



The Republican.

STCC gets internships

Wednesday, September 05, 2007

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SPRINGFIELD - A new agreement between Springfield Technical Community College, precision manufacturers and the Regional Employment Board is designed to help boost the region's pool of qualified machinists and engineers.

The agreement was signed late last month by college officials, the Western Massachusetts chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Association, and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County.

The memorandum of understanding calls for the college's Mechanical Engineering Technology program to develop a new two-credit internship at area precision manufacturing companies, to offer a one-year certificate program in computer-numerically controlled machining, and to provide existing workers at member companies with college-credit courses to update their skills.

Companies in the 31-member tooling and machining association will provide internships, including some paid work, and advise the college on curriculum and give hiring preference to qualified graduates of the college's Mechanical Engineering Technology program.

The companies will also give instructors in the program the opportunity to participate in company-sponsored internal training programs to update their skills.

The Regional Employment Board will provide scholarships to five or six eligible students by paying for the approximate \$300 cost of a two-credit internship, according to David M. Cruise, manager of Regional NetWorks, a collaboration between the employment board and the association.

The agreement also calls for the parties to reach out to students and parents by developing summer enrichment programs for middle-school students.

John S. LaFrancis, a professor in the Mechanical Engineering Technology program for 17 years, is particularly happy to see the component that reaches out to students.

"What I hope to see come of this is education of the general public, to have them understand what a factory looks like today," LaFrancis said.

"There's a lot of work still here in Massachusetts in this field, it's very diverse," he added.

Larry A. Maier, president of Peerless Precision in Westfield, said the internships "will give the engineering students some real-world experience to go along with their classroom training, so you should come out with a more qualified engineering student."

Springfield Technical Community College's program already has "a really great facility," Maier noted, with computer-numerically controlled machines, a rapid-prototyping machine, vertical milling machines and two turret lathes.

The program has about 35 students this year, LaFrancis said.

J. William Ward, executive director of the regional employment board, said precision manufacturing is a key element of the region's economy, even though many of the large factories closed in decades past.

The pool of skilled workers that helps the many small precision manufacturers thrive is aging, however, Ward warned, even as global competition is growing.

"The key is, we cannot lose that competitive advantage and we have to grow it," he said.

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