Profile: NHTI alumni AND their local manufacturing employer say community college partnerships 'the way to go'

Jim Batchelder has to get up earlier than many of his classmates, but that's OK with him.

"I'm in a good spot — especially for being in college," said the NHTI advanced manufacturing processes student. "I make more than the average 20-year-old and I feel way more independent."

Batchelder was hired as a CNC operator and setup apprentice by Vitex Extrusion of Franklin, NH, in April 2014 — and he's not shy about giving thanks to those who helped him get a head start.

"The day after I said I needed a job, (instructor) Jeff Musheno arranged an interview," said Batchelder.

It's a common practice for industry-savvy advanced manufacturing instructors at NH's community colleges to help match students with employers facing a significant workforce skills gap. Together, NHTI - Concord's Community College and its six sister colleges are part of NH's Advanced Manufacturing Partnerships in Education, a statewide initiative that unites the colleges, more than 100 industry partners and state and federal agencies to develop and deliver industry guided and approved education and training programs designed to provide seamless transitions from classroom to career.

Under a $20 million TAACCCT grant from the U.S. DOL's Employment and Training Administration, advanced manufacturing labs at all NH community colleges were opened or overhauled with state-of-the-art technologies found on professional production floors. More than 30 certificate and degree programs cover disciplines such as advanced machine tool and welding technologies, mechatronics and robotics/automation, engineering, electronics and electromechanics, and more.

The partnerships are mutually beneficial.

Vitex CEO Andrew Curland said "NHTI came through when we needed it most. We run 24 hours a day, five days a week, and have been especially busy this spring and summer. Jeff knew us, contacted us and — relative to regular recruits — brought in several stars. He outlined the potential of each candidate from NHTI, and we've been very pleased with what we've seen."

Curland said, as manufacturing grows and evolves in the United States, increased automation demands deeper knowledge of machine operations and programming. For example, he said, a basic understanding of computer-assisted design and manufacturing software is essential.

"We need a higher level of people, Curland said. "So, on a large scale you see companies setting up training programs with community colleges to build these skills. We think this is the way to go."

Curland said he's optimistic not only about his company's growth, but also the industry's strength as a whole. Vitex manufactures custom aluminum extrusions and finished components. The company has invested $2.5 million into its fabrication business over seven years, and recently celebrated a record 122,106 pounds of aluminum extruded in one day.

While Vitex has hired several NHTI alumni as operators, the company has a laser focus on advancement. Already, Batchelder and another NHTI alumnus, Tim Plourde, are being groomed for growth.

"We've sat down and outlined a vision for Tim and Jim for the future, emphasizing where you can go," said Human Resources Manager Carol O'Reilly. "At a smaller company, you can be more diverse."

The pace has both challenged and thrilled Plourde and Batchelder.

"Manual machines are not really my thing," said Plourde, a setup apprentice who is also a recent NHTI graduate with an associate's degree in mechanical engineering technology. He much prefers the more modern technology NH's community colleges are training for. "With (computer-numerical controlled machining), the machine is doing the work for you. And looking ahead, I'd love to be in programming, designing parts and doing programming right there in the shop."

That could happen faster than Plourde ever imagined.

"They're throwing me at everything," Plourde said, grinning. "There's a lot to learn, fast. And Andy really pushes for our advancement."

Batchelder praised instructors at NHTI for making him a quick study.

"What you learn at NHTI sets you up for things you learn on the job," he said. "We have some real-life blueprint, design and CNC experience. If you understand how a machine works and how programming works, it's easier to pick up specific job instructions. And it's good to know *how* a part is going to be made when you're designing it. NHTI does a good job giving you a strong base to learn from. It makes us fast learners, and that's what you need in production."

Batchelder said it's been exciting to continue his education while working full time, and he's got support from both his employer and educators.

"(Curland) told me, 'Take whatever time you need to take for school. I can help you finish your education.' They're very proactive about helping us help ourselves," he said. "And the instructors at NHTI will bend over backwards for you. They know everyone and they want you to get working — but keep educating yourself."

"They want you to succeed," Plourde added. "They've lived interesting lives, worked lots of places, and they tell us: You're going to need school, but you're also going to need experience."

Experience, indeed.