



MID-SOUTH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

April 25, 2014

MSCC, Southwest Tennessee Community College Sponsor Employer Forum

The Greater Memphis Workforce Development Institute, an unprecedented collaboration between Mid-South Community College and Southwest Tennessee Community College, celebrated an ending and beginning at the recent Employer Forum in West Memphis.

“Usually you talk about something like this as a beginning, but I actually I think of this as something of an end,” said Dexter Muller, interim president of the Greater Memphis Chamber of Commerce, during his presentation. “Three or four years ago, we came over to Mid-South because you had received some grants and wanted to have employers give you counsel as to what the training program needed to look like. I thought, ‘Well, that’s a novel idea.’



“We came over and started seeing it, and I thought, ‘This is amazing.’ I brought everybody over, and we started forming that partnership. People began to realize that we all go down or progress together, so in that sense it’s an end of that process. But it is also beginning because I’ve never seen a partnership that I think is as progressive as the Greater Memphis Workforce Development Institute.”

Representatives of numerous employers, MSCC, SWTCC, the Greater Memphis Chamber, the Arkansas State Chamber, and The Manufacturing Institute participated in the day-long event on the MSCC campus. The forum focused on the development



and delivery of industry-relevant, hands-on training and fast-track career options to build a skilled workforce, particularly in machining, welding, and industrial maintenance.

“This is a very positive first step in helping to create a vision and a better ability within our region to produce and sustain the kind of workforce that is so desperately needed to move us forward,” said MSCC President Dr. Glen Fenter. “This Tennessee-Arkansas collaboration has created a synergy that certainly has never existed but could potentially be very powerful.

“It only made sense to merge our efforts and be smarter about how we work together and most importantly be able to provide a very enhanced and expanded level of service to our business and industry clients whether they are in Tennessee or Arkansas.”

John Churchill, executive director of Workforce Development at SWTCC and director of the Workforce Development Institute, praised MSCC for its leadership in galvanizing regional efforts.

“Mid-South Community College and Dr. Fenter really reached across the river and asked, ‘Can’t we do this together?’ If we’re all trying to compete with one another while looking over our shoulders, we’re feeding off each other and not feeding off the needs of industry and the needs of the companies in the area.

“I think Dr. Fenter has finally convinced people that working together we can solve the big problems. We can all have our own little niches and specialties, but we can work together and strengthen each other.”

For a variety of reasons, a significant “skills gap” has developed in the national workforce, especially in technical areas. Progressive educational institutions like MSCC and SWTCC have had difficulties while trying to buck the traditional academic and funding models to deliver what is needed.

Dr. Gibson “Sunny” Morris, who retired from MSCC in 2013 and is now consulting for Workforce First in Memphis, said the time for collective change is now.

“Quite frankly, employers on both sides of the river haven’t been happy,” Morris said during a panel discussion. “There has been a pretty big effort driven by employers, particularly in Memphis, to address that. Essentially what we’ve had going on in our institutions and organizations that are supposed to provide a skilled workforce for employers is an inward focus, often driven by faculty.”

Business and industries in Memphis are “not going to take ‘no’ for an answer,” Dr. Morris continued. “That’s why we’re trying to unite...to instigate a unified workforce development system for the Greater Memphis region which includes most of eastern Arkansas. You can’t have economic development if you don’t have workforce development.”

Randy Zook, President and CEO of the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce, said efforts to change the educational system are vital to the future of the region and country.

“We realize that we have an economy in Arkansas that is not running at its potential for a host of reasons, including a shortage of people with the right employment skills,” he said. “In many cases, the resources, assets, equipment, plants, and raw materials are in place; we just don’t have enough people to meet the potential demand of business. There is not an adequate supply of kids coming along to backfill the positions that are open now or will be opening soon, much less create growth opportunities.”



“The challenge becomes, how do we channel state money more effectively and more strategically? The K-12 system gets the lion’s share of the general revenue in Arkansas, about 42 percent. We just, with blind faith, throw more money into the K-12 system thinking, ‘Surely, we’ll do better.’ The facts belie that. The fact is over the years since the Lakeview Case we have dramatically increased our funding per student but have not seen attendant improvements and results.”

Zook said the funding situation that MSCC faces while trying to train the workforce of the present and future is a travesty.

“If you knew the details of way Mid-South Community College is underfunded on an operating basis, you would be shocked, stunned and would say ‘What a colossal screw-up,’ and you’d be absolutely right,” he explained. “We’re trying to marshal the business community’s support for strategic realignment of funding streams across the whole spectrum of education services provided so that we are smarter, more focused and aligned with the needs of the 21st century, and not the 20th or even 19th.”

Brent Weil, senior vice president of The Manufacturing Institute, a nonprofit affiliate of the National Association of Manufacturers, praised the efforts to connect curriculum with business and industry needs.

“The pipeline of talented workers is the single greatest factor in the growth and vitality of a regional economy,” he said “This cross-border partnership is literally building bridges between counties in a way that will give greater opportunity to citizens from across the Memphis area.”

Following presentations and panel discussions, MSCC machining, welding, mechatronics, and process technology instructors told their stories, and the lunch hour included an open dialog between employers and educators. The day’s activities concluded with vendor demonstrations and training.

For information about job-relevant training at MSCC, visit the campus at 2000 West Broadway in West Memphis, call (870) 733-6722, see the website at www.midsouthcc.edu, or email admissions@midsouthcc.edu.