

Building the Perfect Workforce
by Gwen Moran

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Community college partnerships are training workers with made-to-order skills.

by **Gwen Moran**

In 2005, Greenville, Mich., seemed like just another textbook tale of a town hit hard by plant closings: Several companies, including Electrolux, which was once Greenville's leading employer, had abandoned the town between 2003 and 2005, resulting in the loss of more than 4,000 jobs. But Greenville got a chance to bounce back in January 2006, when United Solar Ovonic (USO), a subsidiary of Energy Conversion Devices, which manufactures solar energy components, considered a move to the area.

Representatives from Montcalm County, which includes Greenville, offered substantial tax credits and training funds as incentives to bring in USO. The company was concerned, however, that although the area had plenty of people seeking employment, they were not experienced in building complex solar panel components. So Montcalm County made an additional — and, as it turned out, conclusive — offer: It guaranteed that Montcalm Community College could, within six months, deliver a certificate training program for technicians based on job descriptions provided by the company. With that offer on the table, USO made the move to Greenville. By June 2007, Montcalm Community College was training 50 solar energy technicians; this allowed USO, later that year, to ramp up production at its facility ahead of schedule.

When an area offers a company the resources and incentives it needs to relocate but lacks skilled workers, the solution often lies with the local community college. Historically, these institutions have had one of two missions — providing either the first two years of the university experience as transfer institutions or training for people going directly into the workforce. Today, community colleges bridge the worlds of business, government, and education, says James McKenney, vice president of economic development and international programs at the American Association of Community Colleges. More than ever, they are creating fast-track training and workforce development programs that are backed by solid academic principles and remediation resources.

Training Programs that Work

Community colleges are good partners for companies such as food-processing giant Cargill Inc., which settle in places like Eddyville, Iowa, where they can find the resources they need. Corn, which Eddyville has in abundance, is a key crop for Cargill's Iowa food-processing operations. The Des Moines River provides an abundant water supply, another critical element. Local utilities ensure that the company has sufficient energy to operate.

With those cornerstones in place, the only piece missing is a skilled workforce. In response to Cargill's

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needs in Eddyville, nearby Indian Hills Community College launched a bioprocessing training program in 1996 — “a course that started in a closet,” says Janet Paulson, project coordinator of the Iowa Bioprocess Training Center (IBTC), a division of Indian Hills that now runs that course and many others. Cargill, which also has a pork-processing plant in nearby Ottumwa, Iowa, initially requested that the college offer specialized training for food-processing technicians. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the area’s food-processing industry grew, the college expanded its program, fueled by demand for technicians from Cargill, as well as from other local food-processing companies, including Ajinomoto USA Inc., Ajinomoto Heartland Inc., and Wacker Biochem Corporation. Finally, the college opened the US\$2 million IBTC in 2004 with funding from those partner companies, as well as assistance from various state and federal government agencies and from two regional energy companies, which saw the benefit in keeping big food-processing customers well-supplied with skilled labor and thus tying them to the area. The IBTC averages an enrollment of 500 people per month, mostly incumbent workers who need further training.

With their government and business affiliations, community colleges are often well positioned to land state and federal grants for workforce development and training: When the IBTC was suffering from insufficient enrollment because of lack of awareness within the community, it applied for and received a U.S. Department of Labor grant for nearly \$1 million. The grant covered programs to educate the college’s teachers in other departments about the bioprocessing and biofuel job training at the center, providing them with information about the opportunities available in these fields to take

back to their classes. In other words, the Department of Labor paid for the center to educate people about the job openings at Cargill, Ajinomoto, and Wacker.

Finally, the IBTC also conducts skills assessments for Cargill. The company sends six to eight workers per month to the center who are being considered for the company’s maintenance team. The cost to Cargill is less than it would be if company employees conducted the assessments, according to Cargill’s training manager, Kim Barfield.

Savings through Custom Training

In 1998, Northrop Grumman Corporation signed a contract with the Navy to design the next generation of large-deck aircraft carriers at its Newport News, Va., location. This meant the company would need at least 600 additional trained employees, including ship designers, welders, electrical engineers, and other skilled workers. To fill the gap, the company had to pull from all existing pools of workers in the area. Northrop Grumman managers worked with Thomas Nelson Community College to customize its training partnerships, creating a comprehensive three-part program: a high school dual-enrollment program; a design co-op, which teaches shipbuilding and provides paid training combined with work experience to workers at any age; and a four- to five-year shipbuilding training program. This approach allowed Northrop Grumman and Thomas Nelson to tap prospective workers from different demographic segments by reaching out to high school students, the unemployed, and those in search of a career change.

Northrop Grumman saved about \$80,000 per employee per year of training with its local made-to-order training program. It didn’t have to recruit and relo-

cate employees and send them through a generic educational program and follow that with additional training in the company's unique protocol and processes.

Making It Work

In partnering with a community college, businesses should start by understanding how the local systems work. Although most community colleges operate independently of one another within their statewide networks, in some states, such as Virginia and Indiana, community colleges work closely with a state director. This can cut both ways — if your company or industry is among the priorities of the state's economic development plans, a workforce training program may find great support. If not, your company may end up scrambling for support of the program it wants to build.

In the planning stages, be prepared to spend time developing the program, in addition to possibly funding part of it. Cargill was involved from the start with the Indian Hills programs, devoting management time to developing the curricula, although no one kept tabs on exactly how much time. When the IBTC was launched, Cargill donated land and equipment.

Similarly, Northrop Grumman donated \$50,000 worth of time and equipment per year to the program at Thomas Nelson. School officials estimate that the company commits nearly \$2 million per year to all aspects of the pipeline, including the salaries of apprentices, training fees, and tuition reimbursement. However, Northrop Grumman estimates that its return on investment is more than \$6.00 for every \$1.00 it spends, based on the productivity of properly trained employees, decreased turnover, reduced hiring costs, more efficient use of managers' time, and other factors.

It is essential that companies assess their needs to ensure that training programs are developing the right skills. In addition to regular contact with managers, the IBTC has a panel of corporate representatives that meets twice a year to discuss the effectiveness of the program and to ensure that it keeps pace with technological developments. Recently, the panel reported that the food-processing course needed more emphasis on process control — the automated monitoring of pH level, temperature, flow, and other conditions — because innovations in technology had made that a bigger part of the job. As a result, the program was overhauled to double the time devoted to that subject.

These programs work better when they support an industry cluster rather than an individual company, says

Robert P. Leber, director of education and workforce development at Northrop Grumman and chair of the Virginia Workforce Council. In most cases, a regional or state economic development group is involved to help find ways to stabilize the program, even during times when hiring may be slow at a particular company. In Northrop Grumman's case, building a large ship is like "a python eating a pig," he says, meaning that the company has a vast need for students coming out of the school's welding, electrical, and other shipbuilding-related programs as it begins work on a new project. However, as the ship nears completion, demand wanes, so the college has developed relationships with other companies, including a truck manufacturer that requires similar skill sets, to keep employment options open for students coming out of the program.

Community colleges are more entrepreneurial than many larger institutions and more comprehensive in resources than most private training facilities. That, combined with the favored status they enjoy in workforce development strategies, makes them effective partners and educators across industries. +

Resources

Gary Paul Green, *Workforce Development Networks in Rural Areas: Building the High Road* (Edward Elgar Books, 2007): Discusses the specific challenges of training prospective employees in rural areas and includes the role of community colleges.
www.amazon.com/dp/1845428722/

William J. Rothwell and Patrick E. Gerity, eds., *Linking Workforce Development with Economic Development: A Casebook for Community Colleges* (American Association of Community Colleges): An overview of best practices in workforce development initiatives.
www.aacc.nche.edu/Template.cfm?Section=Bookstore&Template=/Ecommerce/ProductDisplay.cfm&Productid=531

Community College Times Web site: The workforce development section covers news about community colleges partnering with business and government institutions. www.communitycollegetimes.com/topic.cfm?TopicId=5

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