

It's time to spring into action and train more skilled workers

By **SCOTT WHIPPLE**
STAFF WRITER

BRISTOL — Jim Albert, president and CEO of the Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce, is on a mission. He wants to get the word out that manufacturing is growing again and anxious to find skilled workers. There is a need to replace aging experts as help-wanted signs dot the manufacturing landscape in central Connecticut. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Greater Bristol's spring manufacturing sector.

In fact, Cindy Scoville, the Chamber vice president of membership and sales and secretary/treasurer of the New England Spring and Metalstamping Association, agrees with Albert that as demand for American products increases there is a growing gap in the pipeline of trained,

skilled workers to take over for an aging manufacturing sector. This problem is likely to worsen over the next three to five years as manufacturing engineers and machinists retire. As a result, companies are unable to produce components and products in high demand.

Albert puts the spring and metal stamping situation into a larger perspective. The slow reversal of a long term decline in manufacturing began in 2009. It has been sustained over the past four years as companies realize the total cost of offshoring jobs is more than just the cost of labor. There are also such factors as political risks, productivity, proximity to customers, innovation, cultural differences, intellectual property risks, transportation -- the list is long.

"Today's manufacturing businesses are not our grandparents'

factories," Scoville says. Positions have been eliminated over time by technology and process changes, and skills needed by most manufacturers today are heavily weighted towards math, engineering and technology along with overall business acumen and communications skills.

Albert says as manufacturing declined as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product over the last 100 years, America's education system shifted its focus towards a college-based "white collar" workforce.

He believes higher education has successfully marketed itself as witnessed by the dramatic increase in the number of college graduates over the last century and a higher than inflation increase in tuition and out-of-pocket education costs. At the same time, there has been a large income gap between the average college graduate and students without any post-secondary education. Much of this shift has come at the expense of "The Forgotten Half" of the student population that doesn't necessarily want or need, a higher education career path to make a living and raise a family.

"That's not to say a higher education degree is not valuable or desired by a large percentage of the population," Albert says. "It's just that we need to also provide (and fund appropriately) quality alternative career options for those where higher education is not desired or needed. We are



Left to right: Ben Russell, Steven Hanecak teachers from the Manufacturing Division of Bristol Tech School; Bill Lathrop, NESMA VP presents donation to Bristol Tech school's Manufacturing Division and Joyce Mowrey, Principal of Bristol Tech School. NESMA works very closely with the Manufacturing Division of the School.

not training and educating our children in skills they need to get a job in the 21st century. This is not the case in other developed countries around the world."

Scoville stresses that organizations like NESMA need to bridge the gap between education and employment. This includes both an emphasis on higher education careers as well as development of post-secondary educational programs culminating in two-year degrees along with technical certifications. And so, the Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce is work-

ing with members of NESMA, as well as several educational and commercial industrial partners, to develop multiple curricula leading to certification and employment in manufacturing and the trades.

Albert expects this program to kick off in a pilot phase later this year.

"We hope to expand it to many other career paths in 2015," he says.

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WHAT'S HAPPENING!

■ There will be an Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction Management Job Fair at Central Connecticut State University on Thursday, March 27 from 5:30 to 8 p.m. Students in attendance will be looking for internships, co-ops and entry level positions. The event will take place in CCSU's Alumni Hall in the Student Center. A buffet dinner will be provided. For directions to Student Center Parking visit: www.ccsu.edu/page.cfm?p=1378 Campus Map: www.ccsu.edu/page.cfm?p=4191 There is no cost to attend. For further information, email Diane Hunter: d.hunter@ccsu.edu

■ Society of Manufacturing Engineers (known simply as "SME") will host a convention, "Manufacturing for the Future" for the aerospace, defense, medical, and micro manufacturing sectors, May 6 through May 8 at the Connecticut Convention Center, Hartford. For information, email communications@sme.org