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Cutting Edge: Central Piedmont C.C. Rolls Out Simulation, Game Development Program

By Bea Quirk, Special To LTW

Editor's note: Charlotte Beat is a regular weekly feature in WRAL Local Tech Wire.

CHARLOTTE - By the time Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) received approval from the North Carolina Community College System late last fall for a new degree program in simulation and game development, the spring semester's catalog was already printed and class schedules set.

But when December came, Farhad Javidi, who had spent the last three years developing the program, decided he couldn't wait any longer. With the OK from the CPCC administration, he set up six classes (for five courses) and used word of mouth to let students know about it. When the new semester began January 9, the classes were full with 27 students enrolled in the program.

Said Javidi, program chair in CPCC's IT Division, "I was so excited, I told them I just couldn't wait!" He has

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been teaching at CPCC since 2002.

Continuing its tradition as an innovator in workforce education development, CPCC is the first community college in the country to offer a two-year associate in applied science degree in simulation and game development. Javidi says the only institution he knows of offering a four-year degree is Central Florida University.

Certificate programs are also being offered at CPCC, considered the flagship of the state's 58-campus community college system.

The curriculum covers a broad background in simulation and game development with practical applications in creative arts, visual arts, audio/video technology, creative writing, modeling, design, programming and management. Students receive hands-on training in design, 3D modeling, software engineering, database administration and programming for the purpose of creating simulations and games. Classes and labs are located on CPCC's main campus outside of uptown Charlotte. (The college has seven campuses and an enrollment of about 80,000.)

"It goes well beyond games," Javidi said. "Simulation technology is used for cancer patients, to train soldiers and pilots, to recreate crime scenes and in the entertainment industry." It's also being used for surgeries, in manufacturing and in energy systems. But games remain its main use so far, and the electronic game industry is an \$11-billion-a-year industry, according to the Entertainment Software Association,

Graduates should qualify for employment as designers, artists, animators, programmers, database administrators, testers, quality assurance analysts, engineers and administrators in the entertainment industry, the health care industry, engineering, forensics, education, NASA and government agencies.

"We are here at CPCC for workforce development, and I want my students ready to work in two years," Javidi said, although he adds that many of them have dreams "of working for themselves."

Javidi credited the support of the CPCC administration, especially President Tony Zeiss, for making the new program possible. Said Zeiss, "Given the overwhelming evidence of the growing demand for a workforce well trained in simulation and game development, we are committed to supporting this exciting new initiative."

According to the US Bureau of Statistics, software engineering is one of the fastest growing occupations in the country. According to CPCC, annual salaries for entry level positions range from \$40,000 to \$70,000.

Javidi is already thinking about the future and would like to add an associate degree in digital effects and animation. "We're now mostly involved with programming development, and this new program would have more to do with the creative arts," he explained.



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Javidi, 46, is a native of Iran and has been in the U.S. for about 20 years. His work in the IT field covers many different aspects. While a student at the University of South Florida, he wrote his masters thesis on developing a standardized keyboard for Persian computing. During that time, he also helped create the first websites for a number of companies, including GlaxoSmithKline and Charlotte-based Epley Associates, one of the largest PR firms in the Southeast. He came to Charlotte to become Epley's director of IT in 1997. In 1998, with his brother Mitch, he co-founded Digiton Corporation, a consulting and technology firm now based in Raleigh, and he currently serves as its senior technology consultant.

In addition, Javidi is a poet and has four published books to his credit. He writes in his native Farsi.

More on the Education Front

The Future Forward Economic Alliance closed this week on Corning Cable System's former R&D facility in Hickory. Cost was \$690,000. The 55,200-square-foot facility will be converted to the North Carolina Center for Engineering Technologies, a classroom and lab facility where students can earn a B.S. in engineering technology.

The program will be administered by Western Carolina University and focus on rapid product development and realization. Plans call for the facility to be turned over to the state university system in July with classes to start this fall. The Alliance is a regional economic development group for 12 counties in the western Piedmont and mountains. It received a federal grant of \$1 million for the effort and has so far raised another \$2.1 million from public and private sources.

Another Workforce Development Effort

The Competitive Workforce Alliance, a partnership between the Centralina, Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Gaston workforce development boards, has announced the findings of a study it commissioned to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the region's workforce. The group wants to make sure that the workforce - hard hit by a loss of traditional manufacturing jobs - has the skills needed in the global marketplace.

The State of the Workforce Report 2005 identified four industry types that are attracted to the Charlotte region: pharmaceuticals and bioinformatics; finance and insurance; logistics; and automotive and motor sports. The report, conducted by the Michigan-based Center for a Skilled Workforce for \$150,000, also recommended expanded training for entrepreneurs and their employees. The report also noted that 95 percent of the region's jobs in the future will require "significant computer skills."

Upcoming Event

The Charlotte Chamber's ITC council will sponsor an executive luncheon on Thursday, Feb. 23 at the Marriott Center City, 11:30 am - 1 pm. It will feature Tom Mendoza, president of Network Appliance (NetApp)

speaking on 'Simplifying Data Management: Doing More While Spending Less.' To register:
www.charlottechamber.com/events

Story ideas? Tips? Send them to beawrites@aol.com

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