

The Marion Star

Higher education getting makeover in Marion area

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Maria Milosh, of Sunbury, studies in the library on the Marion campus of The Ohio State University at Marion and Marion Technical College. (Photo: Bill Sinden/The Marion Star) Buy Photo

MARION – Higher education is going through a transformation in the Marion area.

Tri-Rivers Career Center's Robotics and Advanced Manufacturing Technology Education Collaborative trains high school students and adults alike as the program aims to fill the skills gap, and a growing number of manufacturing companies send their employees to the program.

The Ohio State University at Marion is adding a bachelor's degree in biology, raising to nine the number of degree programs that can be completed entirely at the Marion regional campus. Architectural work has begun for a new science and engineering building projected for a 2017 opening, and private housing being constructed on University Drive across Marion-Mount Gilead Road from the campus promises to change the dynamic of student life.

Marion Technical College reduced all of its curriculum programs to 60 to 65 credits to save students time and money, effective this summer.

Gus Comstock, Marion CAN DO! director, counts the presence of the three academic institutions as a strong marketing tool for attracting new employers and the economic benefit they would bring to the Marion community.

"How many other communities have an Ohio State, a Marion Tech, a RAMTEC?" Comstock said. "Marion's got this really robust training workforce development, and we need to put it all together, and that needs to be a huge incentive when we're talking to companies."

Training workforce

Expressing his pride in the RAMTEC program, Tri-Rivers Superintendent Chuck Speelman noted that Tri-Rivers received a mention in Gov. John Kasich's State of the State address for 2015 and regularly reminds the public that Tri-Rivers offers more than the rapidly growing advanced manufacturing program.

"We're so much more than RAMTEC," Speelman said, citing as an example the school's veterinary science program, which recently allowed students to watch veterinarian Dr. Scott Yancey perform spaying and neutering procedures. "At the same time, we have gotten people's attention on the national level because of RAMTEC."



Dominic Chango, Anthony Ongolibong and Blaine Kemmere demonstrate hydraulic hose connections on a training rig at the RAMTEC training center at Tri-Rivers Career Center on Nov. 10, 2014. The three men are apprentice maintenance technicians at Whirlpool Corp., and are taking classes to improve their job skills. (Photo: James Miller/The Marion Star)

RAMTEC has had 80 to 90 students complete the FANUC robotic tool handling class. Industrial companies receiving the training include Marion Industries, U.S. Yachiyo, Cardington Yutaka Technologies, American Showa, Honda America, Whirlpool Corp., Bridgestone, Guardian Industries, Ashland County West Holmes Career Center, ConAgra Foods, Silver Line Building Products and MTC.

The RAMTEC program also provides Whirlpool's four-year journeyman program for its maintenance people, as well as a tool-and-die program. Whirlpool employees received training in Parker Hydraulics and are being trained in Allen Bradley programmable logic controllers.

RAMTEC also runs a 400-hour certified class in adult welding for displaced workers in conjunction with Marion County Job and Family Services.

RAMTEC growing

Recipient of a Straight A grant, Tri-Rivers' RAMTEC will train all of the robotics instructors for the other eight new RAMTEC sites, which also received Straight A funding, beginning in June.

Tri-Rivers' advanced manufacturing and engineering program accepted 11 students last academic year and this year accepted 32 students, as the program has grown with the opening of RAMTEC.

The RAMTEC consortium, of which Tri-Rivers is a part, received the \$14.99 million Straight A grant in June 2014, allowing Tri-Rivers to partner with eight other career centers to expand and continue the vision of RAMTEC to address the skills gap by preparing high school and adult students with advanced manufacturing and engineering skills.

"So much of what we're dealing with now is what I call gray-collar jobs," Speelman said. "These are jobs that take great analytical skills, math skills, team skills, communication skills. That's one thing that I see as our role, to turn out a student that is well-rounded enough, that has an understanding about a particular career or career pathway, that they can get that first job."

"I think our best days are ahead of us," he said. "I see every year people starting to realize the four-year degree is not a guarantee of a middle-class income or above. People are coming out with all this training, but they don't have a job. I think we do a great job of matching trade skills with jobs that are out there."

He expressed hope that Tri-Rivers adult education program continues to grow.

"We're finding ways to support our community, not only for high school students coming out looking for that first job, but our adult students looking for a better job, to apprenticeships looking to move up in a company, and that's going to open up entry-level jobs."

OSUM adds programs

Ohio State Marion continues to evolve as it provides Marion and surrounding communities with geographically accessible route to a bachelor's degree and, through the main campus, beyond.

Dave Claborn, OSUM director of community relations and development, said the regional campus is educating about 1,300 students, of which 300 to 400 are Marion County residents, "and a lot of them are first-generation students, so you're taking somebody whose earning potential is \$18-, 20-, \$25-thousand-a-year and boosting them to \$45,000, \$50,000 a year. There's that sort of impact. I think that's our goal, to increase that percentage of college graduates who are going to earn significantly more than they would have otherwise."

"We're the bachelor degree-producing four-year university in the area," he said.

Students can complete a degree program entirely at OSUM in biology, education (early and childhood licensure), English, business management, history, psychology, master of arts in integrated teaching and learning (for currently licensed teachers), RN to BSN completion program (for licensed registered nurses) and social work.

"There's kind of a fairly steady flow of additional programs and a strategic plan looking at adding more of those," he said. "I think we'll see how it plays out, but having some student housing getting built adjacent the campus here changes the nature of the campus. We're not just a commuter campus anymore. There is some economic impact to that, having a residential group of students who will be bringing their purchasing power and what-not into the community. ... We hope they like it here and get internships and get jobs here and add to the overall mix. There's a lot of places where that impact is going to be felt, and the more we develop the campus and make it more of a player in the community."



First year sonography student Amanda Bare, right, scans the kidney of classmate Lauren Champine at Marion Technical College on Nov. 21, 2014. Bare and Champine are pursuing a two-year associates degree in diagnostic medical sonography. (Photo: James Miller/The Marion Star)

Claborn said OSUM determines which degrees may best suit the Marion area. "It is a strategic planning process," he said. "There's been a lot of looking at what would fit in the economy here. We're not just adding degrees without looking at what would fit into the fabric of the community. So there's that. How does this campus function in the community?"

Campus changing

The impending addition of the science and engineering building is "going to play a huge role," he said. "It's all part of the same package. Now we're really going to have a state-of-the-art science and engineering building."

The addition of Annex of Marion, which is due to be available for housing students for the 2015-16 fall semester, to student housing available in the Harding Centre downtown may lead to the addition of other facilities on the campus, he said.

"We need to sort of prioritize what sort of additional recreational facilities we're going to have to put in now that we have a residential population," Claborn said. "Do we need some sort of food services?"

OSUM also may consider whether the addition of a biology degree calls for the addition of more scholarship money for biology majors and/or a biology chair.

"It's an exciting time to be here to really see this place take off," he said.

Connecting with community

Marion Technical College, which has more than 225 full- and part-time employees, is tied to numerous aspects of the Marion-area economy, said Vicky Wood, MTC vice president and chief academic adviser.

"I think we're in the center of support for the local economy," Wood said. "We are connected with the businesses, industry, government, health, every sector of business enough that we work with them, we know their needs, so we can develop programs to meet their workforce needs."

Evidence of the college's thoroughly connected relationship with employers is its affiliation with 154 organizations and more than 200 professionals representing those organizations. More than 94 percent of the school's graduates are employed in the community in health, manufacturing, education, public service, hospitality, retail and other occupations.

"We have professionals from those serving on advisory committees that review our programs," Wood said. They comprise 19 committees that meet twice a year. "They guide us to what their needs are."

The employers also support MTC students through clinicals, co-ops and internships.

MTC helps employees

"The other things is when we assist businesses it's not only providing them employees," she said. The school also has programs that help employees to improve their skill sets, which also benefits their employers.

Using the county's largest employer for an example, she said, MTC has conducted a business management Adult Student Accelerated Program in which several Whirlpool Corp. employees learn skills needed to advance their job responsibilities, and partners with RAMTEC to teach an apprenticeship program in industrial maintenance and tool-and-die work for Whirlpool employees.

MTC also provides an Adult Basic & Literacy Education program to help people working at Whirlpool through a temporary hiring service to pass their General Educational Development test to become eligible for permanent employment at the dryer-manufacturing plant.

Referring to an American Community Survey for 2010-2012 showing that only 12.3 percent of Marion County residents compared to 24.6 percent of Ohioans have at least a bachelor's degree, Wood said, "We are the community's two-year college. We have to be in touch with what the needs are so we can get the students prepared for those workforce needs."

Aiming to improve

The same survey shows that 20 percent of Marion County residents compared to 32.2 percent of Ohioans have at least an associate's degree.

"I'm glad that we're closer to the state average for associate's degrees, but we're still lagging," she said. "The higher education degree (they have), they're going to have a higher income, support our tax base."

She said MTC is working with Harding High School to find ways to expand their partnership.

A graduate survey from 2014 shows that 97 percent of MTC graduates were employed within six months of graduation and 94 percent of MTC graduates "stay in the community. I think that speaks to the programs that we have to support the educational needs of the Marion community, Marion and surrounding communities."

One-year programs increase

Marion Technical College, which has 2,615 students enrolled this spring compared to 2,666 last spring, plans to add seven new programs for the 2015-16 academic year to the five it currently offers, she said. One-year certificate programs for accounting, computer information technology networking, computer information technology software development, clinical health informatics specialist, database administration, pharmacy technician and Web development are in the works.

To save students time and money, MTC reduced all of its programs to 60 to 65 credits effective in summer 2015.

Wood said two-year colleges across the state have been challenged by the Ohio Board of Regents to make the reduction. Many of MTC's programs currently range from 67 to 72 credits.

She said she supports "anything to help the students. We need to cut costs. Our students cannot afford books, the cost-of-living and tuition. We're always looking at ways to make college affordable." She said the challenge will be maintaining the college's high success rates with the lesser number of credits. MTC will track the results and discuss them in about two years.

The certificate programs serve as a "stepping stone so a student can get through a one-year certificate, gain employment and then finish their associate's degree. Again, that's a state emphasis, as well."

She said all of the educational institutions must work together to improve outcomes for the community.

"We need to be connected to the community at all levels, Ohio State, Tri-Rivers, with Harding and the county schools," she said. "The more we can collaborate and expand our partnerships, the more students we're going to get through the educational system and support our local workforce."

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