

The search for skills: Polytechnic careers event aims to reach parents

By Kecia Bal

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Nate Randall welds a truck bed at J&J Truck Bodies in Somerset on March 13, 2015. A Polytec in order to introduce parents to in-demand “gold-collar” jobs in the region.

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For the past year or more, local economic development folks have tried to get the skilled labor message – that a shortage is here, that it’s going to get worse with looming retirements and that those careers can come with competitive wages – across to school administrators, young people and adults seeking a new career.

But the hard sell is to the parents – many of whom are reluctant to not steer kids toward four-year degrees, according to folks organizing a Polytechnic Career Awareness event on March 15.

Sara Deyarmin, program development manager at the Challenge Program Inc., which has organized the event to introduce parents to in-demand, “gold-collar” careers in the region, said the concept

fits the organization’s goal to build sustainable business and education partnerships.

“It’s something we kept hearing from a lot of the businesses – mainly manufacturing: There’s a lack of interest in millennials in manufacturing,” she said. “But it’s not only lack of interest but that parents and educators turn kids away from careers in manufacturing.

“There’s a big misconception.

“They’re not the dirty, blue-collar jobs of yesterday.”

Blue-collar jobs today aren’t what they used to be, Deyarmin said. She’s hoping parents see the value.

“When we talk about blue collar jobs, the visual people get is dirty, monotonous jobs – and barely getting by,” she said. “The way to change that perception is to coin these jobs as gold collar. The jobs are lucrative and really sustainable.

“They’re also not the dirty job they used to be.”

Machinists, for example, often now require more computer skills than elbow grease, she said.

“Part of the problem is they have that skill gap,” Deyarmin said. “I’m not discrediting post-secondary education.

“Education doesn’t stop with a high school diploma. It’s a matter of are you getting educated in the right things for what you want to do with your life.”

And those types of skilled labor positions are expected to be in-demand for the long term. By

2022 nearly 80 percent of career opportunities won't require a bachelor's degree or advanced degree, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry.

The event is to feature a keynote address from a department representative as well as speed-networking sessions with local employers. Education, training and employment representatives also are to be on hand to answer questions, and students are invited to join parents.

Brian Galiote, contract administration manager for Martin-Baker America – one of the businesses participating in the networking session and a supporter of the Challenge Program – said he is concerned about a future skills shortage.

Manufacturing company Global SFC Valve in Somerset is another longtime supporter.

“What we've been looking at for the past few years are a lot of technical areas where we find an aging workforce and we don't have anybody coming up behind it with that skill set,” he said. “We see more folks going into the ranks of four-year institutions. We don't see anybody taking in interest in a lot of the trades. We are concerned that we're going to be looking for people who aren't there.”

The event, he said, is a step in the right direction. Organizers hope to make it an annual gathering.

“I think there are a lot of people out there who really don't know the non four-year institutions are here locally and the opportunities here locally,” he said. “I think a lot of people have the misunderstanding that: if I do a trade I'll make \$20,000 a year all my life. The other thing, too, a lot of those particular functions aren't necessarily things you can sub out to another country. We need them right here every day.”

Areas where he sees a skills gap are in sewing, what he calls almost a lost art, as well as inspection technicians.

“A lot who do that have a two-year degree,” he said. “Normally, you would be looking at some kind of machining background. One of our best inspectors has a two-year degree in machining. He's a phenomenal individual who can understand it from the design side. If you have a background in machining, that's a good foundation for a job that pays well.”

Other companies participating include Riggs Industries, FirstEnergy, North American Hoganas, Corle Building Systems, Conemaugh Medical Center and Norfolk Southern, Deyarmin said.

“These are incredible opportunities that people don’t know exist,” she said.

“Norfolk Southern employs about 1,000 people in Blair County, with entry-level welding jobs that will pay over \$30 an hour.”

Guilds are expected to participate, including the Future Road Builders and the Associated Builders & Contractors, and both offer apprenticeship and training programs that can help people move to a solid career path quickly, she said.