RVCC Boot Camp recruiting ground for earnest high-tech manufacturers

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CLAREMONT — It’s a pretty rare sight — even in today’s recovering job market: A room of students and job seekers listening intently while representatives from local companies work to sell them on openings for high-tech, high-paying jobs.

That was the way it went down during the last week of River Valley Community College’s second Machine Tool Boot Camp, an intensive, hands-on introductory course in advanced manufacturing that curriculum designers say, “fits an entire college semester of training and education into two weeks.”

The full-time program includes project-based training modules in blueprint reading, occupational and lab safety, hand tools and bench work, measurement, metrology and inspection, manual machining, manufacturing and materials science, technical mathematics, introduction to computer numerical controlled machining and geometric dimensioning and tolerancing.

That training was designed with direct industry input to meet the exact needs of advanced manufacturers in New England.

“We want students to finish this program and continue growing,” said RVCC Adjunct Instructor Chris Gray, who leads the boot camp. “We want to make them hungry for even more training.”

And that training can evolve to fit changing needs of RVCC industry partners. Nimble adjustments are a hallmark of the college’s growing “manufacturing-driven” offerings.

“We want folks like you to say, ‘I have these jobs open. We need these classes. Go!’”

Entry-level jobs in advanced manufacturing require levels of skills and knowledge nearly unparalleled in other industries. New hires are expected to recall and retain large amounts of job specific techniques and data, and are called upon to make split-second decisions that can determine the welfare of expensive and often delicate equipment.

RVCC’s Machine Tool Boot Camp provides a learning experience in which the work is immediate, consistent and intense. But key — and unique in the industry — is that it also allows for mistakes and learning in a supportive educational environment impossible to achieve on a busy high-tech production floor. Students of RVCC’s Boot Camp experience the very real pressures of high precision/high production manufacturing in a setting that is learner-centered, not product-centered.
The employer presentations and professional networking session were part of a professional networking luncheon, also carefully thought out by the community college as part of the program. Enthusiasm for the targeted training program was obvious in three companies that are experiencing remarkable growth, yet are struggling to find career candidates with the right skills.

Richard Dennis, human resources manager for Sturm Ruger & Co.’s Newport facility, said the firearms-manufacturing company with sites in Newport, Arizona and North Carolina, made 2.2 million firearms last year. But more to the point, where it employed 800 in 2010, the most recent employee count has nearly doubled at 1,549.

“It’s hard to find people who know what an XYZ axis is,” Dennis said, pointing to a whiteboard scribbled over in mathematical equations for emphasis. “Job applicants don’t know what they are getting into,” in terms of the very technical nature of today’s manufacturing techniques.

Dennis said he believes boot camp graduates are far more qualified and prepared for that reality. He said it’s a great place for someone considering a job in the industry to start. And if a job seeker has already been rejected by his company? Take this class and — absolutely — apply again, Dennis quipped.

“What would it take for me to get a job?” one student tested.

“Here — I’ll give you my business card,” Dennis replied without missing a beat. “You are coming in with an edge with this program. You’re further in, and that only accelerates your options for further advancement,” such as management and engineering tracks.

The Machine Tool Boot Camp is one of dozens of industry approved targeted training and education programs created under New Hampshire Advanced Manufacturing Partnerships in Education initiative, made possible by a $20 million federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant awarded to New Hampshire’s community colleges by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration. Each of New Hampshire’s community colleges offers certificate and degree programs in advanced manufacturing disciplines such as advanced composites manufacturing, advanced welding, electronics and electromechanics, mechatronics and automation/robotics, machine tool technologies, and programming and engineering technologies.

The next Machine Tool Boot Camp by RVCC will be held in March. To register or to learn more, email AMPed NH Project Coordinator Bob Stillings at rstillings@ccsnh.edu.

River Valley Community College is one of seven colleges in the Community College System of New Hampshire, offering more than 37 associate degree, certificate and diploma programs in Claremont, Keene and online.