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The 'Google' of maritime education

TCC chosen to launch comprehensive learning center for maritime industry

by Catherine MacDonald

As the largest provider of higher education and work-force development services in Hampton Roads, Tidewater Community College has trained many maritime workers at nearby industries. Now, TCC is leading a program that aims to change the industry forever — both in and outside the region.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded TCC nearly \$3 million over a span of four years to launch the Southeast Maritime and Transportation Center (SMART). The SMART Center, a consortium of community colleges, business and industry leaders, is the only NSF center in Virginia, and the only maritime center in the country.

Barbara Murray, a program direc-



Murray

tor at TCC's Office of Workforce Development, was the principal investigator for the NSF award, meaning she worked with educators, industry representatives and the NSF to craft a plan for the center. She stressed the award was not a grant for a short-term project, but an opportunity to create a permanent, sustainable resource and a lasting legacy.

"Not money here, gone tomorrow," she says. "What they're looking at is, 'Did it grow? Is it going to help folks for good, forever?'"

While the center will provide some training, that is not its primary purpose. Murray and her colleagues will be traveling and conducting focus

groups and surveys, developing curricula, creating a website and a national repository, among other efforts to streamline education in the maritime industry.

TCC was chosen for this project primarily because of its strong partnerships with maritime-related industry partners, says Theresa M. Bryant, the vice president for work-force development at TCC.

"We have a long history and strong track record of working with our partners, involving them at every step of the process, so that our courses and programs are designed to really meet their training needs," Bryant says.

She says TCC has led the way in designing academic credentials that create career pathways. For example, to earn a registered apprenticeship,





Tidewater Community College officials say the SMART Center will streamline maritime education.

Photo courtesy Tidewater Community College

students must complete a specified number of classroom training hours per year in addition to job training.



Bryant

Normally those classroom hours would result in a “bag of credits that didn’t tie into anything further in the education world,” Bryant says. TCC validates this coursework so a certificate becomes fully embedded in an associate’s degree, allowing students to continue their education and potentially earn a bachelor’s degree or beyond.

Bryant says instructors teaching apprenticeship-related courses will help with the development of curricula for the center by working directly with industry partners.

The creation of education and career pathways is a top initiative of the SMART Center, according to Murray and Bryant. TCC’s role will be to provide leadership and oversee the implementation of the project’s activities.

“Murray(’s) ... primary responsibility is to bring together all our partners — both corporate and educational — to design curricula, credentials and career pathways to serve the industry needs into the future and to make these resources available on a national level,” Bryant says.

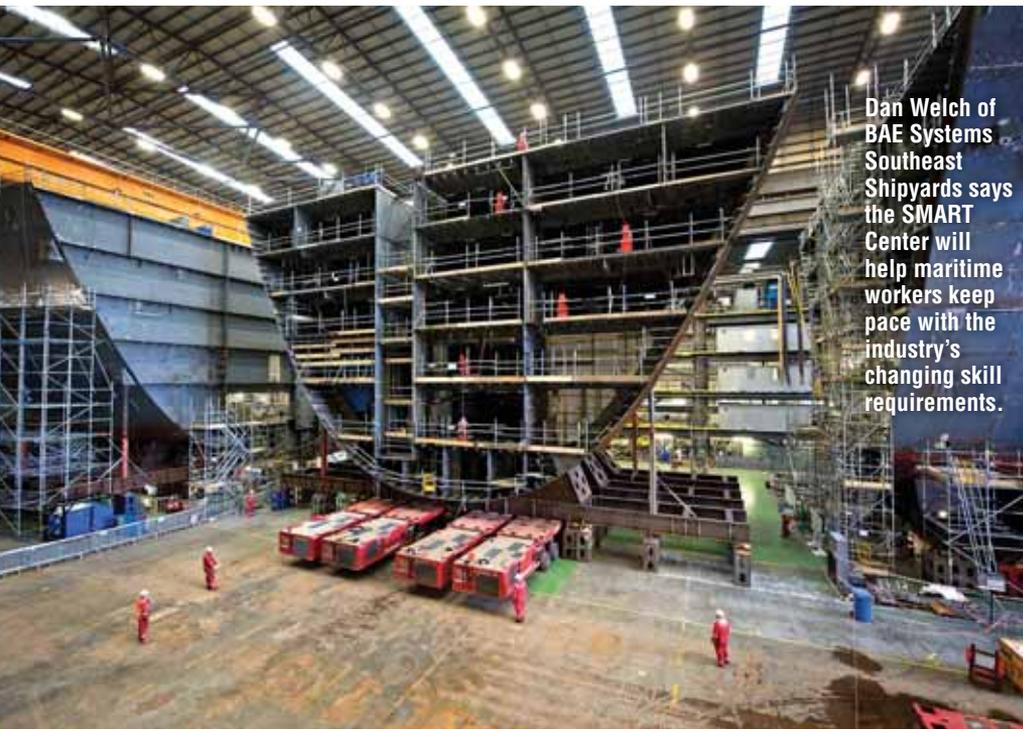
One of the center’s main goals is to not only provide students with industry-recognized credentials, Murray says, but allow them to utilize their training in any location. The center’s curricula will serve as a national model.

Murray uses the health-care industry as an example. “[If] I have certificates and credentials from Montana, I can move here to Virginia, and they’ll still work.”

However, the same is not true in the maritime industry. A person trained in one location today might not be qualified for a maritime job elsewhere in the country. This status quo gives the maritime industry a bad name, Murray says, and is a disadvantage to workers.

“If you leave this area what are you going to do?” asks Murray. “If a company changes or closes where do you go?”

Mark Landry, the work-force director at Jackson County Campus at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, was a co-principal investiga-



Dan Welch of BAE Systems Southeast Shipyards says the SMART Center will help maritime workers keep pace with the industry's changing skill requirements.

Photo courtesy BAE Systems

tor for the NSF award. He says the center's plan for cohesive training will help workers keep up with changing technology and job requirements.

"In any career field, the types of employees that are going to be needed in the future are going to need to have many more skills to

compete," Landry says. "And now we're not just competing locally — we're competing globally."

Dan Welch, vice president and general manager of BAE Systems Southeast Shipyards, says the key benefit of the SMART Center will be this type of training. The required skills of shipyard production workers are changing, he notes, and the industry needs to keep pace.

"It's beyond our capability to conduct that kind of training and education," Welch says. "That's outside of our scope."

Murray says the SMART Center at TCC "would be, basically, the Google of maritime and transportation," meaning those in the industry would look to the center for relevant information. She says she and her colleagues are building a national repository to streamline the system and become a dynamic resource for educators. She says they are currently developing a website and expect it to be up by summer or fall 2011. 🌐

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