



The Republican.

Precision is needed to prime economy

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There are still plenty of job opportunities in precision manufacturing in Western Massachusetts, but the region needs more qualified machinists and engineers in the pipeline to realize the industry's full potential.

We applaud Springfield Technical Community College, the Western Massachusetts Chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Association and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County for coming up with a plan to fill the void.

Under a recently inked agreement, STCC's Mechanical Engineering Technology program will develop a new two-credit internship at local precision manufacturers that will give workers the skills they'll need to stay current with advances in the industry. The program will offer a one-year certificate program in computer-numerically controlled machining and provide existing workers at 31 member companies with college-credit courses to update their skills.

Even though many large factories here have closed, manufacturing is far from dead in Western Massachusetts. During a recent business roundtable at the Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical High School in Springfield, members of the machining association estimated that regional manufacturers have more than 400 vacancies and just 30 student graduates able to fill those slots annually.

"There's a lot of work still here in Massachusetts in this field, it's very diverse," said John S. LaFrancis, a professor in STCC's Mechanical Engineering Department. LaFrancis hopes the new program will help the public shed misconceptions and understand what a "factory looks like today."

Annual wages in the state's manufacturing industry last year were about \$62,000.

With the pool of skilled machinists aging, the precision manufacturing sector needs new blood. So it's imperative that the region take steps to grow the industry. The STCC program will help the region capitalize on the industry's competitive advantages while positioning Western Massachusetts for a role in the increasingly global economy.

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