

WPCC technical programs see slump

Falling enrollment in Western Piedmont programs mirrors a statewide trend

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MORGANTON — Western Piedmont Community College's technical programs are down but not out. Some vocational classes in the

state's community college system are wanting for students, but according to Richard Greene, WPCC's executive vice president, "We've been pretty steady for the last two years."

Part of that reason may be because the term "vocational" has been dropped from the description of courses and the word technical added to describe classes in programs such as the building trades.

"Vocational" classes over the past few years have suffered from

an image problem, Greene said.

He said most community colleges have dropped the term "vocational" from the title because of the stigma it carries.

Mike Pittman, director of vocational programs for the N.C. community college system, said in recent reports, "Every parent wants their child to go to a four-year school and learn to operate a computer. They don't want them to look at the traditional trades."

"The construction industry has

gotten a bad reputation."

In 1993, for example, 5,963 students statewide graduated from such vocational programs as plumbing and carpentry, while 11,833 graduated from electronics technology-related programs. In 1997 — the last year data was available — 1,221 received vocational degrees or certificates were awarded, while the number of technical-degree programs increased sharply with

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15,783 people graduating with diplomas or certificates in those related fields.

And although the name is different at WPCC, those same vocational programs, now termed technical, have taken a hit as well.

According to Greene, the college's technical programs have dropped a bit, graduating 1,558 in 1999 and 1,489 in 2000. However, he said, this spring it looks like it has reversed itself.

"Building trades are the hardest programs to get students in. People

tend to train on the job," Greene said.

Tom King, a member of the N.C. State Board of Community Colleges, recently said, "Our problem has been that there's such a demand for these people (traditional tradesmen) that they're learning on the job instead of going to school to learn."

"But that's costing the employer time to train them. We've got to provide that service, and if they come and learn that trade they can get out and get a better job."

Now, as with most community

colleges, WPCC has several choices for technical programs.

Students now can choose from getting a two-year degree, a one-year diploma or a certificate, which takes less than a year to complete.

Building industry officials, however, complain that the full-time programs do not work for all students. They have encouraged community colleges to offer more courses through continuing education.

(The Associated Press contributed to this story.)