**Grant fuels Richland manufacturing training program**



October 19, 2013 12:01 am • [By NICOLE HARBOUR - H&R Staff Writer](http://herald-review.com/search/?l=50&sd=desc&s=start_time&f=html&byline=By%20NICOLE%20HARBOUR%20-%20H%26R%20Staff%20Writer)

DECATUR — Twenty-six-year-old Richard Farrar had dreams of a career in software technology in Chicago, but when he realized how stiff the job competition was going to be, he made a decision that changed his life.

“My dad was an explosives ordnance in the Army, and my grandpa worked at Caterpillar, and they both encouraged me to look into manufacturing,” he explained. “They told me there’d always be jobs in that field, so I decided to do it.”

Searching for a school with a strong manufacturing program, Farrar said he was led to Richland Community College.

“The manufacturing program here was a lot better than the programs they had in Chicago,” he said. “In fact, a lot of schools are just now starting to offer CNC (computer numeric control) and welding programs and certifications, but Richland has had them for a long time and has industry partnerships, so I knew I’d get a quality education here.”

Currently enrolled in his third semester at Richland, Farrar is one of the first students enrolled in the college’s new Illinois Network for Advanced Manufacturing Earn and Learn Manufacturing Program, a federally funded manufacturing training program that will collect data from participating students over the next four years to measure their success and that of the program. He couldn’t be happier with what he’s learning.

“I’ve found that I have a knack for CNC machining,” he said. “There are job openings throughout the country and in Illinois, and I know this program will be very helpful. There’s always something new to learn.”

With a large manufacturing employer base in the Decatur and Macon County area, Richland already had an extensive manufacturing program in place, with certificates and degrees available in programs such as welding, computer numeric control machining and mechatronics, but last year, the community college learned of a $12.9 million U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training grant that could improve its manufacturing curriculum and provide for updated equipment over four years.

“In early 2012, I went up to William Harper Community College for two days and met with 20 other community colleges, and we all agreed that we needed one major emphasis in order to be successful across the state,” said Darbe Brinkoetter, dean of continuing and professional education at Richland. “And we all were aware from our community and employer input that manufacturing had huge needs.”

With workers transitioning from assembly lines to high-tech jobs and needing more training on welding and CNC machines, Brinkoetter said focusing on manufacturing was an easy choice for the colleges. “We knew we needed to have the right curriculum in place, as well as the right equipment,” she said. “So we decided to gear everything with the grant toward manufacturing and went from there.”

Submitting the grant application in May 2012, Brinkoetter said Richland and the other 20 colleges were hopeful they would be awarded the funding, and four months later, they received good news.

“I remember we learned we got the grant on Sept. 18, when the National Sequestration Education Center opened,” Brinkoetter said.

With Richland receiving $525,000 of the grant, the college’s administrators, faculty and manufacturing professors quickly set to work to tweak four of its manufacturing courses to help build a Certified Production Technician certificate program, which was developed by the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council and adopted by all 21 colleges partnering on the grant.

Each of the four courses that make up the technicians program — manufacturing processes, occupational safety, maintenance fundamentals and metrology and quality control — has a certification test, and if a student passes all four, they will receive a certificate that is recognized throughout the United States.

If a student wishes to continue with his education after receiving a certificate, however, Brinkoetter said the four courses can launch students into more specialized manufacturing areas within the college’s Illinois Network for Advanced Manufacturing program.

“The CPT courses are really the core curriculum,” said Brinkoetter. “They provide entry-level skills and can lead into the more specialized areas of precision machining or CNC; metal fabrication, which focuses on welding; mechatronics, which focuses on electrical; and renewable energy.”

With various entrance and exit points for the INAM program, Brinkoetter said it accommodates many different kinds of students, including dual-credit students, veterans and unemployed and incumbent workers.

“Students can start with any of the CPT courses or even some of the more specialized, advanced courses if they already have some background or experience in manufacturing,” she said. “Some students may stop their education after the core CPT courses, while some may stay in for additional certificates, associate degrees or even bachelor’s degrees. It is wide open; it just depends on what they want to do based on their interests and abilities and the opportunities they find out there.”

John Templeton, 38, who has worked for Richardson Manufacturing Co. in Springfield since April 2012 and is currently enrolled in his first computer numeric control course at Richland, said specialized skills are needed in the manufacturing industry now more than ever.

“The company I work for said they wanted me to go into the CNC maintenance program, so I have to know what the commands (on a CNC machine) do and what to do when the machine makes a mistake,” he explained, taking a break from working with milling machines during professor John Daum’s CNC Fundamentals class. “Pretty much everything is made with CNC machines now, so knowing how to work them is very important.”

Classmate Demetrus Lofton, 27, of Decatur, an employee of Stripmasters Services Inc., agreed.

“This is a very important class,” said Lofton, who is in the last year of his Industrial and Equipment Specialization degree. “It’s not a required class for me, but today, nearly everything is made off of CNC machines, so to advance in my career, I have to know how to work these machines” that are computer-driven and often used to manufacture different parts or to help with different manufacturing processes, such as welding and cutting metal.

With many manufacturing companies unable to offer training programs due to lack of funding, Brinkoetter and Jack Adwell, Richland’s dean of business and technology, are hopeful the Illinois Network for Advanced Manufacturing program will provide manufacturing employers with the highly-skilled employees they need.

“One local employer mentioned that the INAM program is exactly the type of structured program that they’ve been looking for to get people ready to come into entry-level positions and take them even further,” said Brinkoetter.

The federal TAACT grant doesn’t cover tuition and fees for prospective students, but it will pay for instructors and an updated curriculum and equipment, including additional welding booths and more CNC and precision milling machines, which will be housed in the college’s new Workforce Development Institute that is slated to be completed and ready for classes next fall.

“Some of the equipment workers will be using in manufacturing jobs is half a million dollars, and to turn a person loose on that who hasn’t been properly trained is not what the industry wants to happen,” said Adwell. “They’re looking for highly trained, highly skilled employees, and that is what we want this program to provide. We want to teach students on the appropriate, updated equipment that they’re going to see in the industry, and this grant will allow us to do that.”

With nearly 50 students already enrolled in the INAM program, Richland is anxious to see what the it will do for the community.

“We hope that the program is successful and that we achieve our goal of providing more highly trained workers,” Brinkoetter said. “We’re hopeful that students get jobs, that the unemployment rate goes down in this area, that manufacturing picks up because we have a skilled work force and that the number of employers who are looking for trained workers goes down because they find those workers. That’s our whole goal.”

With the area continuing to feel the effects of manufacturing layoffs and a 12 percent unemployment rate, Adwell said the manufacturing training program is critical for job seekers.

“I think it’s very vital,” he said. “When you look at who’s been laid off and lost jobs, they’re primarily the people who are working unskilled jobs, so the way to get back into the work force is to increase their skills. That’s why this program is so important.”

“This program will provide additional training that is needed in CNC and welding, so it’s very important,” agreed John Jackson, vice president of operations at Barton Mfg. “We’re really hoping to take some of our current employees and run them through the program to help them increase their skills, and my hope is that, overall, we will end up seeing people with higher skills here in Decatur. That’s what we need for employment.”

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