VA To Host Manufacturing Skills Program

Michael Felberbaum, AP Business Writer

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The Virginia Manufacturers Association is partnering with ECPI University to create a hub for manufacturing education and training in Southside Virginia to help align regional employer needs and economic development objectives.

The new Manufacturing Skills Institute announced Friday will be located in South Boston at the Southern Virginia Higher Education Center, a high-tech campus for cultural, educational, job training and work force development opportunities for the region. It also is home to several centers that focus on innovation, technology, modeling and simulation, as well as material coating and energy efficiency.

Officials say the institute will help ensure a workforce pipeline to meet current and future job requirements in advanced technology industries.

"What this center represents is that critical hub we've been looking for because in training, with full-scale world-class technology it always ends up being an issue of affordability and critical mass," said Brett Vassey, the Virginia Manufacturers Association's president and CEO. "These days it's just too expensive and too difficult for any one organization to close these skills gaps. ... It is truly a public-private partnership and it's everybody using their own resources and collaborating around a common set of goals."

Vassey said that Virginia's more than 5,000 manufacturers employ more than 230,000 people and contribute $34 billion to the gross state product. The industry also accounts for more than 80 percent of the state's exports. Over the last 20 years, the industry has shed more than 43 percent of its total jobs — with higher percentages in Southside and southwest Virginia — but still creates about the same gross state product.

"We have transitioned as an industry from labor-intensive to technology-intensive, and it doesn't even matter if you're making a technology product. ... That has changed the workforce dramatically," he said, adding that the location puts the institute within two hours from major concentrations of manufacturing in the region.

The initiative builds on other advanced manufacturing research and training efforts throughout Virginia, notably the Commonwealth Center for Advanced Manufacturing in Prince George County that is bringing together universities and industry to help the state — and the country — regain its manufacturing roots. The work being done there will be used for production that has come a long way from the textiles and furniture plants that once populated the region.

"There's a lot more automation, there's a lot more computerized systems, there's a lot more advanced technologies that the individuals working on the machines have

to learn," Paul Dockery, a business development specialist with ECPI, said. "It's no longer just someone there turning a wrench several times a day ... it's more technically advanced."

The goal is to "offer unique training options to both individuals as well as employers" to develop the "employable skills that the manufacturing market is in need of," Dockery said.

As part of the institute, ECPI also is offering select advanced manufacturing skills certificates that translate into college credits. The private university has campuses in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, and offers associate, bachelor, and master degrees, as well as diploma programs.

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