

Cooperative education at WPCC blossoms in 2nd year

By LINDA PHILLIPS
News Herald Staff Writer

Cooperative education at its best is a plus for everyone — employer, employee and student.

At Western Piedmont Community College, the cooperative education program is reaching for its best as it flourishes into the second operative year and adds a full-time cooperative education specialist to the staff.

Velda Benfield, 28, a Statesville native, has come to WPCC as a cooperative education job developer and instructor. She is equipped with an array of education and counseling degrees and an impressive background in staff development and cooperative education experiences.

Ms. Benfield began her stint in cooperative education at WPCC in early November, shortly after she completed a specialist in education master's degree in counseling and student development at Appalachian State University.

Since then, she has been busy teaching courses in career planning and exploration, contacting businesses for work placements, screening cooperative education candidates for jobs, and advising students about resumes and career options.

Meanwhile, the number of students getting involved in cooperative education has grown.

Spring quarter has shown a significant increase in student participation in this work-and-study related program with some 44 students — 17 women and 27 men — enrolled in 10 degree disciplines, and placed in 29 working locations throughout Burke County.

Cooperative education is a new curriculum approach for most junior colleges but is a tried-and-true study-work type program that can be found at many four-year institutions across the country, said Ms. Benfield.

In fact, Western Piedmont is one of the only community colleges in this area that has such a program, she said.

"The program is possible here because of a Title VIII, five-year federal grant and because of a strong commitment from the college administration and the trustees to help us fund it," Ms. Benfield.

Cooperative education is a program which allows students to get curriculum credit while getting paid for a job.

"In cooperative education, several things can happen," said Ms. Benfield. "A student has the opportunity to find a full or part-time job directly related to his major and receive course credit for the work, or he can get credit for the job he already has, if it relates to his major. The point of this program is career exploration, to



Photo by Chuck Liddy

Cooperative education instructor Velda Benfield ... advises student, Jamie Hart.

get a chance to see if what you are majoring in is the field you really want to be in."

The logistics of a co-op program work in favor of student and employer.

"The student is getting valuable work experience, the employer is getting a second-year student who has been carefully screened and who is highly responsible, and if the employer likes his co-op students, he can keep them on even after the quarter is finished," she said.

There are two types of co-op programs. One type is called "alternating" in which a student works full time for a quarter and then goes to school full time the next quarter. The other type is "parallel," more common. In this case, the student works full- or part-time and continues to attend school.

Students who participate in the program must find a job either on their own or with the help of the co-op placement officer. In addition, students must meet several requirements.

They must have a 2.0 grade point average, a transcript and three references, which are checked. They must also be in the second year of a degree program, have an employable appearance, be responsible and have a manner that employers look for when they're hiring.

Ms. Benfield helps students prepare these specifications, as well as good interviewing techniques and careerplanning tactics. She works with students on an individual basis and in

her career classes.

But students are entirely responsible for actually getting the job they interview for, said Ms. Benfield.

"I screen each student carefully and then I send several resumes of students I think are qualified for a certain position to that employer. The employer then reviews the resumes and asks whichever students he wants to come and interview," she said.

"Even then, it's not guaranteed that the student will get the job, because he is competing with other applicants who are not from WPCC. But this is all part of job-seeking and it's the way it will be once the student is out of school, so it's good experience. If a student doesn't get the job, we work on strengthening the things that might have kept him from getting it," she said.

In Burke County, student placements have been made in retail businesses, industries, restaurants, law offices and hospitals. Nursing and dental technician students, however, cannot be a part of the program due to licensing standards which require these students to volunteer their work hours.

"We have a good range of job placements," said Ms. Benfield. "Still, we need more business and industry contacts, so that we can get more people involved in this program. I go out to visit places and talk to employers but it takes a long time to get to everyone since I'm the only one going out. If people are interested in being in the program, they should contact me here at the college," she said.