

# Editorial: Training for the future

The walls along this hallway inside Continental Inc. in Newport News are coming down to house a new training center with TNCC. Glass walls will open up the new class rooms and lab areas to the hallway that are scheduled to open in in Sept. 2017.

In a rapidly changing world with an increasingly global economy, it is common to hear the lament that our educational system is not keeping up with schools in China, in India and in other parts of the world. This may or may not be true – it all depends on how the metrics are chosen and interpreted – but the more pressing concern in the U.S. is trying to get our educational system caught up with *our own* society.

With all of the nonstop dissection of unemployment statistics, here is a reality that rarely gets mentioned: Thousands of jobs go unfilled each year, many of them offering good salaries, because our colleges are not turning out graduates who are trained to fill them. This is true locally regionally and nationally.



Machinists make the body of this new pressure pump from a block of metal at Continental Inc. in Newport News. Thomas Nelson Community College is working with Continental in Newport News to create a training program on-site.

(Joe Fudge)

For this reason, it is especially encouraging to see signs that schools at all levels in Hampton Roads are reacting to the shifting shape of the American workforce by adding or emphasizing programs specifically designed to fit new graduates with promising career fields.

The two most recent examples: Thomas Nelson Community College in Hampton striking a partnership with the Continental plant in Newport News to train machinists who will help the automotive systems company hire hundreds of new employees in the next few years; and Smithfield High School, which is launching an initiative that will offer teens in-depth training in a number of career-oriented fields not covered in a standard high school curriculum.

Across the nation, our community colleges have emerged as under-appreciated gems for teens as well as adults looking to improve their professional outlook. They are convenient, affordable alternatives to traditional four-year colleges whose spiraling tuition fees are either shutting students out altogether or leaving them with crippling loan debts upon graduation. And at the same time, those community colleges are proactively offering more and more classes and training programs specifically designed to match students to available jobs.



Continental, Thomas Nelson Community College partner to train machinists

The latest program at TNCC is a fine example of this. The local Continental plant needs workers trained to use machines that make fuel injectors and other parts and components. It is precise, detailed work, and the company saw a great benefit in collaborating with the nearby community college to train those workers.

This is a situation where everyone comes out ahead — the college gets a new program to help attract students and those students can receive specialized training with a job (and potentially a career) waiting at the end. And, of course, Continental gets to play an active role in developing the prospective employees who will replace retirees and fill new positions to accommodate expansion.

The new initiative at Smithfield High School will help prepare students starting at a younger age. It is an ambitious \$10 million program, buoyed by a \$3 million contribution from Smithfield Foods that will pay for a technology lab and two other new buildings on the school's campus.

As the plan comes to fruition in the next couple of years, students will be able to take hands-on classes to learn skills in the culinary, health science, mechatronics and other technological fields. In announcing his company's participation last week, Smithfield Foods CEO Kenneth Sullivan told the student body: "You have to change; you have to innovate; you have to adapt in education, just as you do in the business world. If you don't, you will not be successful."

High school students who have an early eye toward their career paths will be able to learn a wide range of technological skills — for example, welding — that will give them tremendous advantages in a job market that is looking hard to find prospective workers with specific skills and certifications.

For students to be able to acquire these skills as part of their public high school education is an immeasurable benefit. Every skill in which they develop

proficiency while still in their teens is another big step toward opportunities on the job market — positions they could move right into as others are serving coffee and waiting tables while looking for work that matches their expensive college degrees.

If our local schools continue to respond in this way to the changing workforce, there will be yet another winner emerging — our regional economy. When high schools and colleges are turning out highly skilled, ready-to-hire graduates, it allows local companies to expand and it encourages other businesses to move here or open new locations on the Peninsula. Major corporations, as well as the promising up-and-comers, pay close attention to such factors in identifying new markets.

Thomas Nelson Community College and Continental and Smithfield High School and Smithfield Foods are the latest examples of local schools and local businesses teaming up on sensible, forward-thinking programs that benefit the entire community. Here's hoping we see more and more.

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