foot in the door to get people internships and find the jobs that are out there."

- Terese Loeb Kreuzer

