



Working to dispel shop class myth

Remember those guys in high school who took shop? If you're too young to travel down memory lane, I'll refer you to the movie Grease and the guys practicing their mechanical skills in shop class on the souped up hot rod.

The typical vocational student in the 60s and 70s faced an educational dead end. They got their high school degree and, if they were lucky, maybe a two-year associate degree at a community college or junior college as we called it then.

Enter the new world. Today's manufacturing jobs have nothing to do with the demeaning stereotype of shop classes years ago.

Automation engineers and machinists today possess highly skilled technical and manual abilities with salaries that can reach into the \$80,000s.

Dr. Eric Roe, director of the Florida Advanced Technological Education Center at Hillsborough Community College, is trying hard to dispel the shop class myth, which many students and adults still believe in today. Roe, who worked in research and development at Tropicana, is busy educating high school students as well as school career counselors about the awesome job potential of the manufacturing industry.

Roe and others are trying to close the skill gap that exists. Lots of engineering, skilled trades and technical jobs go wanting because there are not enough people with the right skills that employers can hire. All of this despite the fact we have nearly an 11 percent unemployment rate in Manatee County and thousands of people out of work.

"A couple of generations were told they had to go to college to be a success in life," he said. If you were in vocational education, you were looked down upon. I know in my high school, those not headed to college were not considered as bright or motivated as those of us who were.

But things are changing, Roe says. The education infrastructure has been changed to remove the roadblocks to continuing education and

now students learning technical skills can get educational credit that will lead them to bachelor and master's degrees.

“Previously the academic programs were not in place but we are seeing that change,” Roe says. Made in Florida is a program Roe is involved with that exposes students to the world of manufacturing through onsite visits and placing educational materials in the schools that explain what these high wage, high skill jobs look like.

And he's getting a good response. Thousands of students are expressing an interest in learning more about the nearly 17,000 manufacturers in the state with a 400,000 workforce.

Another part of the problem Roe and others face is helping people realize that these not-so-visible jobs are in their community. Inside those bland looking cluster of buildings, often in industrial parks, are people using their creative skills to develop products essential to our economy.

Roe and others predict in the next few years a difference will be seen. “People are in the pipeline right now,” he said. Those graduates will be entering the workforce and making a difference.

They'll be filling essential jobs with an average wage of \$47,500, 20 percent higher than Florida's overall average wage with a salary potential in the \$60,000s and \$80,000s.

Hopefully we'll be able to say goodbye to the skills gap for good.