

Employees earn college degrees at work

by Iona N. Conner

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Employees of State Farm Insurance Co. can earn an associate's degree from Frederick Community College without leaving the office.

The new program, a first for FCC, is an expansion of a joint project between FCC and Frederick County's Job Training Agency called Customized Training.

Lisa Gritton of Frederick is enrolled in the program. She is an education and development assistant at State Farm, who just finished a seven-week Introduction to Business fast-track course.

"It was a lot of reading," she said.

Gritton hopes the program will

"make me more marketable and competitive in the job market."

So far, 50 State Farm employees have signed up for either Introduction to Business or Introduction to Computers.

Trenton Hightower, director of customized training for FCC, said many older workers feel they lose promotions when younger people with fewer years invested in a company are promoted because the longer-term employees don't have degrees.

"Sometimes that's the only thing holding them back," Hightower said.

Janet Flanagan, business services manager for JTA, explained that her office worked with FCC to put the package together.

In 1996, the Frederick County Board of County Commissioners signed the Workforce Partnership Agreement allowing JTA and FCC, both publicly funded agencies, to work in tandem.

"Both FCC and JTA have a mission of working with businesses to serve employees," Flanagan said, adding that the agreement enables them to pursue that mission together.

While it normally takes a working adult six to eight years to finish an associate degree, the new on-site course could be completed in as little as four years, Hightower said.

Tana Flanagan, Janet's sister-in-law, is the employee development specialist for State Farm. "Many of our employees have expressed an

interest in getting their degree, but the struggle has always been time and money," she said.

In the new program, 15-week courses have been condensed into seven weeks and employees are encouraged to work on assignments together. State Farm reimburses students who take classes onsite. The average three-credit class at FCC plus fees costs a county resident about \$265.

Each year, the FCC/JTA Customized Training people help approximately 3,000 workers improve their skills and knowledge.

Now that the first on-site program has been established, other companies in Frederick such as First Nationwide and Wells Fargo are making inquiries, Hightower said.