

Initiative seeks to expand state's pool of 'dream' manufacturing jobs

By Glenn Marshall, Robert Kennedy and Anthony Cacace
Today

In President Barack Obama's State of the Union speech last month, the President called for laying out a blueprint "for an economy that's built to last — an economy built on American manufacturing, skills for American workers and a renewal of American values."

That sounds like something industry, higher education and government should support — but in practical application, how would that work?

In Connecticut, we've started to tackle the issue. As co-chairs of Connecticut Dream It. Do It., an initiative modeled after the Manufacturing Institute's national effort to enhance the manufacturing workforce, we're bringing together a coalition of business and industry associations, educational institutions, economic development organizations and manufacturers to enhance Connecticut's manufacturing sector and create the next generation of skilled workers.

Our message is loud and clear. It's not your grandfather's or even your father's world of manufacturing anymore. Today's manufacturing is high-tech, clean and cutting-edge. Jobs — and exciting careers — do exist and you can find them in manufacturing companies throughout the state. From making jets fly to building helicopters and submarines to creating life-saving biomedical devices to robotics, Connecticut's advanced manufacturing industries compete worldwide and offer high-tech, rewarding career opportunities.

But even in this economy, every day we hear from employers who can't find enough skilled workers to fill existing jobs. The manufacturing workforce is graying and we must focus on filling the talent pipeline with the people who have the right skills and the right credentials for these high-tech jobs.

The right credentials are a vital part of the solution. Credentialed individuals demonstrate that they have learned and practiced the skills needed to be successful in entry-level positions in any manufacturing company. The Connecticut Dream It. Do It. initiative supports the use of the National Association of Manufacturers-Endorsed Skills Certification System to help

increase the number of prepared applicants for manufacturing jobs. The system focuses on credentials that are nationally portable, third-party-validated, and industry-driven.

We are also moving to close the skills gap, align manufacturing programs with future cutting-edge technologies, and step up training in our state. Last October, the state legislature passed Governor Dannel P. Malloy's bipartisan Jobs Bill, which encourages new job creation while developing and strengthening the state's workforce competitiveness. In response to the bill, three community colleges — Housatonic, Naugatuck Valley, and Quinebaug Valley — have recently been selected for the creation of manufacturing centers to meet the state's workforce needs. The bill provides for \$17.8 million in capital funding for the manufacturing centers, and \$2.2 million to expand the precision manufacturing program at Asnuntuck Community College.

Although state funding provides a foundation to address the need for skilled workers, building manufacturing centers alone won't ensure success. We need to attract students to these centers. We need to educate students, families and educators to the challenging and rewarding opportunities of the manufacturing world. This is the talent pipeline we need to build.

Let's start by making Connecticut. Dream It. Do It. our rallying cry and push hard for federal support to buttress what we are able to do at the state level. We must maximize President Obama's commitment to train two million workers through a streamlined workforce system built on partnerships with businesses. Federally funded training programs will enable us to build a highly-skilled, educated workforce that will make manufacturers more innovative, more productive, and more competitive. It's what will drive our state's economic recovery today and secure our prosperity in the future.

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