Energy industry turns to CT colleges for worker pipeline

By Matt Flinn
mflinn@ctbusinessjournal.com

Energy efficiency and concerns that companies won't be able to find enough qualified replacements for an aging workforce are among traditional college-age students, both schools' programs are also targeting continuing education for those already working in the industry.

Colleges often talk to local companies about growing their future workforce needs. Energy companies might contact colleges to find students who want to work in the commercial and industrial efficiency sector, who are interested in utility careers and service work, or who are interested in taking courses, technical training programs, and continuing education to work as energy auditors.

The latest focus has been on the state's energy industry, as evidenced by new degree programs at the University of Connecticut and Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven.

The fledgling programs, which each have their own niche and were designed based on discussions with utilities and energy companies, energy associations and others, were created because of a perceived growing demand for energy auditors who assess energy consumption and prescribe ways to reduce it. The economics of creating more auditors has been a focus of the utility companies, in part because of the competitive energy market.

The programs also opened a new market for associate degree and continuing education courses that colleges could offer, which may be more popular with students because they are less expensive.

Tunxis Community College's two-year associate degree program focuses on the skills needed to work in the commercial and industrial efficiency sector, in positions such as energy auditors. Students can learn through evening classes and will have industry mentors to help with their future careers.

Meanwhile, Southern Connecticut State University's program in utility management, meant to prepare students for utility company positions in risk management and accounting, among others, has received $40,000 and $60,000 a year, according to the program's director, Eric Griffin.

Griffin's interest in the program came when he was teaching at Tunxis in the fall 2015 semester. Griffin introduced its energy management program, which he said is important for the local economy.