

The Halls of Ivy (Tech) Are Humming With Precision (Tooling)

By Jack McGuinn, Senior Editor

If you've been following this space with any regularity, you know that grassroots efforts among industry and academia are springing up around the country to help win the hearts, minds and talents of young people in nudging them towards a career in manufacturing.

Add another partnership to the list.

Students at Indiana-based Plymouth High School (PHS) — with a generous boost up by ITAMCO, the machining services, open gearing and large-part assembly company — now have available to them the opportunity to pursue “precision tool manufacturing training courses.” ITAMCO, also based in the Hoosier state, has partnered with Ivy Tech Community College (ITCC) and the Plymouth Community School Corporation in the creation of “dual credit” manufacturing courses intended to help and inspire students to continue their post-high school education.

As Ivy Tech North Central Chancellor Thomas Coley puts it, “Ivy Tech’s role in training a skilled workforce is vitally important to the economic stability of our region. Manufacturers in the

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Marshall County area communicated to both Ivy Tech and the Plymouth Community School Corporation the desire to partner with us to provide training opportunities to high school students that will lead to jobs immediately after graduation.”

Readers familiar with these kinds of partnerships also know that it requires a good deal of heavy pulling to make it happen. Just ask ITAMCO’s Mark A. Neidig II, purchasing manager for the family-owned business.

“There were a lot of moving parts with having multiple partners engaged,” he acknowledges. “Plymouth High School had to get school corporation board approval for budgeting the funds and executing the building renovations for the host site. Ivy Tech had to find an

instructor able and willing to teach the course. And Jerry Hollenbaugh, director of the North Central Area Vocational Cooperative (NCAVC), put together an advisory committee of local manufacturers and educators to help establish the curriculum.”

In addition, pre-engineering STEM courses are already available at PHS, courtesy of the nationwide Project Lead the Way program (<http://www.pltw.org/about-us/who-we-are>). This affords students the luxury of attending egg-headed STEM classes and then heading over to ITCC for some hands-on precision machining experience.

Since the program began in August, the outcome has been “terrific,” according to Neidig. And that is despite the fact that, says Neidig, “The program was not officially advertised, because we weren’t sure if the facility and equipment would be ready on time.”

Speaking of equipment, ITAMCO contributed \$100,000 worth of machinery for the venture, as well as invaluable technical assistance. As for the program’s scope, Neidig says that “While any student in the state may attend, we’re targeting students in 12 area high schools that participate in the North Central Area Vocational Cooperative”

So why now? What inspired ITAMCO to help spearhead this program? When you think about it, and if you own a manufacturing company, by now the answer should become obvious.

“Ultimately, (the reason) was our customers, Neidig says. “We are continually trying to raise the bar of excellence at



ITAMCO donated \$100,000 in machinery for the new Ivy Tech dual credit program (all photos courtesy NCAVC).

our company to better serve our customers. One barrier to doing so was the time it would take us to bring new employees up to technical competence. We decided to help launch this program so that we could get students excited about manufacturing, give them a solid technical skillset, and ultimately develop future employees."

But remember—these things take time.

Says Plymouth Community School Corporation Superintendent Daniel Tyree, "Marshall County Industrial Corporation Association has been working on this for over a year now. We are excited to finally be seeing the course offering come to fruition. Not only will high school students be able to earn a valuable skill and get college credit for their work, we will be helping our existing manufacturing firms fill much-needed jobs."

Adds Neidig, "I see this program as being critical in sparking an interest with students for manufacturing, and in turn accelerating their interest in STEM courses. Getting more high school grad-



The Ivy Tech program offers students dual-credit manufacturing courses to motivate them to continue their post-high school education.

uates with solid STEM knowledge is important."

Of course the skills gap dynamic has been with us for longer than we care to admit, making insidious and largely unremarked "progress"—from grade school to grad school. And if we are

honest with ourselves, we know where the blame lays. As Neidig points out, two of the reasons are "School budgets getting tighter and a lack of industry engagement with local high schools. When schools started cutting their vocational budgets, manufacturing compa-

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nies did not step up and say how important the training was or try to find more innovative solutions to bridge the funding gaps."

Another is the now outdated mantra embedded in kids' brains that without a college degree, you're toast. You'll be parking cars or wrangling burgers or worse. Which begs the question: a degree in *what?* It can be safely stipulated that countless kids go off to college each year with absolutely no clue to what they are going to do if or when they graduate. But what about kids who like working with their minds *and* their hands? Short of being a surgeon, college doesn't offer much.

Or as Neidig states, "I think the paradigm of 'college vs. vocational trade' is outdated and doesn't reflect reality. The reality is that college is very expensive and learning a skilled trade early in life is a great way to earn a living. It also gives students who are pursuing engineering or management careers a practical, skills-based foundation."



The Precision Tool Manufacturing Training Center is an outlet for high school students to earn a valuable skill and get college credit for their work, while also benefiting manufacturers in Indiana.

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