



Inland Northwest building manufacturing workforce

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As rural “on-shoring” becomes an increasingly viable option for companies wishing to remain competitive in the global economy, the Inland Northwest region—comprising Eastern Washington and North Idaho—is seeking to meet the growing demand for a strong manufacturing workforce through strategic partnerships and initiatives. Both rural and urban communities throughout the region are focusing efforts on building skills for the factory floor as well as awareness among non-college-bound students about career opportunities in manufacturing.



In rural northeastern Washington, local manufacturing firms project 20 percent growth in industrial employment opportunities over the next two years. A partnership program involving 12 firms from the mining, wood products, and light manufacturing industries, local educators, and the Tri-County Economic Development District has created a program focused on developing training programs to meet employers' needs for the future workforce, and on educating students about the value and potential of manufacturing careers locally.

Through a series of industrial site tours, high school visits, working sessions, and meetings the program has:

- Clearly defined the entry-level skill needs of major employers as well as the ongoing training programs that will support growth in the manufacturing sector;
- Developed educational materials for teachers, careers counselors, and parents on the benefits and stability of employment in a manufacturing environment;
- Addressed the “what’s-in-it-for-me” perspective of students, with catchy informational materials.

Manufacturing is also growing in the rural southeastern corner of Washington State and across the state line in Idaho. To meet the demand, the Palouse Economic Development Council is working with the state Workforce Development Board to increase both the number of workers available and the quality of entry-level skills of those workers by:

- Developing a new DVD to highlight manufacturing career options for junior high and high school students;

- Creating a new website that outlines career opportunities in the area's primary manufacturing sectors (boat building, metal fabrication, and wood products);
- Organizing manufacturing plant tours for high school teachers to help them better understand the career opportunities available to students;
- Co-sponsoring an application for additional funding on behalf of the North Idaho Manufacturer's Association to broaden the focus of the group to include workforce issues.

In addition, the Palouse Manufacturer's Skill Panel is evaluating work readiness credentialing systems through a partnership with WorkSource and upgrading training provided by Walla Walla Community College, Clarkston Campus.

The Inland Northwest's two major urban areas—Spokane, WA, and Coeur d'Alene, ID—are also taking strategic steps to ensure a strong manufacturing workforce. The North Idaho Manufacturing Consortium (NIMC)—a business group comprising 30 of the state's top manufacturing companies—seeks to create a larger pool of job applicants by addressing junior high and high school students and organizing career days, shadow programs, and job fairs. The group is developing the first non-academic scholarships in Kootenai County. Fifteen scholarships (three per local high school) will be awarded to students for vocational/technical education at North Idaho College, drawing support from college foundations as well. NIMC also led efforts to re-instate welding, machinist, and mechanics classes at North Idaho College. The classes were filled during the first day of registration in just a few hours.

In Spokane, manufacturing jobs grew 4.6 percent in 2006. Greater Spokane Inc.'s Advanced Manufacturing Workforce Initiative skill panel made several recommendations in 2005 to address the challenge of finding skilled manufacturing workers. Partnerships are being formed, and the following action is being taken:

- Greater Spokane Inc. is reaching out to educate teens about real-world opportunities in the manufacturing and technical fields with brochures and "career binders";
- A Work Readiness Credential test is being piloted by Spokane Community College and Greater Spokane Inc.;
- Spokane Community College has launched the Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (I-BEST) program, a two-quarter, short-term training curriculum that introduces students and incumbent workers to professional technical education;
- The Community Colleges of Spokane in partnership with Washington Manufacturing Services is now offering a lean manufacturing certificate program.