

PROMISING PRACTICES IN RURAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

CUMING COUNTY, NE
POPULATION: 9,125

UPSKILLING WORKERS VIA MANUFACTURING BOOTCAMP

SNAPSHOT

Cuming County, located in eastern Nebraska, needed more welders. This was especially true in the county's trade center, West Point. The community had several local manufacturers, but the lack of welders was impeding business growth. When people did apply for positions, many had low-level employability skills and a clear lack of general manufacturing experience.

OPPORTUNITY

Northeast Community College's Center for Enterprise, located in Norfolk, brought local manufacturers together in West Point for a roundtable discussion that focused on the current needs of the business manufacturing community. It was clear that the businesses wanted additional training to bolster technical manufacturing skills.

When businesses discussed the situation further, they indicated that employability or soft skills were as important as the technical skills. Examples of soft skills include:

- reporting to work on time
- demonstrating the ability to work in teams and manage conflict
- the ability to communicate with internal and external customers

As a result, both technical and employability skills training were woven into the curriculum.

Northeast Community College turned to its instructors, who developed the Diversified Manufacturing Technology Certificate program and began to look at aspects of the program that would meet the objectives of the business community. The local businesses provided a great deal of input in developing the new customized "boot camp" curriculum, which includes:

- basic workforce readiness skills
- tools and techniques related to the application and management of quality, productivity and competitiveness in an industrial environment

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- customer service
- safety
- information about evolving manufacturing career pathways and technologies

SOLUTION

Picking and choosing aspects of an already established certificate program had benefits as well as challenges. As portions of the curriculum were already in place, the process of developing customized training was fairly easy for the Northeast Community College instructors. Furthermore, the businesses appreciated the flexibility of designing a program to meet local needs.

However, customizing the curriculum did create some additional costs. Low unemployment rates and the need for qualified workers drove employers to focus the training program on those in the community who were unemployed and underemployed. The targeted populations meant affordability was important. That led the college to look at possible grants that could offset some of the costs, as well as require the businesses to make financial investments toward support of the program.

A third audience for this program was area high school students who for various reasons were not interested in continuing their education at the college level. This left a population of the future workforce needing an alternative to develop their technical skills and increase their employability. The boot camp model provided a pathway for Northeast Community College to hold conversations with K-12 administrators who understood the opportunities of this unique offer: provide non-college bound students experiences in both the manufacturing sector as well as post-high school education.

In addition to meeting area businesses training needs, Northeast Community College was able to reinforce continuing education and skills training by providing program participants with up to six credit hours of college credit towards completion of the Diversified Manufacturing Technology certificate, an 18 credit hour program, through its credit for prior learning process. Evening program scheduling enabled businesses to maintain productivity while allowing incumbent workers to attend.

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Scholarships, funded by industry itself, assisted in offsetting 85 percent of the total cost of participation, leaving participants with expenses of less than \$100. Industry representatives recognized credentialing was designed into the curriculum to:

- signify that students had acquired a defined set of skills and knowledge
- bolster engagement
- provide a successful transition to further education and career pathways

In addition, participants are guaranteed an interview with at least one of the sponsoring businesses, if they so choose, as a means to connect the participant with career opportunities within area businesses.

IMPACTS

- The program is entering its fourth year and includes 72 contact hours of training in a nontraditional evening format over a nine-week period.
- Upon successful completion of the program, each participant receives an OSHA 10-Hour credential, American Heart Association CPR/AED/First Aid Certification and Introduction to Diversified Manufacturing Certification of Completion.
- Of participants who have completed the program, 95 percent are employed in the manufacturing field and 83 percent are employed in the Cuming County region.
- Fifty-nine percent of participants cited a wage increase within a few months following the boot camp and linked it to a direct result of their participation (as a result of entering the workforce or as a result of finding full-time employment).
- Employers cited increased engagement by participants of the boot camp, improved willingness to accept responsibility and better resourcefulness in identifying the means to optimize efficiencies and improve quality.

TAKEAWAYS

- What started as a local need for more welders ended up providing additional opportunities to discuss manufacturing as a career with high school students. Bringing people together to discuss the larger issue broadened the scope of the project and potentially its impact.
- A video highlighting the manufacturing industry was created to promote the program.
<http://www.northeast.edu/Bootcamp/Program-Background.aspx>

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- Sponsoring businesses utilized the program to provide job upgrading skills to current employees who previously had not had formalized training.
- Businesses appreciated the response from Northeast Community College. Everyone was open and honest about the process — good communication was essential. Businesses now look to Northeast’s Center for Enterprise for customized assistance and expertise in workforce issues.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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- <http://www.northeast.edu/Bootcamp/Program-Background.aspx>

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