

WEAP Program Teaches Skills to Underprivileged

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Andre Dawkins is a man with skills. But his concerns about his future impelled him to make a huge sacrifice in time and income to learn how to connect computers to each other as a network operator.

"Equipment in my line of work is becoming more computerized. There's a high demand and pay, but also high casualties," he said of the construction business.

Thanks to curriculum provided by the Cisco Networking Academy to the Women's Economic Agenda Project in Oakland, Dawkins now has the skills to be a network operator.

WEAP graduated its first class of nine this past spring. Its second class begins June 18. Program manager Danielle D. Williams said the number of applications greatly exceeds the number of spots available.

"I get about 14 calls a day from people saying; Did you get my application? Do you think I'll get in? It breaks your heart," she said.

WEAP's 19-year mission has been to help poor women and their families achieve economic self-sufficiency. It does so through courses in technical skills, contact with an array of employment related resources, case management and emotional support. Despite its name and its Oakland location, WEAP doesn't turn away men or residents of other Bay Area cities.

Ethel Long-Scott, WEAP executive director, agreed there are "huge challenges" in getting graduates employed, especially in today's economy.

"Cisco came up with this concept to get the knowledge out in as broad circles as possible and address the huge gap of tech-preparedness workers," she said. "Cities like ours and (others) around the Bay Area have significant unemployment, and they do not have the skills for the new economy."

The current downturn in the Internet industry has not affected the clamor for spaces in WEAP's classroom. Williams' task is to weed through the hundreds of applicants for 20 spots and determine not only who would most benefit from the course but who is most likely to complete it. The 11 who dropped out midstream in the first class left vacant seats that could not be filled by others after the course had started.

As a heavy equipment operator, Dawkins, 36, has the skills and certificates to operate nine kinds of machinery such as bulldozers, loaders, escalators, and other Gargantuas of the construction site. While he enjoys it, it isn't steady. Once a job is finished, he waits for another assignment. He wanted something he could do all the time. And the idea of connecting computers and therefore people appealed to him.

Cisco Systems, Inc. donates the online curriculum to schools and other organizations. But the course costs students. WEAP charges students \$3,000 per student. The same Cisco curriculum is available in Junior colleges and community agencies but can cost as much as \$5,500. Unlike WEAP, other organizations usually don't offer case management and employment-readiness support, Williams said.

The course is challenging. It assumes eighth grade reading and math skills and basic computer literacy. Dawkins for instance was already building his own computers when he signed-up. Three nights a week for 12 months, students gather at WEAP's offices on 15th and Broadway and follow the course work online under the tutelage of a professional.

The course work was so demanding that Dawkins chose to work in construction part-time on one-fifth of his normal wages just to keep his mind free, he said. Some had to find cheaper apartments and take second-time jobs to manage paying for the course. Others had to struggle to keep up as they coped with family and health problems. One student died during the year and another was incapacitated enough to have to drop out.

Dawkins remembered how his fellow students rallied to support each other.

"We formed a network we hoped to rely on for years," he said. "that process made us stronger. Those who remained became more determined to learn the skills we wanted to learn."

But Cisco's certification for the course can only be won by a separate exam. Of the nine students who graduated this spring, five have earned certification so far. Dawkins is waiting to take his examination.

Cisco, a manufacturer of networking equipment for the Internet, has constructed a variety of courses for several certification levels, which it offers online and free to the teaching institution.

"Cisco is interested in supporting education. This is just an example of our commitment," said Laura Reynolds, Cisco's regional manager for government and education. To find CISCO learning programs elsewhere, log on to: <http://cisco.netacad.net>.