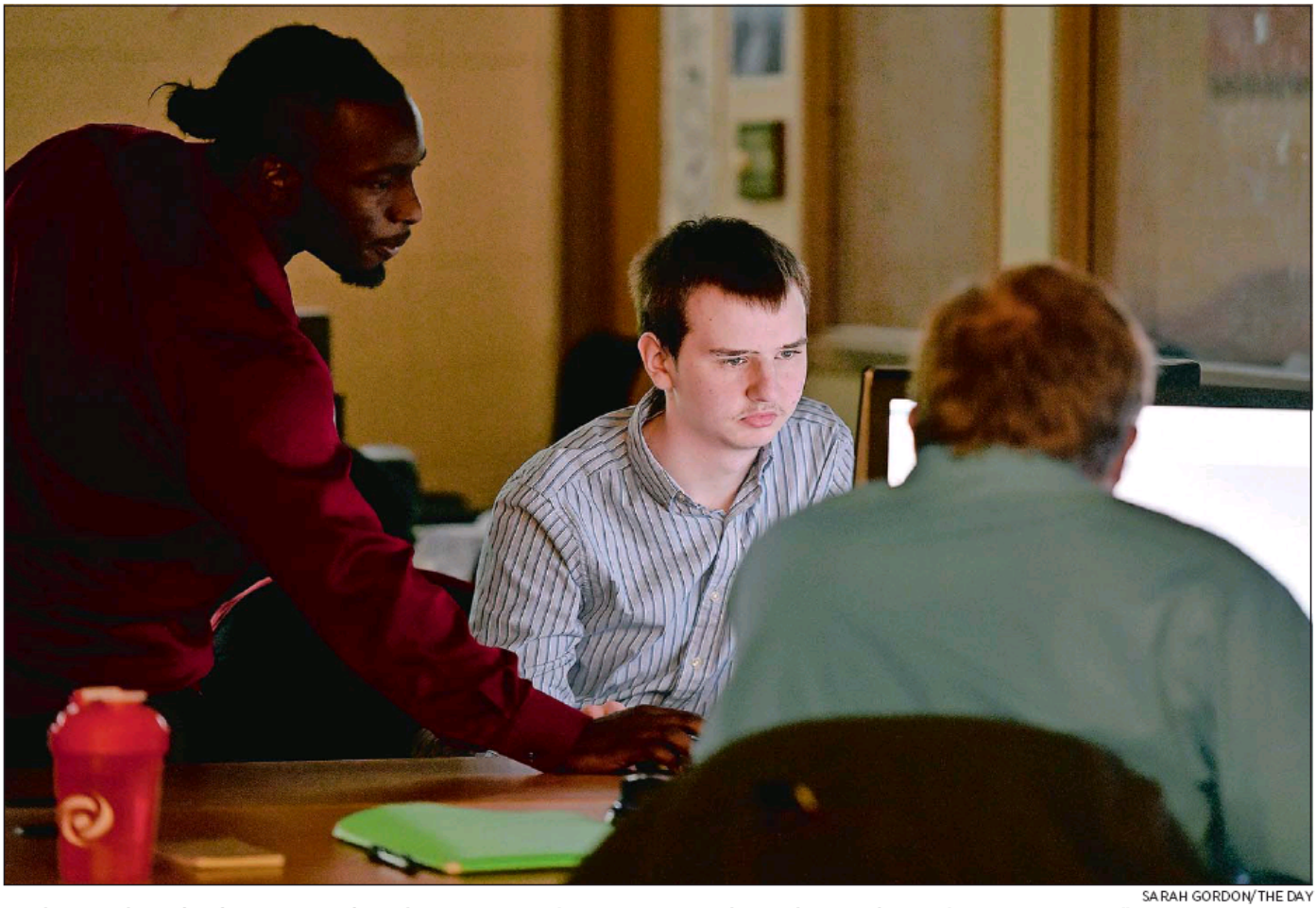
The Day

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DESIGNING A NEW CAREER



SARAH GORDON/THE DAY

Student Stephen Sikorsky, center, works with instructor Cecil Carter on a pipe design during a design class on Dec. 12 at Ella T. Grasso Southeastern Technical High School in Groton. The class is part of the Manufacturing Pipeline initiative.

Manufacturing Pipeline connects seekers, jobs

Program teaches the skills that employers like Electric Boat need

By ERICA MOSER
Day Staff Writer

Most of the 18 students in the design engineering class are settled into their seats and working with the NX software when one man wanders in late, looking more dressed-up than most, in a button-down shirt, tie and suspenders.

Instructor Cecil Carter stops to ask, "How was the interview, was it good?" The man replies with a thumbs-up. A woman later walks in, is asked a similar question and nonchalantly replies, "I got it."

Carter doesn't seem to mind the tardiness, because the reason people are late is exactly why they're in this five-week, 150-hour course: to get a job, typically at Electric Boat.

HOW TO ENROLL

Visit ewib.org/pipeline and click "apply here" to fill out the application.

The next step is to complete a skills assessment on basic math, spatial reasoning and shop safety.

Those who don't pass can take a two-week refresher course or be referred to the American Job Center, while those who pass are directed to complete profiles on the Connecticut Department of Labor and Electric Boat websites.

Then comes an information session about available training and job-search opportunities.

These students were in the ninth cohort of this class. It's one of several courses — all at no cost to enrollees — as part of the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative that the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board launched in 2016 to teach the skills that employers are seeking.

When the first class graduated in May 2016, EWIB President John Beauregard said the plan was for 450 students to undergo similar training in the next three years.

The program has wildly surpassed expectations, enrolling 873 as of Nov. 26. Among the 1,753 who have taken the assessment, some don't take the classes and are employed through other programs, so EWIB counts a total of 1,225 job placements.

Of those, 972 are employed by EB, while 253 are working at 187 other companies in the region, according to data Beauregard provided. Between replacing retired employees and creating new positions, EB expects to hire about 15,000 people over the next decade.

Aside from design engineering, the other classes offered are introduction to manufacturing, welding, machinists, sheet metal, pipefitting and electrical. Each applicant starts with a skills assessment, and the time between that and starting the course depends on demand from employers.

Classes are taught at Grasso Tech (through Three Rivers Community College), Quinebaug Valley Community College and the Westerly Education Center.

Keith Zanardi, 55, had spent the past decade working at Walmart when a friend said, "I hate the fact you work there" and encouraged him to take the assessment.

While in the design engineering class at Grasso Tech from 3 to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, he still was working from 4 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday at Walmart.

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Manufacturing Pipeline connects

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The schedule was not quite so hectic for Sarah Rawlinson, a 25-year-old who holds a bachelor's degree in fine arts but was looking to transition from commission work to something full-time with benefits. She found out about the MPI through a college friend who went through the program and was hired at Electric Boat.

Kaleb Burrs, 19, was living in Colorado and working at Papa John's when he heard about the pipeline from family members in Connecticut, so he decided to move here.

Where does the money comes from?

Beauregard said EWIB has spent about $6.1 million on the pipeline so far: $2.7 million to cover training and tuition for 45 classes; $2.6 million for assessments, remediation and case management staff; and $800,000 for support and stipends, like if participants "are having a hard time filling the gas tank" to get to class.

In September 2015, the U.S. Department of Labor approved a three-year, $6 million grant, though Beauregard noted it's less for the region after accounting for federal evaluators. EWIB applied for an additional $400,000 in other federal grants, along with $600,000 in state dollars from the past two years.

To sustain the initiative going forward, EWIB has the $8 million workforce development grant the state is providing as part of the $83 million investment in Electric Boat announced in May.

EWIB also has 10 high schools signed up for its youth pipeline spinoff, which is entirely funded by a $450,000 grant from the Gawlicki Family Foundation.

Interest in the pipeline has spread, with legislators at the end of the last session authorizing the Apprenticeship Connecticut initiative to replicate the MPI across the state.

Last month, Beauregard and EWIB Chairman of the Board Chris Jewell went to Washington, D.C., for a workforce development roundtable with representatives from multiple federal departments.

Some expressed concern that such intense focus on defense manufacturing creates too much regional dependence on the Pentagon for jobs, but Beauregard noted the pipeline prototype was not designed exclusively for one industry.

It's "portable to apply in a geographic sense somewhere else, and it's portable to apply to another industry," he said, such as health care.

Another criticism is that, as a private company with a lot of money, EB shouldn't need this much funding from the state.

The median age of those enrolled in the program through Nov. 26 is 28, with nearly 43 percent of participants between the ages of 20 and 30, according to EWIB.

Forty-one percent have no education level beyond a high school diploma, while another 33 percent have completed some college but don't have a degree.

The enrollees are 86 percent male, with women ranging from 7 percent in the electrical classes to 25 percent in design. More than 83 percent of the participants are white, while 11.5 percent are black, and 12 percent listed their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino.

Groton, New London, Montville and Norwich have yielded the most people in the MPI — more than 51 each. Enrollees have come from as far as Milford and Shelton.

Beauregard has a knack for seamlessly bringing up the program in conversation. It's like he has turned the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon into the Six Degrees of the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, but it usually takes him but one or two degrees.

At business breakfasts and board meetings, you hear about how the MPI is helping the unemployed and underemployed. You hear the latest numbers on job placements.

But it's another experience to hear the individual stories of MPI participants. Through EWIB, The Day connected with four people who completed the program and now are employed by Electric Boat or another local manufacturer.

Aaron Robbins, 27, had spent the past several years working at Stop & Shop, and recently had finished his associate degree in information technology but wasn't having luck finding a job.

Figuring that he has "a lot of technical skills as far as computer repair and messing around with gadgets goes," the Norwich resident started the outside machinist class in April 2017. Afterward, he accepted an offer from EB only to later be told he couldn't get a security clearance, though Robbins said he never found out why.

He started a job at General Dynamics Information Technology, based in Pawcatuck, in January. Robbins said he's "not 100 percent satisfied yet," in terms of opportunities and pay, "but that'll all come with time." He is pleased with the benefits package; turning 26 at Stop & Shop and having to get on state insurance was a struggle.

William Carroll III, who lives in Stonington, had been working as a home aide for acquired brain injury patients, but he didn't find the work challenging and ended up in the pipeline after others he worked with entered.

Carroll, 51, had to quit his job to take the design engineering class, because the course ran at the same time as his shift.

"I kind of jumped on with my fingers cross, and I had to cut the lifeline for my other job," Carroll said. He added, "I put all my eggs in one basket, and thank God — thank God — it paid off." He has been working at EB for 12 weeks.

"I can pay my (expletive) bills," he said.

John Matusiak had spent the past 10 years as a caregiver for his disabled mother, but after she died last year, he "needed a complete change of pace." He heard about the pipeline on Reddit. The 32-year-old took the welding class and is now a tradesman at Collins & Jewell in Bozrah.

Chinette Jimenez, 29, spent seven years working in supermarkets and held a job at PCC Structurals before finding herself unemployed for a year. She finished the welding program in late 2017, got an offer from EB within a week, and now can see herself staying there for the rest of her working life.

"Before entering the pipeline, it was kind of bad. It was just living week by week, and just trying to get the bills paid, you know?" she said. "But now I opened a 401K; I'm being able to save money. There's like a future, you keep on progressing."

e.moser@theday.com



SARAH GORDON/THE DAY

Instructor Cecil Carter talks about designing a pipe during a design class on Dec. 12 at Ella T. Grasso Southeastern Technical High School in Groton. The class is part of the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, which so far has placed more than 1,200 workers.

How to enroll

Visit ewib.org/pipeline and click "apply here" to fill out the application. The next step is to complete a skills assessment on basic math, spatial reasoning and shop safety. Those who don't pass can take a two-week refresher course or be referred to the American Job Center, while those who pass are directed to complete profiles on the Connecticut Department of Labor and Electric Boat websites. Then comes an information session about available training and job-search opportunities.

READER COMMENTS

Erna Luering 12 hours ago Report

I am SO pleased to read this article! it reminds me of when there were plenty of important jobs during and after WWII, and hardly enough workers to go around. This is a blessing for Connecticut, and we need more jobs, whether they are heavy duty jobs or manufacturing clothes or canoes, or whatever . The healthy state needs to offer a variety of jobs so that people have the opportunity to find a niche that they can shine at their work, and enjoy being there. Variety... that's what will strengthen our economic health. Nafta may have worked; but the minute that became law, USA stopped making shoes, factories went south, and we suffered a huge blow to our economic health on all fronts.

Dan McCarthy a day ago Report

This sounds like a well thought out partnership to help people find well paying jobs while learning a skill without the burden of higher education debt which often comes with no employable skill.