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PCC manufacturing program, facility get rave review in industry magazine

PUEBLO – It’s ironic that at a time when CNC Machining Technician jobs are plentiful in Colorado, there are so few facilities that are training students to have the skills needed to fill those jobs. One of the few colleges in Colorado that has a CNC machining technician program is Pueblo Community College, which offers both a certificate and associate degree in Machining Technology.

In PCC’s program, faculty combine a rigorous curriculum with a wide array of manual and CNC equipment in addition to material prep and quality assurance. CNC is a manufacturing industry wide-accepted acronym for computer numerical control.

PCC became one of the nation’s first Haas Technical Education Centers and is considered an approved site by Haas Automation for students to receive comprehensive education and training on the company’s CNC equipment. Located in PCC’s Gorsich Advanced Technology Center, the manufacturing lab currently is the subject of a major article with photos in the September 2011 issue of “Home Shop Machinist,” a national trade magazine for the industry.

Written by R. Lane Maxwell, a retired registered professional engineer who has taken classes at PCC, the article heaps praise on the lab for being an ideal facility and having modern, state-of-the-art machinery for training students. A self-described tinkerer, Maxwell has used the facility to manufacture pieces, first using metal lathes and milling machines before advancing to more complicated projects by utilizing CNC and water abrasive machines, etc.

“Visitors and students alike who see our manufacturing lab and other technical capabilities in the Gorsich Center often comment about the tremendous capabilities we have available,” pointed out Roger Weitzel, PCC’s Machining Technology department chair.

PCC’s program prepares students to enter the manufacturing world using the latest design interpretation skills, machine setup, cost-effective manufacturing operations, and safety protocol and quality assurance principles. To ensure a solid foundation of skills are achieved first, they work through basic shop mathematics, print reading, material science and applicable speeds and feeds for machining, then progress to fundamental hands-on skills before moving to more complex operations like CNC machining and quality assurance for product specification

compliance. Students also receive instruction on the latest manufacturing principles such as Lean Manufacturing, ISO Standards, Geometric Dimensioning & Tolerancing, and Computer-Aided Manufacturing (CAM) software such as Mastercam.

In addition to earning an Associate of Applied Science degree, students can work to achieve certification in Mastercam (CAM) software. Faculty are also evaluating other nationally recognized certifications and credentials that students can achieve to make their educational experience transferable to virtually any location or manufacturing sector employer.

As part of the college focus on meeting the needs of local manufacturers in Southern Colorado, a manufacturing collaborative was formed over four years ago to address many issues employers face to remain competitive in a global economy. One of the top concerns they already face is a shortage of skilled workers, and they also are apprehensive that the situation will become acute when many workers reach retirement age over the next 5 to 7 years.

The Department of Labor agrees with their fears, with its Occupational Outlook Handbook noting that the number of workers learning the manufacturing occupation is expected to be less than the number of job openings in the future as experienced CNC technicians and machinists retire or transfer to other occupations.

Fewer younger people are interested in learning manufacturing skills, and only three of the Pueblo high schools still offer manufacturing-based classes. However, students taking those classes are able to earn both high school and college credit concurrently.

Statistics show that CNC technicians can earn a good living. The Department of Labor notes that the median hourly wages of CNC technicians were \$17.41 in May 2008. The middle 50 percent earned between \$13.66 and \$21.85. Weitzel said the typical starting wage for CNC Technicians in this region is around \$14 - \$16, with the pay rate escalating with experience. Most recent PCC grads found jobs with Lockheed-Martin in Denver and Los Alamos Labs in New Mexico.

While many colleges have been phasing out their manufacturing programs, PCC is working to make its programs more robust to meet the current and emerging high demands as Reshoring (basically the opposite of outsourcing) starts to ramp up. As part of the efforts, a committee of regional manufacturing representatives is exploring the benefits of establishing a Manufacturing Innovation Center in Pueblo. The initiative will focus on creating an all-encompassing set of services that address a wide range of needs for employers such as supply chain development, logistics, new product development, federal compliance issues, the skilled worker shortage, etc.

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Founded in 1933, Pueblo Community College is a premier teaching institution focused on providing academic and service excellence to help its students acquire the 21st Century skills needed to better their lives. An educational and technological leader, PCC fosters economic development and utilizes strong partnerships in the communities it serves through its Pueblo, Fremont and Southwest campuses.