

COLLEGES ...

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do?” he said. “And then we used that to drive curriculum.”

Today, there more than 100 companies involved, including Taylor Devices and Taber Industries of North Tonawanda and Clifford H. Jones, SR Instruments and Keller Technology in Tonawanda.

The college gets input on what the companies are looking for in employees and sometimes receives donated equipment and materials. The companies get to steer training toward what they need — and in return get access to student resumes.

The result has been, in Witkowoski’s words, “truly mind-boggling.”

He illustrated the program’s success with the case of a single student, who recently started looking for work with the completion of the program in sight.

“I had emailed a resume out for him to our Machining and Manufacturing Alliance,” Witkowski said. “Within less than two minutes, I got a response back saying, ‘We’ll definitely contact him.’ Within six minutes, his phone started ringing. By

11 o’clock the next day, he had six interviews. It was incredible.”

There are several facets of the department, but probably the largest portion now is the CNC precision machining program, Witkowski said.

There are three levels, starting with a 15-week CNC sequence course designed to help people seek entry-level employment. Five more classes in addition to that sequence gives the student a SUNY-approved certificate in CNC precision machining, and all apply toward a two-year associate’s degree in industrial technology.

All of it was designed with the needs of MMA members in mind, for a very practical reason: There are a lot of local jobs in the field and — despite the common knowledge — not nearly enough qualified people to take them.

“A huge need”

While the number of students in the industrial technology program is rising, Witkowski said he still has more jobs posted in his department right now than he has people to fill them.

“There is a huge need. A couple things are going on,” he said. “It’s gotten into people’s minds that (industrial technology) wasn’t a good

thing to go into. So for the last 20 years, schools have gotten out of their machine shop courses for various reasons. Parents have been telling their children, don’t go into it.”

However, he said, 60 percent of the workforce in this field is eligible to retire within five years, and workers have to come from somewhere.

“Moog Inc. (one of the MMA partners) says the average age of their workforce is 58 years old,” he said, “and they have no one to replace these people.”

Doug Taylor, president of Taylor Devices — and a former machinist — echoed Witkowski’s words on the discrepancy between the number of qualified workers and the job opportunities.

The average machinist job at the company pays about \$18 an hour (plus overtime and benefits), he said, but demand for workers still exceeds available, trained help.

“When I went to high school, you could go to regular high school to learn how to become a college student — or to a vocational school where they would teach you a trade,” he said. “Then all of a sudden, the schools changed. Now it’s we just

want to do college prep, we don’t want to go any of those disgusting blue collar tasks.”

In fact, North Tonawanda was once home to the Iron-ton school, a public vocational school that focused on industrial arts, Taylor said.

It closed 1969. With it went a local source of qualified workers.

“You’d grab your Ironton grads when they came out,” he said. “They’d live locally ... and they’d have a job for life. But things changed.”

Today, with computer-controlled machines and the need for very skilled labor that isn’t coming from the high school level, the company tries to snap up as many ECC program grads as it can.

“When they graduate a student ... we try to get them in right away and interview them,” Taylor said. “If it goes well, we hire them. We always have openings for machinists. I don’t think there’s a shop in the area that doesn’t.”

Christopher Sansone, president of the Buffalo Niagara Manufacturing Alliance and production manager at Keller Technology, agreed.

“Half the battle is just getting someone who is willing to learn, who has a good work ethic,” he said. “ECC is

giving them the basis of what we’re looking for. I think they’ve done a tremendous job.”

But ECC’s best efforts aside, there still exists a surprising disconnect between companies desperately seeking qualified employees and the high percentage of unemployed workers in the region.

Business owners speculate that some of the drop-off in interest in pursuing these types of jobs can be laid to a lack of understanding in exactly what workers do.

“(People) still think it’s 19th century blacksmith operations,” Sansone said.

Both Taylor and Sansone said the ECC program fills a vital need in Western New York.

“I wish it was 10 times as big,” Taylor said. “I have no doubt that if they graduated 10 times the machinists, they’d all be snapped up. I don’t think people realize how many machine shops there are in this area.

“If it’s not mass produced by the millions and it’s made of metal, there’s a machine shop involved.”

Part of a larger puzzle

Rick Washousky, ECC executive vice president of academic affairs, said that

— although it’s had a resurgence in the news lately — partnerships between businesses and community colleges have been on the rise for about the past 10 years.

“We have hundreds, if not thousands, of partnerships,” he said, with businesses including National Grid, National Fuel, Caruba Collision, DuPont, Carquest and Perry’s Ice Cream, which contacted ECC in hopes of seeing an industrial refrigeration program. Previously, Perry’s had to send people out to Garden City, Kan., for training, Washousky said ... and today, ECC’s industrial refrigeration program is one of only four in the country.

“There’s probably not a curriculum here at ECC ... that doesn’t have some type of partnership as far as offering internships, cooperative work experience, job opportunities,” he said. “These public-private partnerships have been really positive.

“That is how we get our students interested in making connections to the world of work. It just makes more sense for us.”

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ECC ...

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“Our typical student is what we would call non-traditional,” he said. “They tend to be a little bit older. We do have 18-year-olds, but our typical student is a little bit older. Sometimes it’s someone who’d been in the workforce for a little while and got laid off.”

Michael Hoffman of the City of Tonawanda is also in his third semester of a industrial technology associate’s degree. Hoffman, 31, has been in the U.S. Navy reserves for about nine years

and otherwise has worked at Lowe’s Home Improvement since 2005.

“I’d like to do more with my life,” he said. “I decided I needed to go back to school. And the industrial technology program just popped out at me; it’s exactly what I wanted to do.”

Hoffman attended Niagara County Community College years ago, he said, working on an mechanical technology degree, but didn’t finish. As he heads toward the end of his two years at ECC, he said he’s encouraged by the job postings from local businesses.

“We’re constantly getting messages saying, ‘We have

these opportunities, who do you have right now?’” he said.

William Wood of North Tonawanda is one of the program’s success stories even before he graduates.

Wood, 27, was a student in ECC’s electrical engineering program when he had to fill some degree requirements and took a look at the industrial tech program.

“Long story short, it led to me getting a job as a machinist,” he said. “More recently, (another company) approached me for another job, which I got for significantly more money.”

Before starting at ECC, Wood did a bit of welding and general labor. But he

wanted more.

“I just got sick and tired of doing that, so I enrolled in the program here,” he said. “I’d done a little welding, but nothing in machining, especially computer-controlled machining. Within one semester, 15 weeks of courses, I was able to land a job in CNC.”

Nicholls hasn’t hit that point yet, but he’s looking forward to working for a company with access to all the equipment he’s learned about at ECC.

“I’m pleased with my choice,” he said. “The future’s looking pretty good.”

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My next question: Is this Buffalo Billion meant for one as-yet-unidentified big new thing?

As Heaney’s piece expertly spells out, this approach — trying to score a massive new employer to create thousands of jobs — is at best a long shot. At worst, it’s a complete waste of time and money.

One recent example underscores the potential pitfalls of such an approach:

The Yahoo! data center built in Lockport was a big “get” for the region, but it came at an extremely steep cost. The amount of public subsidies needed to lure Yahoo here amounts to spending \$2.1 million for every job at the data center. Spending at that rate, Cuomo’s billion would directly create fewer than 500 jobs. Of course, there are the spin-off benefits, but it would probably never repre-

sent even a dollar-to-dollar return on the investment. In other words, it would be a failure.

Furthermore, there just aren’t many business expansion projects of that size to go around. The analogy that comes to mind if Captain Ahab trying to reel in Moby Dick.

So if the Buffalo Billion isn’t going to a bunch of little things and it isn’t going for one giant thing, what’s left?

There is one logical conclusion: This Buffalo Billion is most likely going to primarily underwrite the region’s burgeoning medical corridor and UB’s landmark bioinformatics program.

Though the governor won’t ever say it out loud, this is the region’s best — and right now only — chance for a true economic revival in the 21st century.

In speaking with economic development types, what comes up again and again as a model for our region is the Albany-area nanotechnology boom.

Essentially, what happened there is the region focused its economic development efforts into one specific growing field, in their case nanotechnology. The investments brought in some of the world’s leading experts and underwrote the cost of creating research and development facilities under a public-private partnership with the region’s largest university.

Sound familiar? It’s UB 2020!

My ending hypothesis is this: Andrew Cuomo realizes that using \$1 billion will generate buzz, but is largely ineffective in building some grand new economy in Western New York. He must also realize that what we’ve been saying for years about using UB as an economic engine makes sense. The direction the university has taken is already creating private sector jobs. Economic development experts say that building on existing businesses in the region is

almost always the most effective form of public investment. And UB’s new president is the co-chair of the entity Cuomo has empowered to identify the projects where the money is best spent.

With his announcement last year that he has embraced much of the underpinnings of the UB 2020 plan, now it seems the real investment is there to make that vision a reality.

It all adds up to the governor doubling down on a plan first proposed here years ago, to make Buffalo a world leader in medical information technology.

If this really is the plan, it’s sound economic development policy and a ray of hope for a region that’s languished since the steel mills went silent 40 years ago.

I hope it works.

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