Early Childhood Education:
Innovative, accountable and changing program meeting needs for tomorrow's professionals

by Marilynn Fryer

like the young lives that child care professionals guide, the field of early childhood education is growing and changing.

To help meet the changing demands of the field, Jackson Community College has revised its early childhood education curriculum in recent years and is offering new classes beginning Fall of 2009.

"More and more is being expected of early childhood professionals all the time," said Professor Mary Belknap, teacher education coordinator who has overseen the changes to JCC's early childhood program. "Those hiring employees to guide young children want highly qualified four-year degreed people."

Focused early childhood programs can lead to large dividends down the road in terms of economic development, public research suggests. Mary Cunningham-DeLuca, children's program director for the Community Action Agency, said scientifically based research today indicates the importance of early childhood education because it directly relates to the workforce of 2030.

"The case has been built over and over again, not by those in the education field but by those in the private and business sector that you need a solid cohort of highly skilled individuals to support the work force of tomorrow," Cunningham-Deluca said.

Child care professionals and preschool teachers provide care for young children, either in the home, day care center or preschool settings. They provide for and nurture young children who have not yet entered formal schooling and
I think it’s like building a house, and early childhood is the foundation.

- Sheri Butters, director of the Great Start Jackson Collaborative

Mary Belknap

To ensure JCC’s early childhood education students have the skills they need, Belknap and her committee consulted with several universities to ensure the classes are current and will transfer to four-year institutions. Actual classroom work or field service will be integrated in each course for practical application of concepts. Online experiences will also be part of course work as technology skills are expected by all teachers at all levels.

Those interested in a career in early childhood education need to combine both knowledge and heart, Belknap said. Professionals must care about children and families, and enjoy meeting all the many needs of a young child. Belknap utilizes a personal disposition assessment tool with many other forms of service learning and class experiences to help future early childhood professionals experience the realities of the profession.

Kelly Winter is a pre-teaching student at JCC who is taking early childhood courses to earn a Child Development Associate credential and work in the field. She currently works with 3-year-olds at Our Lady of Fatima School.

“Every day is different,” Winter said. “The children like to have fun and laugh. I’m very creative, and I love the creative aspect of working with children.”

Professionalism is important when working with children, Winter said, and the job should be taken seriously. JCC will start with three classes through the teacher and early childhood education program and continue to build more offerings in early childhood depending on market needs. In the Fall, Emergent Literacy and The Exceptional Child will be offered, and in the Winter, Child Growth and Development will be offered. Further course development will be guided by student enrollment, community needs, transfer university expectations, and state and federal guidelines.

“There’s a big move to support young children in our community, with efforts like the Great Start Collaborative and Head Start,” Belknap said. “One only has to step into the world of young children for a short time to realize if Jackson Community College is helping to prepare early childhood professionals to work with our young child, we want only to offer the very best in educational opportunities. Our Jackson future is our young children, we must be innovative and accountable.”

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