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JWCC training center preparing students for careers in local industries

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Educators at John Wood Community College knew they had something special when it took less than two years to fill a 30,000 square-foot facility at 42nd and Koch's Lane with training programs designed to match graduates with jobs in local industries.

Today a national training program that would partner community colleges and businesses is in the spotlight as President Barack Obama announces an expansion of the Skills for America's Future program. Obama hopes the program will train 500,000 workers for manufacturing jobs during the next five years.

"Last year we launched Skills for America's Future to bring together companies and community colleges around a simple idea: making it easier for workers to gain new skills that will make America more competitive in the global economy," Obama said.

Phil Conover, interim vice president of instruction at John Wood Community College, understands the concept well. He worked as a consultant with JWCC and oversaw creation of the Workforce Development Center in 2009. Since that time, the center has worked closely with local businesses to create specialized training courses. More than 300 people have found jobs with many of those local employers. Another 107 have gotten certificates.

"We have 100 manufacturers in Quincy and we knew from employers they were looking for certain types of training for employees," Conover said.

The training programs put JWCC ahead of the curve as Obama announces new features in the national job-training program.

Members of the JWCC Board of Trustees took a chance, obtaining the building at 4220 Koch's Lane where a call center was closing. The space has been divided into classrooms, offices, training areas, a garage and dining lounge that can handle scores of students in a variety of training sequences.

Training is available for truck drivers, forklift operators, electrical technicians, manufacturing techs, construction/building trades, welders, computer-aided design and other trades. The program's success can be measured in the many local manufacturers that are working in partnership with the Workforce Development Center. ADM, Knapheide Manufacturing, Konstant Products, Manchester Tank, Midwest Patterns and many other local employers are either seeking workers who have completed training at the site or sending some workers there for recertification or new training. Many of the business partners are donating equipment used at the facility.

Conover said partnerships make the Workforce Development Center successful.

"I don't think many people understand how unique Quincy is with 18 percent of its jobs in manufacturing. The average (manufacturing employment nationwide) is about 10 percent," Conover said.

In order to keep those quality jobs in and around Quincy, Conover said the development center provides specialized training that matches the needs of employers.

A course in aluminum welding was created to fill a local void, for instance. Forklift instructors have moved out of the classroom to offer classes at business sites in order to use equipment where operators will be working.

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The electrical technology classes are popular for students that are sought by local industries as well as those who plan to operate on their own. The electrical tech classroom has frame-in cages where students can practice making electrical circuit connections. Another part of the classroom is dominated by a building, constructed by the building trades group, where students can handle electrical connections that are indoors, outdoors, under the crawl space or on the roof.

Jeff Deege, electrical inspector for the city of Quincy, is among those teaching students about building code requirements.

Phil Steinkamp oversees the truck driver training program, which has seven students enrolled in the summer sequence. Traditional classes take 11 weeks, but six-week training programs are offered for those who want a full immersion course.

"I have students that left here and got more than \$50,000 in their first year" as truck drivers, Steinkamp said.

Such a high starting salary compensates for the training costs of about \$4,500 for those within the district and up to \$6,000 for those out of district.

Conover sometimes marvels that more people aren't signing up for training that all but guarantees quality jobs. He attributes part of that to the development center being new and the need to connect perception with the new reality of manufacturing careers.

"Manufacturing today offers clean work environments with advanced technology and head-of-household careers right here in our region," Conover said.

"Our goal is to educate current workers and young people about this fact. Manufacturing is the growth engine of the entire economy and our region offers incredible careers for those with the right training, and that's where John Wood Community College plays a key role."

JWCC President Thomas Klinicar said the Workforce Development Center is very well known in the business community.

"Our partners in private industry have helped us link education and jobs. That's why we are ahead of the curve in terms of providing the training needed to sustain jobs and grow the economy," he said.

Klinicar said it's easy to see why the national initiative is focused on connecting community colleges with private industry.

"Community colleges can adapt quickly and provide the training to help private industry keep the country moving. We have created relationships with industry to stay engaged and meet workforce demands as they arise," Klinicar said.

In addition, he said community colleges are affordable path to promising careers.

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