

MCC programs target skills for manufacturing

College ramps up its effort to train students for 'middle-skills' jobs

By NATE DOUGHERTY

School is in session this summer at Monroe Community College, but besides offering the normal schedule of academic courses, the college is trying to accomplish something else—filling some high-need manufacturing jobs.

The college has ramped up its efforts to fill "middle-skills jobs," positions that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree. This push has a specific focus on advanced manufacturing, and MCC has worked with local manufacturing groups to teach the skills needed to fill jobs that have been going unfilled.

Throughout the summer the college is offering programs to introduce high school students and unemployed workers to basic manufacturing skills and the advanced manufacturing industry.

The hope is that participants can leave the fast-tracked program ready to enter the workforce, said Javier Ayala, dean of career technical education.

"We're doing this in a way that is atypical, trying to fast-track core competencies in a way that allows individuals to get an extensive curriculum during the summer," he said. "The summer programs allow them to first know what is needed for many advanced manufacturing jobs, and for those out of work or looking for a career change they can be job-ready in six

to eight weeks."

These skills are needed badly. Last year the National Skills Coalition of Washington, D.C., released a report, "New York's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," predicting an increase in middle-skill jobs, which already account for nearly half of all jobs in the state. The percentage is expected to grow with economic recovery, the report states.

The middle-skill jobs often are going unfilled, the report adds. In 2009, 46 percent of all jobs were classified as middle-skill, but only 39 percent of workers met education requirements to fill them.

"Nationwide that's a big issue for employers, and there is a growing need for addressing the skills gap in Rochester," Ayala said.

The gap will grow as more highly skilled workers retire in the coming years, Ayala added. "Employers have been telling us that, and we're well aware of what's coming," he said.

MCC has sponsored three major summer programs. The first, a four-day program in late June, was meant to inspire high school students to pursue careers in advanced manufacturing. Students toured local companies and worked with professionals and educators on various experiments that taught them the science of optics.

The program worked with 30 students from East High School in Rochester and Gates Chili High School, twice the number of participants last summer.

A program aimed at a younger audience is the Summer Work Experience for Youth at MCC. This five-week program works with Rochester students ages 16 to 20 to expose them to occupations in precision machining. Participants get to work on the tools and learn processes for metal fabrication.

The program also takes students on company tours and works with the Rochester Technology and Manufacturing Association to develop the curriculum.

"They take basic math, learn about concepts like lean manufacturing, and in the machine lab they're actually learning to create parts on the lathes and mills," said Ross Micali, project coordination and training development professional with MCC's career technical education division.

"This way when they go to employers they have the manual skills and can be entry-level operators."

Part of the outreach to younger students is meant to challenge perceptions about manufacturing jobs, Ayala said.

"What we've found is that advanced manufacturing is not seen as very sexy, so we're trying to show younger people how it's very cutting-edge," he said. "This is not the manufacturing of 10 or 20 years ago. We show them how they'll be working with lasers and advanced physics."

Another effort, the Machining/CNC and Optics Fabrication Job-Readiness Training Programs at MCC, gives accelerated technical education to unemployed and underemployed people. The program is split into two sections—one for machining that runs July 2 through Aug. 23 and another for optics that runs July 9 through Aug. 16.

This program is meant to produce job-ready participants, and MCC works closely with RTMA, the Finger Lakes Advanced Manufacturers' Enterprise and the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster to set up job interviews and create a curriculum to

meet the job requirements of local manufacturers.

Working with these partners is crucial to creating successful programs, Micali said.

"We work with them to identify what the skills are that were needed, how long the training should be and what kind of things they want to see in it," he said. "What they're telling us is that there are job openings out there, especially for the unemployed who have a proven manufacturing track record and need some new skills. That's one of the groups we're trying hard to reach."

Micali said there is room for the programs to grow, taking in more participants and covering a wider range of job skills as the marketplace changes. The college works with RochesterWorks, Finger Lakes Works and the Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, Wyoming Workforce Investment Board to identify candidates for the programs.

"By working with such a range of groups, we've been able to recruit from outside the immediate area to fill these needs," Micali said. "We have participants from almost all nine counties around the area."

To meet the growing and changing needs of the manufacturing sector, MCC will have to continue to be flexible and implement more programs along the lines of the summer series, Ayala said.

"The key is that MCC is responsive to industry needs," he said. "We want to keep the traditional track and the four-year pathway, but we also want to create a different kind of career pathway. The summer programs are a way for us to respond to those needs in a quick and flexible way that we can't otherwise do in the fall and spring."

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