



## **South Carolina will not thrive without educated workers**

**By Karen Owens, President, Silver Crescent Foundation**

The skill sets required by South Carolina's manufacturing industry have changed a good deal in the last few decades. Years ago, a person who hadn't finished high school could have the skills to become a valuable employee in a local manufacturing plant and earn a good living.

Back then, the industry was different and South Carolina wasn't facing much competition. Today our manufacturing industry is competing with dozens of countries—and millions of workers—around the world, who can almost always perform the work ably and at a lower cost. Increasingly, the manufacturing operations that remain in the United States don't compete on cost; rather, they use new technologies to create higher-value products that can't be found anywhere else. Facilities use highly advanced processes and sophisticated equipment, and they require educated workers with strong backgrounds in engineering, science, technology, and math. Many plant managers won't consider applicants who don't have a high school diploma or GED.

Unfortunately, not as many of today's students are choosing to study math and science. Those who do may dismiss a career in manufacturing, picturing an old-fashioned factory that is noisy and dirty, with work that is repetitive and unchallenging. Many teachers and parents hold this bias as well, steering students toward four-year college degrees without even considering the value of a technical education and the advantages of a high-paying job in manufacturing.

The fact is manufacturing pays wages that are typically 25 percent higher than non-manufacturing jobs, even in today's uncertain economic climate. Manufacturers require workers who are not only smart and skilled, but who are creative, innovative, and enthusiastic about making the products that make people's lives better, safer, and more convenient.

A career in manufacturing can be so much more than running equipment or making parts. Manufacturers have finance, sales and marketing, and information technology departments. They need experts in training, logistics, and distribution. They need software developers. And some even need chemists and lab technicians.

Businesses must step up to help change the mindsets of teachers, parents, and most importantly, students, about what it means to be successful and what kind of career will give them fulfillment and support a high quality of life. We need to make our students understand the vital contribution that they can make to society by being a part of the manufacturing community.

If we don't succeed in encouraging more students to explore and choose careers in manufacturing, South Carolina will not have the skilled and capable workers that the best companies need, and we'll be passed over for other locations with more educated workers. South Carolina needs to attract more advanced manufacturing companies paying higher wages if we want to raise our per capita income so that it's equal to or above the national average.

The Silver Crescent Foundation is committed to promoting manufacturing vitality and career opportunities in South Carolina. By helping people of all ages and backgrounds discover manufacturing, we are working to fill our state's future workforce pipeline with the creative and educated workers that our existing companies and newly recruited ones require to thrive and prosper.

We support a number of programs designed to change people's perceptions about today's manufacturing environment. From Camp Success, our week-long academic summer camps for middle school students, to our Student Design Challenge competitions that foster creativity and imagination, we are committed to helping young people understand the real world connection between using their aptitude in science and math to making the world a better place to live.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, South Carolina's employment demand is projected to increase by 16 percent by 2030, yet our available labor pool is expected to grow by only 7 percent for the same time period.

We need to do everything we can to make sure this number is wrong. We must teach students from an early age that dropping out of high school is an even worse decision today than it was in the past. We need to communicate to students of all abilities that manufacturing is a desirable and rewarding career choice. If we don't, we will continue to fall further behind in the global economy.

***The Silver Crescent Foundation promotes manufacturing vitality and career opportunities in South Carolina***