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RCC plans Southern Oregon manufacturing training hub

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Rogue Community College in downtown Medford. Manufacturing training hubs will open at each of RCC's three campuses in Medford, White City and Grants Pass.

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Rogue Community College will offer eligible small manufacturers hands-on instruction designed to improve efficiency, workforce skills and government-contract readiness.

Rogue Community College will serve as Southern Oregon's training hub for a new statewide program aimed at helping small manufacturers improve their technology, workforce and ability to compete for government contracts.

The U.S. Small Business Administration awarded Oregon State University $5 million to lead the initiative in Western Oregon. Of that, $770,000 is designated for RCC to provide free training and technical assistance to eligible manufacturers in Jackson and Josephine counties.

RCC plans to offer training at its facilities in White City, Medford and Grants Pass. The program is expected to begin in November.

The 12-month initiative is part of the SBA's Empower to Grow program, a broader federal effort to strengthen domestic manufacturing.

Stephen Phelps, RCC's dean of instruction and student engagement, said the partnership draws on the schools' different roles.

"[OSU's] mission really is research-oriented, which is a significant divergence from us," Phelps said. "Our mission is to supply the workforce."

RCC will offer two main types of training. Short, hands-on courses will teach workers how to use manufacturing equipment. Those courses could last from a few hours to a week.

Phelps said RCC is still deciding which equipment to purchase and assigning faculty members to the program.

The college will also teach lean manufacturing, which focuses on reducing waste and making production more efficient.

"We kept hearing people saying, 'I need to be more efficient with this,' or, 'How can I be more efficient?'" Phelps said. "You start to get this idea of this is what people need."

The statewide initiative expects to work with about 100 manufacturing firms and 400 participants. Phelps hopes at least a quarter of those participants will receive training through RCC.

When the grant ends, he said, the college will retain the equipment and expertise developed through the program and use them to train students and workers.

RCC plans to recruit manufacturers from several industries, including aerospace and engineered wood products.

One potential participant is Advanced Composite Solutions Inc., a Central Point company that repairs and fabricates composite aircraft parts.

CEO Sarah Hess said she and her husband and business partner, Greg Hess, supported the program when Phelps asked for their input.

Hess said business management courses at RCC helped them expand the company. But she said further growth will require more equipment and workers with the skills needed to seek government contracts.

“We don’t have enough qualified people that actually understand what it takes to bid on government jobs,” Hess said.

Advanced Composite Solutions supplies parts to Erickson Inc., a Central Point company that manufactures and services heavy-lift helicopters. Hess said aerospace manufacturing requires companies to document each component and material used in an aircraft part.

“You have to have accountability and be able to trace down to the screw that you may have put in one of these composite parts,” she said.

Hess hopes RCC’s program will help build a workforce prepared for that level of precision and accountability.

Phelps said the training could also make local manufacturers more competitive for contracts and other funding opportunities.

“If we can get the incumbent workers trained,” he said, “that makes these companies eligible for additional funding sources, or it assists in making them eligible or being more competitive.”