

SKILL CENTER

A major and perhaps the crucial contributor to Alaska's chronically high rates of unemployment is the low skill level of the State's resident workforce. Indeed many Alaskans lack not only the training, but also the basic habits and attitudes necessary to hold down a steady job. Many efforts have been made to correct these deficiencies and bring Alaska's disadvantaged population into the economic mainstream. One of the most successful, and certainly most revolutionary thus far, has been that which encompasses the operations of the Alaska Skill Center in Seward.

Probably the first impression felt by a visitor to the Alaska Skill Center in Seward is the utter dynamism of the place. Students and staff alike seem intent upon the one goal of providing the students with the skills, both social and occupational, that will allow them to compete successfully in Alaska's labor market. There is a constant bustle as students move to and from classes and various other activities. In fact, in the case of the building maintenance students, the class may be right out in the hall repairing a portion of the main building's heating system. In any event the initial impression is one of a group of people working enthusiastically towards a common goal. Interaction between staff and students is free and easy in sharp contrast to the public schools, where rigid social boundaries often separate student and teacher.

Indeed if a person's first impression of the skill center is its dynamic nature then his second must be the almost total dissimilarity between the educational process as it takes place there and the highly structured curriculum so characteristic of the public school system. In the typical public school students must follow a rigid course of studies at a set pace. Tests graded on a curve pit the student against his peers. At the skill center each student is allowed to proceed at his own speed. Training, which is given in the four major areas of food services, mechanical skills, building maintenance, and clerical and office skills, is essentially non-competitive. There are no class curves and no grades. There is instead a strong emphasis on allowing the student to succeed a little at a time and in making him aware that he has succeeded. This is important as a confidence builder, lack of self-confidence being an almost universal characteristic of disadvantaged persons.

While there is a set course of instruction in each of the occupational areas leading to a diploma

in that area, the prime emphasis is on giving students as much training as possible. Because of this the term dropout becomes meaningless when applied to students departing the skill center prior to graduation. No matter what the reason, if a person leaves the skill center he is given a certificate. This certificate lists the number of clock hours of instruction he has been given, and the area in which it was administered. Often this training plus the various counseling services he has received will be sufficient to allow an otherwise unemployable individual to obtain work. In fact, one of the main barriers to assessing the effectiveness of the skill center's program is the difficulty in gaining follow-up information on persons who leave there without completing a course of training. Another unique aspect of the skill center's program which sets it apart from most other educational institutions is the emphasis that is placed upon teaching attitudes that will allow the student to succeed on the job. That he is enrolled at the skill center in the first place usually indicates a lack of such attitudes on the part of an individual. Training to instill useful attitudes is given in a number of ways. Vocational training is conducted such that it resembles, as much as possible, an actual work situation. For example, if a student misses a day of training without a good reason, he is docked a day's subsistence. Correct attitudes are reinforced in various other ways as well. A student who has a perfect attendance record for say a full month may be given a day off as a reward.

At least as important as its training function, is the rehabilitation aspect of the skill center's program. As mentioned previously, persons arrive at the skill center because their problems combined with their lack of skills have prevented them from obtaining and or holding a job. These problems run the gamut from alcohol abuse to health problems, with alcohol abuse being by far

the most common. When discussing the alcohol abuse problems of skill center enrollees staff members emphasize the psychological rather than the physical nature of these problems. That a trainee abuses alcohol is a surface indication of deeper difficulties stemming from an inability to cope with his social environment. During the trainee's period of enrollment the skill center's counseling staff attempts to help him confront and master his problems. For the alcohol abusers, and as mentioned above they include a large proportion of trainees, this means in addition to other counseling services, an intensive cure program involving group therapy. It also involves treatment with antabuse a drug which, when taken, will make a person ill if he drinks alcohol. This cure program is voluntary. Often, however, it is a choice for the individual of either taking the program or leaving the skill center.

Although alcohol abuse is the largest single problem among skill center enrollees, it is by no means the only one with which the staff must cope. Often a trainee's particular situation will require an innovative approach if rehabilitation and training of the individual are to be accomplished. An example of this is the case of a trainee from Juneau. This person had spent a large portion of his past four years in the local jail for various petty offenses. Upon enrolling in the skill center, he was transferred to the Seward jail. An arrangement was made whereby he was released to custody of the staff during the day so that he could attend classes. The program has proven so successful that plans are in the works to add additional trainees under a similar arrangement.

Whenever a trainee is placed by the skill center, his employer is informed of everything about the person that might cause the person problems on the job. If he has had alcohol abuse problems, or is emotionally unstable, this is noted. In this way the skill center stands behind any enrollee that they place in employment.

Generally speaking then, how successful has the skill center been in preparing disadvantaged Alaskans for employment? One employer who has hired a substantial number of skill center

graduates indicates that as a group they have proven better prepared to step into positions with the company than were new hires as a whole. He indicates that in his opinion clerical trainees receive training on the par with that given in the best high school clerical courses with which he is familiar. Furthermore, while some period of adjustment is required, retention has been higher among skill center graduates than for employees of the company as a whole. There is a tendency, particularly among native graduates, to return to the village after several months of work to engage in traditional subsistence related tasks such as fishing and hunting. However, while working the graduates have proven to be well motivated and dependable employees.

With an estimated 62,000 Alaskans in need of manpower services the State's unemployment problems will not be solved overnight. Indeed for them to be solved at all manpower services must be geared to the whole person rather than to just his lack of vocational skills. Because of its strong emphasis upon providing such services, it seems certain that the Alaska Skill Center represents the wave of the future with regard to manpower training in Alaska.

Wade Hampton Manpower Resources Document

Available: The latest in a series of Alaska Manpower Resources Documents will soon be released by Research and Analysis. The publication reports the results of a comprehensive manpower study and skill survey conducted in the Wade Hampton labor market area under the Department of Labor's Smaller Communities Program. Persons or groups interested in obtaining copies of the report should contact Research and Analysis or write:

**Alaska Department of Labor
Research and Analysis Section
Box 3-7000
Juneau, Alaska 99801**