

Kellogg Community College Supports Local Manufacturers With Flexible Learning Program

Great innovation in learning is coming from the historic manufacturing town of Battle Creek, Mich., dubbed, as it is the home of Kellogg Company, “Cereal City.” There, Kellogg Community College, through its Regional Manufacturing Technology Center (RMTC), offers an Industrial Trades program with an innovative, non-traditional style of training that fits both the needs of local manufacturers and residents looking for good jobs.

“During the recession, few entered the trades, but now Michigan manufacturing is taking off and there is great opportunity,” said Thomas Longman, Interim Director, RMTC, Kellogg Community College. “Our flexible, modular, open-entry/open-exit training programs are designed to meet the employee training needs of area business and industry.”



Under the direction of Thomas Longman, Kellogg Community College's Regional Manufacturing Technology Center offers flexible modular open-entry/open-exit training programs designed to meet the employee training needs of area manufacturers.

RMTC's program incorporates competency-based modules, individualized instruction, and self-paced learning through online courses by Tooling U-SME, which delivers versatile, competency-based learning and development solutions to manufacturers and educators across the country. Modules are credit-based and may lead to a certificate or an associate in applied science.

“Unlike traditional programs, students are not required to start at the beginning of a semester,” said Longman, who has been with RMTC for 23 years. “They can take classes as needed — even walk in that day and start. At any time we might have five to 20 students in the shop all working on something different. It's like a buffet of training.”

Located in the center of an industrial park, RMTC works closely with employers to develop curriculum. This non-traditional approach using blended learning is a way to find and keep qualified workers, according to Longman. He estimates up to 70 percent of students are already working for manufacturers, many of which pay for the cost of training.

For instance, if a company is setting up a Tool and Die Apprenticeship, the employer would pick and chose classes from a menu. RMTC would set up the program right away so that the employees could start immediately and not have to wait for a new semester to start. The format enables companies to quickly and efficiently manage the training process.

Integrating Blended Learning

An important part of the program is online learning. RMTC began offering Tooling U-SME courses back in 2007, and since then nearly 750 students have completed more than 6,000 hours of training. The school is currently using Tooling U-SME online classes as part of the curriculum for its Industrial Maintenance, Welding and Machining programs.

“We started using Tooling U-SME to enrich our machining courses and then talked to other instructors about how well it was working,” said Longman. “Now two other instructors have added it to their programs.”

Tooling U-SME's industry-driven online content was created by a dedicated content development team with leading manufacturing experts and is used extensively by Fortune 500® manufacturers as well as educators. Its online content maps to state, system or program level, and to national credentials including the NAM Skills Certification System, covering certifications such as NIMS, AWS, SME and MSSC.

Longman said that the classes provide an easy way for instructors to monitor student work as well as save time with grading.

“Our instructors don’t lecture; students study theory online and prepare to come to shop after their Tooling U-SME class,” said Longman. “We can monitor how much time students spend online and see their progress by looking at the difference between the pre-test and final test. When students go through Tooling U-SME classes, we see a difference – they are more prepared to do the hands on.”

With instant feedback and automated grading and homework assignments, the process saves considerable administrative time for instructors.

For students, the flexibility of online training is a plus. “Some students get off work on the 2nd shift and can’t fall asleep so they do coursework at home at 2 a.m.,” said Longman.

He also noted that the Tooling U-SME classes adapt well to different learning styles, saying, “Some hands-on learners don’t enjoy the academic classes. Some may struggle with reading and comprehension. With Tooling U-SME, there is the option of having text read to them.”

Addressing Skilled Labor Gap

RMTC’s customizable and flexible programs are a model for schools across the country that are looking for better ways to create programs that develop the skilled labor local manufacturers need.

“More often we are training people for job skills rather than a certificate or degree,” said Longman. “As the baby boomers are starting to retire, companies know there is a real problem and are starting to rebuild their pipelines through training and apprenticeship programs.”

This provides plenty of opportunity for those willing to develop the skills needed to fill good, well-paying jobs within companies that often pay the cost of training and development, leaving students with little to no debt.

“Lives are better because of the training and the effort that students put into their education,” said Longman. “Employees are able to earn a better wage, buy a nicer home and have better things for their family.”