



PROVIDED BY BLUE RIDGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

GF Linamar LLC is opening a light metal die-casting factory in Mills River that will employ 350 people. Many of them will receive the specific skills they'll need at Blue Ridge Community College's Southeastern Advanced Molding Technology Education Center.

Equal opportunity

North Carolina's workforce-training programs specialize in meeting the unique needs of its diverse workers and businesses.

Counting North Carolina's workers is straightforward. There were 4.7 million of them in September, according to the N.C. Department of Commerce. But describing them, and those who want to join their ranks, is more difficult. There are high-school students with college-worthy grades who would rather work with their hands. There are parents interested in higher-paying advanced-manufacturing jobs but can't invest the time in returning to school. And there are plenty of military veterans who leave the service at one of the state's seven bases but want to stay and work in North Carolina.

The diversity of workers is matched only by the variety of businesses in the Old North State. While that makes a strong economy, finding workers with skills specific to each business is a challenge. The state's numerous workforce-development services are making that easier. *Site Selection* magazine called them the Southeast's best in 2015 and 2016 because of workforce-development expenditures, percentage of workers with a National Career Readiness Certificate and other factors.

One of the most far-reaching programs is Commerce's NCWorks, which coordinates job recruitment and workforce training through N.C. Community College System,

N.C. Department of Public Instruction, N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, and local workforce-development boards. "North Carolina has some of the best workforce programs available anywhere in the country, and NCWorks is building a coordinated system of services focused on serving the people and businesses of North Carolina," says Napoleon Wallace, Commerce's deputy secretary for rural economic development and workforce solutions.

Switzerland-based Georg Fischer Ltd. and Canada-based Linamar Corp. are partners in GF Linamar LLC. Its light metal die-casting factory in Mills River will produce lightweight power-train, drive-line and other parts for the auto industry starting next summer. The plant is a \$271 million investment that will create about 350 jobs over six years. A training effort at Blue Ridge Community College, which has campuses in Henderson and Transylvania counties, will ensure there are candidates to fill those positions.

Southeastern Advanced Molding Technology Education Center, or SAMTEC, in Hendersonville opened in January 2016, less than a year after GF Linamar announced its factory. Shanda Bedoian, Blue Ridge's corporate and customized-training director, says it's the only place in the nation that offers hands-on learning for maintenance, technology, operations and quality control in high-pressure die casting. She credits cooperation from GF Linamar suppliers and the "phenomenal" partnership of Blue Ridge, the community-college system and Henderson County for its speedy creation. A \$550,000 grant from Rocky Mount-based Golden LEAF Foundation, which invests the state's portion of the national tobacco settlement in economic-development projects, bought its training equipment.

SAMTEC has trained 13 workers with dozens more expected to participate in an eight-week training course over the next year. Specially trained instructors will teach them technical and softer business skills, Bedoian says.

"That's the way real life is. When you get in a plant, you need to be able to look at

multiple angles and respond to any problems that arise."

The service is offered at no cost to GF Linamar because the company meets job-creation and capital-investment thresholds. Maureen Little, vice president of economic development for the community-college system, says about 35,500 people from 922 companies received customized training during fiscal year 2015-16. Some of that work is done at training centers like SAM-

TEC, including one at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College. Its Composites Training Center of Excellence opened in 2014 to train workers for Evendale, Ohio-based GE Aviation's nearly \$40 million advanced manufacturing plant, which opened in Asheville the same year.

Winterville-based Pitt Community College is helping Cleveland-based Hyster-Yale Materials Handling Inc. improve the productivity of workers at subsidiary Hyster-

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Yale Group's Americas headquarters and factory in Greenville. About halfway through the three-year project, the college has trained more than 175 of the plant's 500 workers. Its 32 classes cover project management, troubleshooting and lean manufacturing.

Jerry Jones, PCC's director of business and industry continuing education and community development, says Hyster-Yale doesn't pay for the training because it is spending capital, creating jobs and helping employees learn cutting-edge skills. "Employee feedback from the courses has exceeded expectations," says Mary Paramore, Hyster-Yale's learning and development specialist. "The community college works with our schedule, allowing us to offer a mix of online and on-site classes at times that minimize the impact on production."

Apprenticeships have been more popular in Europe than in the U.S. But that's changing, especially in North Carolina, where businesses, public schools and community colleges have united to cre-

ate them. Apprenticeship 2000 began in Charlotte in 1995, when executives from high-tech manufacturers took a proactive approach to employee recruitment and training, says Andreas Thurner, technical training manager at Stanley-based cabinet hardware manufacturer Blum Inc., one of the program's two founding companies. More than 20 years later, Apprenticeship 2000 has trained 420 people, includes 60 member companies and has inspired more than 10 similar programs statewide.

Through its partnership with Charlotte-based Central Piedmont Community College and public schools, Apprenticeship 2000 offers high-school seniors free community-college education coupled with a paying part-time job. Participants finish the four-year program with an associate degree, the specific skills needed for a full-time job with an annual salary of \$36,000 at a member company and no college debt. "By the time they're in the third year of the program, they might have enough to buy a house," Thurner

says. Blum has 60 employees who went through the program, which invests about \$170,000 per apprentice.

Gaston College's Apprenticeship 321, whose name reflects the highway that runs by the college and through the region's manufacturing corridor, was launched with a \$200,000 grant from the National Science Foundation in 2015. "Gaston College has the privilege of working with nine innovative companies that are on the cutting-edge in job development and industry growth that will strengthen the economy of our region," President Patricia Skinner said in a statement.

North Carolina's strong military presence has many benefits, including providing disciplined and industrious workers to new and expanding businesses. To harness that potential, Fayetteville Technical Community College created Transition Tech. It's an option for the more than 7,000 soldiers who transition out of the service at nearby Fort Bragg each year. "The volume of who we're seeing is just incredible," says Jolee Marsh, the college's associate vice president of corporate and continuing education. "Most of our classes are booked until next June."

Marsh says Transition Tech's training ends in certificates or credentials. The program has two components: industry credential classes and programs approved by Army Career Skills. "The approved Career Skills Programs aid transitioning soldiers and veterans by allowing them to participate in civilian training, credentialing, apprenticeship and internship programs starting up to six months before separation from military service." Its classes run 10 to 12 weeks and include pipe fitting, welding, collision repair and logistics. Classes for utilities and cybersecurity companies are in the works. Participants also are taught job-search skills including resume writing and interviewing.

The only such program in the state, Transition Tech started with support from Greenville-based East Carolina University in 2014. It has trained almost 600 people, including veterans and former civilian employees of the Army. ■

— Suzanne Wood is a freelance writer from Raleigh.

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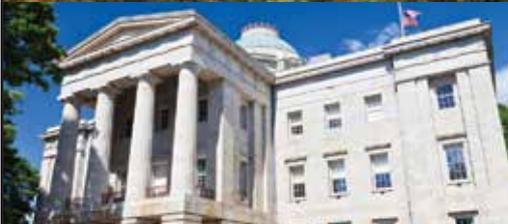
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