



## MANUFACTURING SKILLS GAP

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Kyle Grillot - kgrillot@shawmedia.com

Jim Falco, McHenry County College's executive dean for career and technology, stands next to recently purchased robotics setup in a repurposed classroom at the community college. MCC has been identifying and implementing programs in manufacturing to produce more skilled workers for local companies.

# Bridging the gap

## MCC helps build pipeline of skilled workers

By JIM DALLKE  
jdallke@shawmedia.com

CRYSTAL LAKE – Two years ago, administrators from McHenry County College began a series of meetings with area manufacturers struggling to find qualified workers.

MCC Executive Dean of Education Jim Falco found what he called a “triple threat” to local manufacturing companies: an aging workforce, a lack of workers in the pipeline, and the low skill levels of employees interested in manufacturing.

After more than a dozen meetings with businesses – and a \$500,000 grant from the Department of Labor – McHenry County College has expanded its advanced manufacturing programs in an effort to provide more high-skilled workers for local manufacturers. Manufacturing accounts for about a quarter of McHenry County's economy.

With the Trade Adjustment Assistance grant, the college recently bought two computer numerical control, or CNC, machines, three robotics machines, and advanced manufacturing software, all of which are aimed at preparing students for the changing, and highly-technical, manufacturing field.

“The college is really invested in this,” Falco said. “We want to support manufacturing because it is such a large part of the economy in McHenry County.”

MCC has revamped its manufacturing curriculum by offering a new degree in engineering technology, which was just approved during the summer. Students also can get a 30-credit or a 12-credit CNC certificate, something Department Chair for Applied Technologies Heather Zaccagnini said can be a fast track to employment.



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John Padron, a robotic technology engineering student from Huntley, works in a recently repurposed classroom at McHenry County College.

“The biggest benefit is that students can come in and say they need to get a job. They need the shortest path to employment. That would be the 12-credit CNC certificate,” Zaccagnini said. “They can do it in one semester ... One of the most exciting parts is how fast they can move through the program.”

Zaccagnini has been heavily involved in discussions with McHenry County manufacturers and said companies are looking for tech-savvy employees who can fill in for a workforce that continues to lose employees to retirement.

“The average age for a lot of the companies in McHenry County is 35-40, and that's a really high average age,” she said. “They're doing everything they can to get the word out that manufacturing is a very high-tech field. It's not working in a dark dungeon anymore. They need people who have skills. They need people who

have a familiarity with technology.” Zaccagnini said the days of the “I Love Lucy” conveyor belt are over, as manufacturing requires more training and critical-thinking skills than ever before. She also dismissed the notion that robotics and machine-based manufacturing take jobs away from people.

“I've been in manufacturing now for 25 years and that's been a misconception the entire time,” Zaccagnini said. “There's always this fear factor that automation is going to replace people, and there won't be any jobs. That just has never happened. What happens is we need more skilled people.”

“And the jobs that we're replacing with automation, they're not fun jobs. You stand there and do the same thing every day. It causes things like repetitive trauma kinds of injuries.”

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