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The number of I.T. graduates is shrinking

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As the impact of the technology bust continues to settle in, enrollment in technology programs at metro Atlanta universities continues to dwindle.

Merle King, chairman of the department of computer science and information systems at Kennesaw State University, said enrollment in technology majors has dropped 25 percent in the past three years.

"This has really been something like a perfect storm," he said.

That storm is causing alarm for Richard Baskerville, professor of computer information systems at Georgia State University. He said the decrease in students studying technology will cause a "skills shortage" that could have dramatic implications for the industry.

Dion DeLoof, president of Anteo Group LLC, an IT staffing company, said he is becoming increasingly alarmed by the drop in technology enrollment and he expects a skills shortage to hit the industry hard.

"I think [a skills shortage] will happen and I'm concerned. I'm even more concerned when I look five or six years out," he said. "Right now companies are calling us and asking for people with six or seven years of experience. We're finding them now. But where's our two- or three-year people behind them?"

GSU's Baskerville expects a skills shortage to take hold in the industry by fall.

But Sharon Habibi, founder of Syscom Technologies, said the pinch already can be felt.

"We have a skills shortage even now. Good people are becoming increasingly hard to come by," she said.

Baskerville said the shortage will eventually result in more students. "The growth of students has to happen. The use of IT in business has to expand because it's an area that has been neglected in recent years," he said. "The unemployment around IT people is going to get absorbed and we'll be back to a shortage. The available labor force won't have the skills."

Habibi does see some positive trends among recent graduates. She said the quality of graduates continues to improve.

"Students coming out today have hit a reality point in the past few years and I find them refreshing," she said.

Explanations of why fewer students are enrolling in technology programs are plentiful. Baskerville said press coverage of fewer jobs in the technology field combined with the outsourcing phenomenon is scaring away potential students.

"It's an interesting exhibit of short-sightedness in career preparation because the time to drop out of information systems would have been 1998 because you would have graduated around 2000 or 2001 and emerged into a period of high unemployment. When everyone bailed was after the horse was already out of the barn," he said.

The continued outsourcing of American jobs to foreign countries also is taking a toll on technology programs.

"We're trying to pay attention to students' perceptions of outsourcing. But the irony with this is that computer science programs have always attracted international students," King said. "Our students have always worked with students from India. So an understanding of other cultures is something that has already been in place."

Outsourcing is the type of phenomenon that can affect the technology industry quickly, while students are in the middle of their coursework at four year universities. That gives two-year technical colleges an edge in preparing students for the work force, said Trina Boteler, vice president of academic affairs at Gwinnett Technical College.

"A two-year system has the ability to be so mobile to respond to what the industry needs. Four years is a long time and you can't tell what will happen then. That's the beauty of quick programs," she said.

But Richard DeMillo, dean of the college of computing at Georgia Tech, cautions against rapidly changing a curriculum.

"It's a delicate balance. You don't want Georgia Tech to respond to fads. But over the course of a generation, you would expect a top-notch curriculum to anticipate where the industry would be," he said.

At Georgia Tech, the number of students enrolled in technology and computer science programs has decreased. But the number of students taking technology courses has gone up, largely because many students taking the courses are not technology majors.

"Every engineering student takes Intro to Computer Science. So if you look at enrollment and applications alone, that tells one story. But there is a larger story. People are choosing other ways to study the industry," DeMillo said.

Although enrollment in Georgia Tech's undergraduate technology programs has fallen by almost 600 students in three years, graduate enrollment has increased by more than 200 students.

"The job market was tough even for people who had degrees. Some people have decided to continue their education instead of entering the work force," DeMillo said.

But DeMillo said graduate enrollment has returned to normal this year, largely because of a decline in Asian applicants.

Two-year technology schools have not been immune from declining enrollment either.

Database programming, for example, has attracted fewer students to Gwinnett Technical College, Boteler said.

"We have seen an overall drop but it's not been across the board. Most programs have been able to stay stable," she said.

The bleak employment situation for the industry also has contributed to declining enrollment.

"There just aren't as many jobs," Boeteler said.

University officials have a difficult time pinpointing where the students who once would have taken technology courses are going now. At Georgia State University, Baskerville said, students are moving into more business-related coursework.

"I think you'll see that the students who might have taken our courses at one time are dividing across the business disciplines. If you look at finance or accounting enrollment, it's risen at the same time ours has fallen," he said.

Georgia Tech has experienced similar rises in related fields, including computer and digital engineering.

University officials agree the only way to cope with the enrollment and possible skills shortage is to plan ahead.

"We really have to be more anticipatory," Baskerville said.

"Nothing helps like a strategy. I think universities put themselves in this position where they have to respond to market forces instead of being a part of shaping them," Georgia Tech's DeMillo said.

Despite the challenges facing the industry, DeLoof said technology programs are doing a good job of preparing students for the work force.

"Graduates coming out of the four-year schools are showing that they've had an excellent education," he said.

"But the market for them is as hard as it's ever been."

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