

Taking initiative

KCC answers push for more skilled workers

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There are times when students don't see the connection between the classes they are taking and how it will get them a job.

That situation likely won't exist through a new program at Kankakee Community College.

A new course of study — appropriately named Manufacturing Training — will begin this fall and is designed to get people trained for high-paying, skilled manufacturing jobs.

"If you don't have a degree, you have to have a skill," said Mark Anderson, KCC's coordinator of manufacturing training program. "Manufacturing jobs can support a family, allow someone to buy a house, but you have to have the skills."

And while some people may not believe there is a future here for manufacturing jobs, Anderson has news for them.

According to information from the Economic Alliance of Kankakee County, the county is home to 118 manufacturing companies which employ 4,469 workers. Statewide, manufacturing jobs provide an average salary of \$74,000.

"It's not dying. Manufacturing is coming back to this country for the skilled labor that's needed in advanced manufacturing," Anderson said. "These companies are looking for help. The problem is they need skilled labor. The days of someone walking into a factory with a black apron and a lunch box are over. People have to come to work with skills."

KCC will be offering four, two-year courses of manufacturing specializations. The courses will be: Welding; machine tool; maintenance; and transportation, warehousing, distribution and logistics (TWDL).

Details still are being finalized. Students who complete the program will earn an associate degree in applied science within the school's technology department. The program will be housed in the former Kankakee Container property along U.S. Route 45/52 in Kankakee.

"To get a manufacturing job,



The Daily Journal/Scott Anderson

Mark Anderson, coordinator of the new Kankakee Community College's manufacturing training program, answers questions in the Daily Journal office Wednesday morning.

the applicant has to set them self apart. This program will help them do that," Anderson said.

A former 14-year plumber, Anderson knows firsthand that someone just can't knock on the door of a business and find themselves working a 40-hour week.

"If you come in with nothing [lack of skills], you won't get hired," he said. "It's that simple. It's our job to make them hireable."

KCC is one of 21 Illinois community colleges that will be participating in this manufacturing initiative that's being funded by a four-year \$19 million federal grant. KCC will receive \$525,000. Joliet Junior College and Danville Area Community College are also participating.

KCC president John Avendano said the push for the program came from industry. As he visited various employers — CSL Behring, Bunge, Shoup Manufacturing, Nucor Steel — and they impressed upon him the need for more skilled workers.

"Our role is to be responsive to the community's needs. We try to provide an educated and

trained workforce. That's part of our mission," Avendano said. "If we look to attract companies to Kankakee County, we have to have an educated workforce. This is a new chapter for us."

Mike Van Mill, CEO/president of the Economic Alliance, said local companies have been pushing for this in the past few years.

"Their processes are always changing," Van Mill said. "What people need to know to be successful in always moving. Community colleges play an integral part in helping manufacturing succeed."

While skilled, ready-to-work employees will aid existing manufacturers, Van Mill said this can also go a long way toward bringing new companies here.

"I believe this training program will be extremely vital for us," he said. "This will be a key recruiting chip. A skilled workforce is one of the biggest assets a community can have. Once we show existing companies what we have, word will spread."

Manufacturing jobs are

expected to be available in large numbers in the coming years. According to the Illinois Manufacturers Association, Illinois will hire more than 30,000 employees in advanced manufacturing positions each year during the next five years.

The IMA also notes that in the next 15 years, 300,000 existing state manufacturing employees will retire, meaning a pipeline of skilled workers needs to be developed. According to the Illinois Department of Employment Securities and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Illinois has 600,500 manufacturing jobs, some 331,000 are based in the Chicago region.

Anderson believes as many as 20 students will be part of the program this fall. He anticipates as word circulates, the program could have 50 students per semester.

And with paid and unpaid internships being part of the program, students will get a foot in the door with area companies.

"Learning in a classroom is one thing, doing inside a business is another," Anderson said.