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LCC class offers fast-track training

4-day-a-week computing course holds promise of jobs after a month

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After filling a dry-erase board with strings of computer commands, Clint Jones stopped to give his students at Lansing Community College a nugget of wisdom about computer numerical control machining.

"The Zen of programming is, 'Be the tool,'" he said.

The course is an intensive one-month introduction to the basics of CNC machining, essentially the use of high-tech mills, lathes and other tools to make components for industries ranging from automotive to health care.

But it's also a fast-track solution to a gap in the region's work force and, for the nine students enrolled, a good shot at starting a new career quickly.

"For quite some time, many companies have been looking for people with CNC skills," said Robert Sherer, executive director of the Capital Area Manufacturing Council.

"They advertise, go to job fairs, mountains of resumes, and they just can't find the people they're looking for. The only solution is increased training supply."

The class was born of a collaboration between LCC, the manufacturing council, Capital Area Michigan Works and four local companies.

Students, many of them displaced manufacturing workers, go to class six hours a day, four days a week. Their tuition is paid by federal grants.

Opening the door

The class won't be enough to make students experts in CNC machining, but it will be enough to get them in the door, said Dick Scott, LCC's apprenticeship coordinator.

The companies involved - Demmer Corp. and Cameron Tool Corp. in Lansing, Midway Engravers in Williamston and Research Tool in Ovid - got a chance to vet both the curriculum and the students involved.

Scott said those companies have "an intent to hire" those students who complete the course successfully.

"They definitely would need more training beyond this," said Carey Oberlin, human resource manager for Cameron Tool, "but it is a great opportunity for them to come into an industry that needs good

quality workers."

And there are plans to continue their training after the one-month course ends.

LCC has developed a four-course certificate program and, through Capital Area Michigan Works, secured money for those students who are hired after this class ends to complete it over the coming year.

Still, Oberlin said, entry-level jobs in CNC machining pay \$10 to \$12 an hour, and Scott said pay can rise to \$22 an hour in the course of a few years.

Offering promise

But the program holds another kind of promise for student Andrew Pratt - the promise of an end to years of on-again-off-again employment.

"I've worked in shops through temporary employment agencies, and the job just ends," the 47-year-old Morrice man said. "I've had a shop shut down. One shop was pretty much seasonal, where we worked 70 hours a week in the summer and three days a week in the winter.

"I'm tired of the yo-yo employment style," he said, "and this here, we've already got to talk to some employers."

LCC is considering running the class again this fall.

Doug Stites, CEO of Capital Area Michigan Works said there is "no reason not to replicate" the program for other industries.

But, he added, that certain things have to fall into place to make it practical.

"You've got to have training space available. You've got to have companies all ready to hire at the same time. I have to have the money at the right moment," he said.

"It's just a matter of can you put it together again in the right sequence."
