Partners in the Future:

Industry, community college and the Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center

By Adam Aurand

**Thinking of attending college?
Why not start while in high school?**

That's the mantra of the Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center (RMCTC) and others, who offer high school students college credits while attending their programs in 10th, 11th and/or 12th grade.

RMCTC's technical academy is a close partnership with Reading Area Community College (RACC) to give high school graduates a pathway to an associate's degree in mechatronics engineering technology. But it was local industry that spurred both schools to action.

"The technical academy really started with the need of our manufacturing community," says RMCTC director Gerald Witmer. As more manufacturers replace human workers with sophisticated robotics, their need grows for employees who can manage and repair that machinery.

Manufacturers are shedding some jobs, Witmer admits, "but the jobs they're shedding are more manual jobs. The jobs that they're adding are more high-skilled jobs." Those jobs are what RMCTC and RACC hope to prepare students to obtain.

Students from Reading and Muhlenberg school districts must meet certain criteria for admission into the academy: a 3.0 GPA or special permission from the school, demonstrated math and reading proficiency on the state's Keystone Exams and commitment to continue an academic course sequence at their sending high school in line with expectations for a college preparatory student.

The results can be a boon to students academically – and financially. Students in the technical academy are dual enrolled in RMCTC and RACC, with access to RACC's library, community systems and other resources. They begin receiving a transcript form RACC and will take courses on the college campus their senior year of high school. By the time the student receives a diploma, he or she has already earned 27 credits toward RACC's 71-credit associate's degree.

"That's 27 credits at no cost – and they are the technical credits, which are much more expensive," Witmer says. A full mechatronics degree from RACC costs about $35,000. After those credits are fulfilled, the balance of credits are charged at the general education rate, less than $8,000.
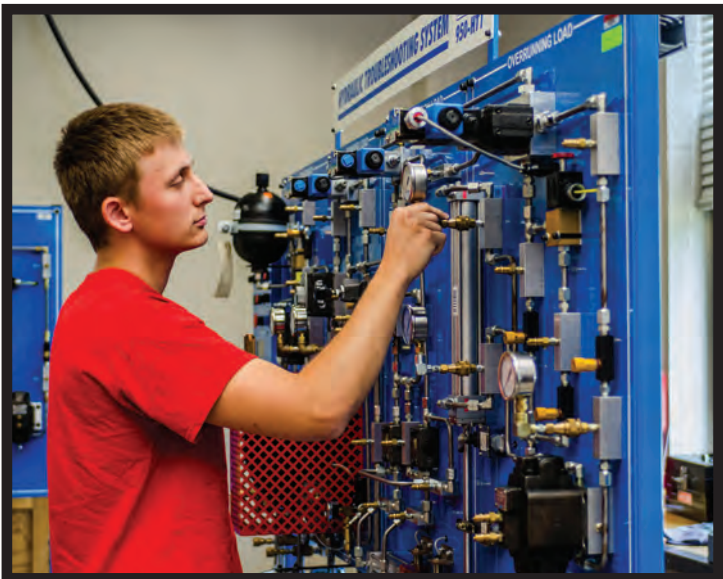
As for job placement after college?

"A 100% placement rate," Witmer says. "We don't have enough trained workers to fill the posi-

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Adam M. Aurand is the public relations/grant writing specialist at Conestoga Valley SD (Lancaster Co.)

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ating a worker who can go into a supervisory role with a strong technical background," Witmer says.

Industry meanwhile, chips in with a marketing campaign to get students interested in manufacturing and healthcare careers. The Greater Reading Economic Partnership launched the "Learn to Earn" campaign and built a website, www.careersin2years.com, it hopes will be replicated across the state. The site says one-third of the 47 million job openings projected by 2018 will require an associate's degree or certification. It's pitch: Get a degree and land a high-paying job in two years or less.

Witmer thinks more K-12/college/industry partnerships will sprout up in the years ahead as families struggle to afford college.

"Sending kids off to college with no guarantee of employment and with tens of thousands of dollars in debt is not sustainable," he predicts. "Parents and kids are becoming smarter shoppers more aware of value." **b**

tions. Here in the greater Reading area, we have some very large manufacturers, East Penn Manufacturing, Hershey Foods, Bayer, Pepperidge Farms."

The track does not have to end with an associate's degree. This spring, RACC signed a guaranteed admissions agreement with Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania to offer students a bachelor's degree in technical leadership.

"Basically it's combining the technical skills that students have with supervisory and leadership, cre-