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Lt. Gov. Simon tours Richland, touts virtues of finishing college degree

By VALERIE WELLS - H&R Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, April 28, 2011 12:01 am

DECATUR - Several things Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon saw Wednesday at Richland Community College intrigued her.

One was the Mathematics Enrichment Center.

The center, as described by Tod Treat, vice president of student and academic services, combines computer-based math tutoring with live tutors who are available in the same room when students run into difficulties.

Math is one of the stumbling blocks for students trying to complete their education, and between 60 percent and 75 percent of community college students have to take remedial courses to prepare for college-level work, which takes time and money some of them can't afford to spend.

Simon is the state's point person in an effort to raise the proportion of working age adults that hold college degrees or certificates from 41 percent to 60 percent by 2025.

"One of the things we know is we need a higher percentage of people with college credentials, and community colleges are a real driver in being able to accomplish that," Simon said.

Most students who fail to complete degrees blame time and money. Richland President Gayle Saunders told Simon that sometimes it seems as if Richland puts barriers in students' paths instead of removing them, and the college is putting its focus on changing that.

"Access (to a college education) is incredibly important but also helping students get to the end of what they came here to do," Saunders said. "It's a shift in culture, not to think so much how to help you start, but to assume that when you came here, you wanted to complete a goal."

That goal, for most students, is work force-ready credentials, but so many community college students are working and raising families in addition to going to college that the college has to be willing to be flexible. One example of that is the midnight welding classes, scheduled specifically to accommodate shift workers, she said.

Working with business and industry to train Richland students in jobs that are available locally is another. Saunders said the college wants to help people stay in the area.

To that end, said Kathie Whitley, vice president of human resources for Archer Daniels Midland Co., ADM first worked with Richland to create a training program for clerical workers at the plant. That went so well that two years ago, it expanded to offer technical training for current employees, in cooperation with Tate & Lyle, which had similar needs. About 65 people are currently in those classes.

"It has three components: creativity, access and collaboration," said Terry Robinson, dean of continuing education and professional development.

Simon plans to prepare a report by the end of the year.

"Every community college has something where they're out ahead of the other schools," Simon said.