# Making It - Advanced Technology In Connecticut


QVCC advanced manufacturing students Peter Avery and Greg Lalumiere stand beside Baxter, a Gibson Engineering robot. (D. Coffey/Courant Community)

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If there was one resounding message for the 261 high school students from 15 area high schools who attended the Quinebaug Valley Community College Advanced Manufacturing open house on Oct. 28 it was this: manufacturing is an opportunity whose time has come.

The students from eastern Connecticut public, private, and technical high schools heard from business leaders faculty members. They sat in on workshops in industrial robotics, lean concepts, and metrology. They toured the college's 10,000 square-foot facility. They had the chance to speak with representatives from companies engaged in everything from aerospace to medical device manufacturing.

"Manufacturing is a dynamic field," said Steven LaPointe, director of QVCC's Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center.

According to LaPointe, more than 5,000 manufacturing companies in Connecticut produce helicopters, submarines, airplanes, and thousands of components that fit into them. Fire alarms, medical devices - even Frisbees - are now part of the manufacturing revolution in the state.

And LaPointe wants to convince students - and their parents - to give it a try.

LaPointe is QVCC's point man of persuasion for advanced manufacturing. He stands at the helm of the community college's brand new $4.8 million center that houses state of the art equipment, such as CNC lathes, programmable logic controllers, milling machines, and measuring devices.

LaPointe's enthusiasm is supported by hard numbers. Approximately 95 percent of those students who have completed certificate and associate degree programs at QVCC have found employment in the field. And northeastern Connecticut stands to benefit big time from billions of dollars being pumped into area defense contractors and the supply chain they rely on.

Groton-based Electric Boat was recently awarded a $17 billion contract to build replacement submarines for the United States Navy. The company expects to hire 12,000 to 14,000 employees, in order to meet the projected growth that will last through 2030.

Pratt & Whitney plans to build 8,000 geared turbofan engines. Some estimates are that one P & W division alone will require 8,000 new employees. Sikorsky Aircraft, with its $220 million economic incentive package from the state, estimates it will need to hire thousands of skilled workers for production of its heavy lift helicopter. And General Electric is poised to deliver on a LEAP engine, meant to compete with the P & W engine.

Eastford-based Whitcraft Group LLC builds parts for jet engines primarily. According to co-owner Jeff Paul, Whitcraft is poised to do well with production of both the geared turbofan and LEAP engines. They expect to hire between 30 and 40 new employees.

"We're diversified across the industry," he said.

Besides the need for skilled workers in advanced manufacturing are the promises of compensation packages. Qualified high school graduates might command $11 to $12/hour. Those with unrelated degrees, certificates, and associate degrees might expect $14 to $16/hour. Those with related degrees, such as engineering, might command a benefit package in the neighborhood of $70K. Benefit packages for some highly qualified candidates at Electric Boat could reach $94,000 annually.

The promise for those starting at the bottom of the wage scale is for continuing educational opportunities and lifetime careers. Many of these advanced manufacturing jobs will be around for 20 to 30 years, according to LaPointe.

"You can start and maintain a career in this field," he said. "We'll teach you what you need to know as long as you come in hungry with a good work ethic."

Paul agreed. Whitcraft and QVCC have become partners in the advanced manufacturing world. Students have become interns and employees at Whitcraft. Whitcraft has sent some of its staff for business leadership training at QVCC. And faculty members have trained at the Eastford facility.

"QVCC takes some risk out of the job hiring process. If you can train on mechatronics and inspection equipment, that takes a burden off us," Paul said.

Students Pete Avery and Greg Lalumiere hope the program delivers. Avery was laid off from a company he'd worked at for 15 years. Lalumiere came in a few years out of high school after a string of dead-end jobs. Lalumiere counts himself lucky to have found a niche.

"I've learned so much," he said.



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