

# MEP and America's Community Colleges: Enhancing the Partnership

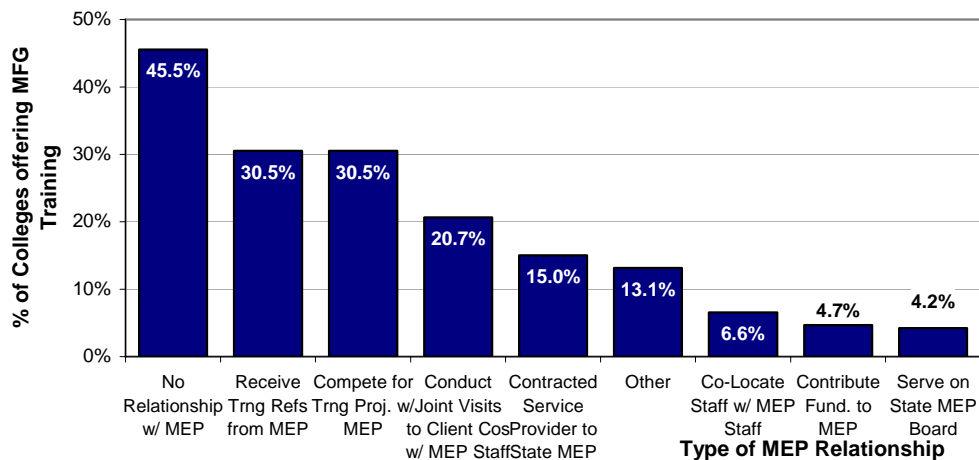
During the summer and fall of 2005, the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC)—with support from the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP)—conducted a mail survey of the nation's 1,013 community colleges. The purpose of the survey was to learn more about custom-designed, industry-targeted courses and curricula (or "specialized industry training"). More than 400 colleges responded to the survey conducted in collaboration with the American Association of Community Colleges.

The most common types of specialized training programs offered include those for business, management & finance-related occupations. About 56 percent of the responding colleges indicated that they offer specialized training for production or manufacturing workers. The average college educated or trained about 860 students in production-related occupations last year. This translates to about 871,000 enrolled students in related programs, representing about 6 percent of manufacturing workers. The largest community colleges were much more likely to have specialized manufacturing training programs with almost two-thirds of colleges with more than 20,000 enrolled students offering manufacturing training programs while only 42 percent of colleges with fewer than 5,000 enrolled students offering related programs. High equipment costs or difficulty in finding qualified instructors represented two of the most important reasons why smaller colleges were unable to offer specialized manufacturing-related training.

## *Relations with the Manufacturing Extension Partnerships*

In analyzing the results of the survey, CREC was particularly interested in learning more about the relationship between the colleges and MEP. Of the 213 responding colleges that offered some form of training or education for manufacturing and production-oriented occupations, about 55 percent acknowledge some form of relationship with their state MEP program. Larger community colleges were more likely to report a relationship with MEP than were smaller ones. Of all the

**Figure 1: MEP Relationship with Colleaes offerina MFG-related**



colleges reporting some form of relations, many receive training referrals, conduct joint visits to client companies, serve on the MEP board, or co-locate staff with the MEP. However, not all of the relationships were collaborative as some institutions reported that they compete with the MEP or have some other relationship.

Among the colleges with the most collaborative relationships, nearly 7 percent co-locate staff with the MEP, 5 percent contribute funding to the state MEP program, and 4 percent serve on the MEP statewide board of directors. Several colleges provide illustrations of these relationships. Jefferson State Community College (AL) and Greenville Technical College (SC) both co-locate staff with their state MEP and serve on the state MEP board. South Suburban Community College (IL), Fox Valley Technical College (WI) and Lakeshore Technical College (WI) all co-locate staff and contribute funding to their state MEP. Given their relatively active involvement with their state MEP, the experiences of these colleges may provide examples of successful practices in building collaboration between specialized community college training programs and state MEP technical assistance efforts.

Other trends emerge when we examine the MEP relationship through a multi-state regional perspective. Table 1 reveals the regional differences between survey respondents offering manufacturing-related training by region. Colleges in the traditional manufacturing regions of New England, the Mid Atlantic, the East North Central, and the West North Central were most likely to have a relationship with their MEP stakeholders. Areas where manufacturing was a relatively smaller segment of the state's economic development efforts, such as the Western and Mountain states, had a lower percentage of respondents with an MEP relationship. The Mountain region was the lowest, with less than 30 percent of respondents indicating an MEP relationship.

Training referrals from the State MEP represent the most frequently cited type of MEP relationship. Over 30 percent of the colleges offering manufacturing-related training received training referrals from their State MEP. More than 20 percent of colleges conducted joint visits to client companies with their MEP staff, while another 15 percent indicated that they were contracted service providers for their State MEP. These activities play an important role not only in actual training but also in making area manufacturers aware of the services available to them.

Competitive relations existing among about one-third of the colleges involved in providing manufacturing-related training. This figure accounts for over 48 percent of all the respondents that indicated that they have a relationship with their state MEP.

**Table 1: MEP Relationship by Region for Colleges offering MFG Training**

Region	Compete	Yes	No Relationship	% With an MEP Relationship	% w/ competitive MEP Relationship
New England	3	7	1	87.5%	42.9%
Mid Atlantic	9	17	8	68.0%	52.9%
East North Central	10	19	7	73.1%	52.6%
West North Central	7	17	12	58.6%	41.2%
South Atlantic	14	28	30	48.3%	50.0%
East South Central	4	11	8	57.9%	36.4%
West South Central	4	9	12	42.9%	44.4%
Mountain	1	2	5	28.6%	50.0%
Pacific	4	6	11	35.3%	66.7%
Unknown	0	0	3	0.0%	
Total	56	116	97	54.5%	48.3%

Larger colleges (serving more than 20,000 students) were more likely than others to report a competitive relationship with their state MEP. Also, colleges in the East North Central, Mid Atlantic, New England and Pacific regions were more likely to see their State MEP as a competitor. About two-thirds of colleges in the Pacific region felt they were competing with MEP. The community college-state MEP relationship was least competitive in the East South Central region with only 36.4 percent reporting that the colleges and MEP compete for projects.

### **Conclusions**

Specialized industry training programs are nearly ubiquitous among America's community colleges, but only about half of the colleges offer training for production occupations. These programs offer an opportunity for colleges to develop a direct relationship with local companies and to generate resources to support training activities. Increasingly, state educational systems are challenging colleges to increase their linkages with industry – to meet economic development goals, to meet statewide training/education goals, and to leverage state education funding with private sector investments.

As manufacturing continues to become increasingly technology-oriented, it will also rely ever more heavily on capital-intensive equipment that will need to be continuously updated. Larger companies with the resources available to provide state-of-the-art equipment for training or with sufficient space to allow for on-site specialized training will likely have an important influence on the types of training that will be available for production occupations. The risk is that smaller colleges and smaller manufacturers (without the resources to contribute state-of-the-art training equipment to their local college) may be left behind.

The survey found that many community colleges view lean and quality training as a source of industry-training revenue. Unfortunately, a number of MEP programs also rely on these programs for their own funding. Not surprisingly, this has led to a greater sense of competition between the two potential allies. It will be imperative for community colleges and MEP alike to diversify their contract training revenue base to other sources of funds.

With an average budget of about \$300,000 per year, specialized training programs are relatively small so the revenues generated from training can be critically important to many colleges. To be successful in meeting this rapidly growing need, community colleges will need to leverage effective partnerships with MEP and private partners. Combined, this more integrated economic development effort will help us ensure that the US has a globally competitive workforce.