LUMINA FOUNDATION

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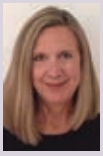
Dream teams

Local collaboration key as cities work to realize a talent-building vision

INSIDE



Editor's note: The stories in this issue of Focus were reported and written by Susan Headden, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and communications professional with many years of experience covering education issues. Headden, a former staff writer at The Indianapolis Star, worked nearly 16 years at U.S. News & World Report, ultimately serving as a managing editor. She later held senior positions at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. She now works as a communications consultant based in Washington, D.C.

On the cover: Johnathan Williams (center), got a lot of help while earning the bachelor's degree he'll pick up this December at Wayne State University. Williams, 46, dropped out of the Detroit university in 1991 but recently returned, thanks to Wayne State's aggressive outreach efforts. Williams' support team includes Bursar Shelia Stewart (center, next to Williams) and (clockwise, from left): Associate Vice President Dawn Medley; Louis Krause from the financial aid office; Academic Advisor Jay Jessen; Enrollment Management Project Director Amanda Rosales, and Selvana Evans, an academic advisor in the business school. It's a big support group, but there's an even larger team devoted to the success of students in Detroit. Community, business, and education leaders are working in concert — well beyond the Wayne State campus — to solidify the city's status as a Talent Hub.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Even in today's digitized, algorithm-driven world, there's a lot to be said for the do-it-yourself spirit. That drive — to blaze a trail, to shape a new tool or a work of art, to devise a unique solution for a particular problem — is deeply human, part of who we are. And it has enriched us all, in ways great and small.

Think about it. Without the D-I-Y spirit, entrepreneurs don't exist. There's no such thing as craft beer … or Etsy … or Amazon … or even the internet. All of these things, and thousands of other innovations that make modern life livable, spring from our creative core, our desire to strike out in new directions and make our own choices.

Mind you, D-I-Y isn't about going it alone. In fact, because humans are social animals, creation through collaboration is typically the most productive route. Two heads — in fact, many heads — are better than one, especially when we face complex or stubborn problems. We see that play out again and again in our daily lives. Neighbors rely on each other, not on distant institutions or government agencies, to get things done. Crowd-funding campaigns … grassroots movements … responses to natural disasters and the opioid crisis — D-I-Y drives all of these efforts.

And in cities and towns all over the nation, this same spirit is being harnessed to address an increasingly urgent need: the need for talent. Faced with a rapidly changing economy, communities coast to coast are pulling together to make sure their residents have the knowledge and skills they need — and ones that area employers demand.

Each locale has its own approach, but one thing is vital to all: the power of collaboration. For any site to succeed in developing home-grown talent, ***all*** of the relevant stakeholders matter, and all must work together. That includes area employers, workforce-development entities, local and state policymakers, philanthropic and community-based organizations, and educators at all levels — from pre-K to college and beyond.

Again, this type of cross-sector collaboration is happening across the country, with cities and towns leaning into the effort of boosting educational attainment among their residents. This issue of Focus magazine takes an up-close look at that trend by focusing on some of the best exemplars we know: the sites that we at Lumina Foundation call Talent Hubs.

The Talent Hub designation — conferred by Lumina, with support from The Kresge Foundation — signifies that a community has already made strides in increasing education attainment and is able to implement an ambitious talent-development plan. These are places that focus on completion, not just enrollment. They demonstrate strong local partnerships and an unwavering commitment to achieving racial and economic justice. They seek to address the long-term, holistic educational and employment needs of their residents. And they work at the systems level to create meaningful change in institutional, local, and state policy.

So far, there are 24 official Talent Hubs, and each one tackles the talent-development challenge in ways that work best for that community.

This issue of Focus highlights three of those singular sites:

- You'll visit Detroit, a Rust Belt city undergoing an impressive rebirth after years of urban decay. Wayne State University is aiding that renaissance through a debt-forgiveness program that encourages students who have "stopped out" to return to school.
- You'll travel to Indiana's Elkhart County, where decidedly different cultures are combining — not clashing — for the common good. There, in the northern Indiana cities of Goshen and Elkhart, a progressive college founded by Mennonites works with RV-manufacturing firms to educate and empower the area's growing number of Latino residents.
- And during a visit to the port city of Mobile, Alabama, you'll see how several area colleges — formerly siloed competitors — are now working in concert. The goal, which is central to the identity of a campus-based advisor nicknamed "Pathway Bob," is to help students find clear pathways to graduation, and on to good-paying local jobs.

Along with these stories in the print version of the magazine, there's a trove of additional information on our website, www.luminafoundation.org. There, Focus offers several extra features, including compelling video and audio. We also provide links to a wealth of related material, including short profiles of each of the 24 locales that have earned the Talent Hubs designation.

All of the information in this issue of Focus is meant to serve one purpose: to encourage the D-I-Y spirit among local leaders all over this country. We want them — and our nation sorely ***needs*** them — to work together to develop and unleash the talent in their own backyards.

We at Lumina hope these real-life stories of community collaboration will inspire scores of cities and towns to write similar stories of their own.

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

Powerful partnerships fuel rebirth

DETROIT — In 2013, when this city became the largest U.S. municipality ever to file for bankruptcy, it was $18 billion in debt and had half the number of residents it did in 1980. Despite a recovering economy, one of every five working-age residents was unemployed, more than a third of city streetlights were out, and the police response time for emergencies averaged nearly an hour.

Today, it's hard to believe that the Motor City — its central core, at least — is that same place. Downtown is now a lively grid of renovated buildings, sports arenas, a light-rail system, pop-up boutiques, and beer gardens.

Sandy Baruah of the Detroit Regional Chamber is quick to point out the workforce challenge his city faces. "We don't have the skills available to match the demand," he says, "and unless we move quickly and boldly, that gap will widen."

of the Motor City

In June 2018, officials announced that Ford Motor Co. would buy and restore the most notorious monument to the city's decrepitude — the crumbling Michigan Central Station. It was a move celebrated nationwide, one that local leaders call transformative.

It also revealed a huge challenge. To realize its dream of returning to its roots as an economic powerhouse, Detroit needs a massive boost in local talent. At the same time, as shown by the empty lots and abandoned homes that still mar the rim neighborhoods, the poverty rate in Detroit is 34.5 percent, double the national average. And although unemployment has fallen to 7.4 percent, it doesn't reflect that nearly half of all working-age Detroiters — the vast majority of whom are African-American — aren't even looking for jobs. That is the lowest workforce-participation rate in the nation.

"In one respect the story is positive," says Sandy Baruah, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber. "Among our peers in North America, we have a built-in capacity. We have among the highest concentration of engineers and percentage of Ph.D.s. We have a strong higher education system. We have natural attributes — we're an outdoorsy state, we have lots of water, and a comparatively low cost of living. But on the negative side, we don't have the skills available to match the demand. And unless we move quickly and boldly, that gap will widen."

The needs are great — and varied. The automotive industry of the future requires tech-savvy workers, those with degrees that might not even exist yet – not just in electrical engineering, for instance, but in a combination of electrical and software engineering. Industry also is

Teaming up to flash the university's "W" sign, Wayne State Associate Provost Monica Brockmeyer (right) joins Associate Vice President Dawn Medley on the school's Detroit campus. The two are helping lead what Brockmeyer calls "a complete transformation of our undergraduate experience."

hungry for workers with basic skills such as numeracy and literacy and so-called soft skills such as how to conduct oneself in a job interview. Unskilled employees, meanwhile, are seeking entry-level positions with clear pathways, and they lack the means and training to earn certificates that lead to better-paying, family-sustaining jobs. They also need reliable child care and transportation.

Embracing a holistic approach

After years of trying, and largely failing, to solve these challenges, city leaders now realize that they must take a more holistic, regional approach. To repair the mismatch between employers' demands and the needs of the under- and unemployed, the region is building on a strong collaboration among business, education, and community groups. The goal is to capitalize on the city's earned reputation as a Talent Hub, a place where local entities work tirelessly — and ***together*** — to ensure residents have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. (See accompanying story.)

In particular, the Detroit Talent Hub is focused on a specific group of area residents: adults who have some college experience but no degree. These so-called stop-outs — those who have left school for a raft of reasons, personal, academic, and financial — are a large and promising bunch: some 690,000 Detroit-area residents in all.

Building on an existing compact among 10 regional postsecondary institutions, the Talent Hub partners are working to track and improve results for these stop-out adults. They're creating a dashboard to publicly share data (broken down by race and income) on previous experience, employment status and the like. They're also making a broad, collaborative effort to prevent students from stopping out in the first place — by making curricular changes and offering more robust advising, for instance.

But before the institutions can help these students complete their degrees, they have to find them. Using records from the past 15 years housed at the National Student Clearinghouse, Wayne State University and Macomb Community College have already identified nearly 53,000 "comebackers" for whom the schools have contacts. The institutions are reaching out on social media and working with business and community groups. They've placed stories in newspapers and on television, and they plan to post ads on buses. Working with the Episcopal Church's local Black Ministries organization, they even bought 5,000 paper fans to slip into church pews.

This academic year, Wayne State is offering comebackers perhaps its biggest carrot yet — a debt-forgiveness program called Warrior Way Back. The program waives past-due balances of up to $1,500 for all students seeking to complete their degrees. For full-time students, the first $500 will be waived the first semester, the second $500 the next semester, and so on. The ultimate goal is to eliminate students' outstanding debt as they make academic progress.

Such debt often stops students in their tracks. Traditionally, students with unpaid balances are prohibited from

What is a Talent Hub?

Talent Hubs are 24 communities that have shown the ability and commitment to significantly increase college-level learning among residents of all backgrounds. Talent Hubs are officially designated as such by Lumina Foundation, with support from the Kresge Foundation.

To earn designation as a Talent Hub, each of these sites truly works as a community. That is, its businesses, education leaders, and civic organizations work as a unit to attract, cultivate, and retain skilled and knowledgeable workers. Aligned and organized around this shared goal, they create multiple ways for individuals to earn college degrees, certificates and other quality credentials beyond a high school diploma.

Each hub has a backbone organization — a nonprofit entity that organizes and coordinates the work of the various local stakeholders. The hubs span the country — from New York City to Shasta County, California; from St. Louis to the Rio Grande Valley, from Boston to Austin.

They serve various populations. Some focus on African-American residents, some on Latinos, others on American Indians. Some hubs are targeting traditional college students; others are zeroing in on older students who left school before finishing degrees. But all share a commitment to eliminating disparities in educational outcomes among students of color.

The three Talent Hubs highlighted here — a northern industrial city (Detroit), a Midwest manufacturing center (Elkhart County, Indiana), and a historic Southern port (Mobile, Alabama) — differ widely in their cultures, demographics, and geography. But all are advancing economically, and through determined and creative collaboration, all are building the kinds of workforces that can match that growth.

For more about the Talent Hubs effort, visit: *https://www.luminafoundation.org/talent-hubs*

registering for classes, and their requests for transcripts — vital for transfer to another school — are denied.

"We have been holding transcripts hostage," says Dawn Medley, Wayne State's associate vice president for enrollment management, "because it's the only leverage we have."

Putting an end to that practice is not only good for students — especially students of color, who are disproportionately affected — it's also good for the health of the university, Medley says. As with many institutions, Wayne State, a public research institution with about 27,000 students, has seen its enrollment drop with recent population trends. Attracting stop-outs is one logical way to help bring those numbers up. "It can be hard to get this idea past the COOs," Medley says, "but by offering this $500 scholarship (the initial debt-forgiveness amount), we bring in $13,000 in tuition revenue."

'It was a bad decision'

Timothy Jones, a 39-year-old divorced father of one, took his first crack at college 18 years ago, pursuing a degree for just one semester before leaving in favor of a full-time job. "It was a bad decision," he says, "but my family needed the money."

Over the years, Jones has worked in restaurants and in the health care industry, most recently as a financial counselor at Detroit Medical Center. Last year, a vicious, untreatable infection from a spider bite caused him to lose a leg. That trauma, along with his desire to serve as a role model for his daughter, was a catalyst for Jones to finish his degree. At an information session for Warrior Way Back last summer, even physical pain couldn't keep him from standing in line for more than three hours to apply.

Jones, who left Wayne State with an unpaid balance of $1,500, admits he didn't distinguish himself academically during his first go-round at college. In fact, his low GPA threatened to keep him from qualifying for Warrior Way Back. Exceptions were made, though, and with the advice of counselors, he is starting slowly in his business management program. He's signed up for just nine credits, with classes in general business, Microsoft Excel, and the required "Introduction to Wayne State."

His advisors helped him create a schedule that allows him to continue to work full time at Detroit Medical Center so that he can manage the tuition with loans and financial aid. "At this time last year, I didn't know where my life was going," Jones says. "Now I've got my foot in the door and my behind on the line."

Louanne Romano, 52, first attended Wayne State in 2010, after receiving an associate degree from Macomb and being laid off from her job as a para-professional in a public school. But her plans to earn a bachelor's degree went off track when she took a full-time development job at a private high school. She switched to a part-time schedule at Wayne State, but even that course load proved too heavy with her job, a death in the family, and the financial strain of having her own children in college.

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Timothy Jones, 39, left college 18 years ago — after just one semester. But he's back on track now, thanks to a Wayne State debt-forgiveness program called Warrior Way Back. And he's serious about succeeding this time. As he puts it: "I've got my foot in the door and my behind on the line."


WAYNE STATE

Louanne Romano (center), joins fellow elementary education students Erika Wharfield (left) and Lillian Douma in class. Romano, 52, first attended Wayne State in 2010, but life events forced her to stop out for several years. The Warrior Way Back program paved the way for her return, and she's now on track to earn her bachelor's degree in December 2019.

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"It was just too much at the time, financially and emotionally," Romano says. So, she left Wayne State, leaving an unpaid balance of $1,485 — just under the limit to qualify for Warrior Way Back. This time around, she is finding a larger, more vibrant, and more diverse university — with more older students like her — in a city that's on the way up. "I'm an educator," she says, "so I like being in the classroom." Majoring in elementary education, she expects to graduate in December 2019.

'They are so responsive'

Among the first expected graduates under the debt-forgiveness program is 46-year-old Johnathan Williams, who was in his second year of work toward an accounting degree when he left Wayne State in 1991. Dealing with a heavy course load and the death of his father, Williams says he simply burned out and needed a break. Then, as he says, "life happened." He married, started a family, and took a job in information technology. He took evening courses here and there, but went back to Wayne State full time only after learning about Warrior Way Back.

Though skeptical at first, Williams is now delighted with Wayne State's commitment to his success. "What makes this so achievable is my support team; they are so responsive," he says. "Before I felt like I was just another student ID number. Now I feel like I have a whole team assigned specifically to me." Williams plans to graduate in December with his bachelor's degree in information management systems.

Wayne State's aggressive outreach to stop-outs builds on its longtime efforts to boost completion rates and improve outcomes. Those efforts have helped earn the university a national reputation as an institution passionately committed to student success. In recent years, Wayne State has hired 45 new academic advisors, added programs, enhanced institutional learning, and changed its financial aid policies in an effort to meet students' needs.

"We're in the middle of a complete transformation of our undergraduate experience," says Monica Brockmeyer, associate provost for student success. "We have gone from being a transactional campus to being a relational campus." The results look promising: In just the past six years, the university's six-year graduation rate has nearly doubled, from 26 percent to 47 percent.

Medley envisions a day when Wayne State will forgive debts of former students even if they re-enroll elsewhere — underscoring the point that boosting college completion is a goal that requires a regional approach. The university could enter a compact with a community college, for instance, based on the former Wayne State students taking a minimum number of credits at the community college.

Wayne State also hopes to inspire institutions nationwide to duplicate its efforts. The ultimate aim is that all colleges and universities will agree to release credits and transcripts for all transfers, regardless of student debts.

Meanwhile, students who have transferred to Wayne State from Macomb Community College or other

Timothy Jones proudly shows off a cell phone photo of his 10-year-old daughter, Trinity. Jones, a divorced father, says he decided to return to college, in part, to serve as a positive role model for his only child.

participating institutions, and who left before receiving an associate degree, can earn that degree retroactively, while still working toward the bachelor's.

Under the arrangement, known as "reverse transfer," Wayne State transfers the credits — at least 30 — back to the community college, which officially grants the associate degree. That credential has multiple benefits: It shows employers that these students are committed to finishing what they start, it provides better job opportunities for students still in school, and it improves the chances they will earn bachelor's degrees.

So far, that track record is not good. Less than 14 percent of Detroit's residents, and just 29 percent of those living in the Detroit metro area, hold bachelor's degrees. This is true even though having a college degree reduces the likelihood of unemployment from 35 percent to just 11 percent.

Non-academic barriers

Beyond Detroit's notoriously underperforming public schools, some surprising factors have hampered college completion and employment in the city, and local businesses are working with the community to address those factors.

One has been the state's much-reviled driver responsibility fees, under which drivers can lose their licenses if they fail to pay fines of up to $2,000 for certain offenses. Not surprisingly, the laws have disproportionately affected poor people: Without a license, and given the city's dearth of transportation options, it's hard for residents to get to work and school. According to Jeffrey Donofrio, the city's executive director of workforce development, about 76,000 Detroiters had outstanding debt from these fees, which is why the Chamber worked to get them abolished.

Another barrier that Donofrio and the Chamber identified: the archaic record-keeping of Detroit Public Schools. After developing a program to train and certify nurses' aides and other health-care technicians, the workforce department found that employers routinely rejected applicants because it took weeks to simply verify that a job candidate had graduated from DPS.

It turns out that the student transcripts were all on paper, stuffed in a vast warehouse, and there was a backlog of requests. So, with a boost from the Chamber, about 500 volunteers from Quicken Loans and other firms worked for hours to sort and digitize the records.

This sort of community cooperation, a widespread willingness to pitch in, is the hallmark of the Detroit Talent Hub. Problems with transportation, child care, debt, housing — all are significant barriers to educational success and gainful employment. But by deploying all sectors together, Detroit has shifted into high gear to help its residents plow through those barriers. ■

Louanne Romano enjoys time on campus with her daughter Isabella, also a Wayne State student. The elder Romano, who returned to school recently after a years-long hiatus, says college is better for her this time around, thanks to growing vibrancy and diversity on campus.

In Indiana, the voice

# of progress speaks Spanish

GOSHEN, Ind. — Amid the corn fields and industrial corridors of northern Indiana, this quaint town beckons visitors with its turn-of-the-century storefronts, historic churches, and an incongruous mix of Amish and Latino culture. In a nod to the old-growth trees that shade its Victorian houses and quiet streets, the entrance signs say: "Welcome to Goshen, Maple City."

They might more aptly read: "Welcome to Goshen: Now Hiring." With just 2.4 percent unemployment — among the lowest in the state — Goshen and all of Elkhart County yearn for qualified workers.

Manny Cortez confers with Mario Gutierrez (far left), a team leader at the Lippert Components plant in Goshen, Indiana. Cortez, 51, immigrated from El Salvador in 1990 and moved to Elkhart County with his wife and family in 2000. "I am living the American dream," he says.

The needs run the gamut, from minimum-wage waitresses to skilled nurses to highly trained engineers in the auto parts and recreational vehicle industries that make up the bulk of the area economy. In one sense, it's a nice problem to have.

Yet it is also a reminder that the economic indicators in Elkhart County, which once boasted a per-capita concentration of millionaires among the highest in the country, haven't always been positive. Just 10 years ago, the county served as the unwilling poster child for the ravages of the Great Recession. Unemployment was so high — 20 percent in March 2009 — that President Barack Obama made the county his first stop on a post-election tour to announce his economic stimulus package.

Right then and there, local leaders made a pledge: No future president would visit Elkhart County for a reason like that.

Job market is fickle

Elkhart County has long been an economic bellwether. Because of the area's proximity to Detroit and other industrial centers, auto and RV jobs have long been plentiful here. In fact, for years residents could earn a generous salary and benefits with just a high school diploma — sometimes even without one.

Accordingly, the rate of college-going here has been exceptionally low, the rate of college completion even lower. More than half of the adults in Elkhart County — 56 percent — have no formal education beyond high school, and 47 percent of the county's Latino adults lack even a high school diploma.

Still, once-plentiful jobs can disappear. In the late 1970s, they succumbed to the oil embargo, inflation, and high interest rates. The 2008 recession, along with disruptive technological changes in manufacturing, proved that dramatic shifts were needed to shield the region from future downturns. And those shifts would have to start with education.

"In the past, there was always blaming," recalls Brian Smith, co-CEO of Heritage Financial Group and an early booster of the collaborative approach that now defines the region's talent-development effort. "Historically, education was in its own silo," he says. "Business does what it does, complaining about school failures, then the education sector gets defensive, and both are unwarranted to some extent. Business didn't appreciate the good that schools were doing. And schools didn't understand what businesses needed." Then, all too suddenly, the economy tanked, pointing all sides to a shared solution that Smith sums up in one sentence: "The only way out of poverty is through education."

In 2012, community leaders formed the Horizon Education Alliance, a collaborative of businesses, schools, colleges, and civic groups that's working to make sure residents have meaningful credentials beyond high school and transferable skills that lead to good jobs. The alliance serves as the backbone organization for the Talent Hub effort and addresses the county's entire educational continuum, from pre-K through college and job training.

"Employers sometimes argue, 'We have 2 percent unemployment; I don't need more educated workers, I just need more bodies!' I can understand that attitude, but I think it's shortsighted," says Mark Melnick, executive director of workforce strategic partnerships for Ivy Tech Community College. "We realized that with the current labor situation and lack of skills, we had to get outside the plant and into the community to start solving the problem."

A key partner with the alliance is Benteler Automotive Corp., a division of a worldwide conglomerate that manufacturers steel auto parts such as bumpers and door beams. Its 300-employee factory in Goshen is profitable, but Plant Manager Jim Butler says it loses thousands of dollars an hour because it lacks needed employees.

The firm constantly seeks engineers with four-year degrees, and it's even hungrier for people with manufacturing experience. So, with Ivy Tech, Benteler is launching an academy that provides employees with an associate degree that includes 8,000 hours of on-the-job training. In three years, they can also be certified in industrial manufacturing.

Brian Smith, co-CEO of Heritage Financial Group, is a strong supporter of Elkhart County's collaborative approach to talent development.

Already Benteler is piloting a program with its team leads, employees who are expected to have a broader knowledge of the manufacturing process so they can better train new workers. One such team lead is Christina Kreischer, 45, who tests metals, hot stamps, and welds at the plant.

Kreischer already has a degree in chemistry from Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, but she is earning a certification to increase her options in an industry that is increasingly advanced. Her program, which is broken into modules, allows students to progress within guidelines but at their own pace, both online and on the factory floor, demonstrating competency along the way.

Another student in the program, Jim O'Grady, 55, works in cold stamping at Benteler. Though he stopped his formal education after high school, he's fairly tech-savvy, having worked for years around industrial robots. Still, he admits he was leery at first about one aspect of the certification program: taking classes on a personal computer.

"I was terrified I would screw something up," O'Grady says. But he hasn't. He can do coursework at home or, while still getting paid (sometimes overtime), at a learning center set up by the company.

Being a Certified Production Technician and an Industrial Manufacturing Technician will make him a more valuable employee and broaden his knowledge overall. "The company wants a stable workforce and a more skilled one," he says, adding: "At first I thought I didn't need to take this,

Jim O'Grady (left), here conferring with Benteler Automotive Corp. Plant Manager Jim Butler, is a student again at age 55. Though he stopped his formal education after high school, he's now enrolled in a company-sponsored certification program. "At first I thought I didn't need to take this, but I'm glad I did," O'Grady admits. "I didn't know as much as I thought."

but I'm glad I did. I didn't know as much as I thought."

Home to one of the largest Amish populations in the nation, Elkhart County conjures images of bearded men, horse-drawn wagons, and large families in home-sewn clothing. The picture is authentic, and there is indeed a buggy barn at the local Walmart.

Latino population booming

Yet it is Latinos, coming here for years in search of employment, who make up Elkhart's fastest-growing population. The Latino population of Goshen Community Schools is now a majority — 54 percent — with 10 percent of those students born outside the United States.

It's a demographic change that the region — with its tradition of social justice, inclusion, and Christian values — has largely embraced. Schools, employers, and civic groups have made it their mission to respect and learn about Latino culture and to get immigrants' English language skills up to speed. They've also embraced Spanish-language proficiency as a virtue rather than a shortcoming, seeing these individuals less as English language learners than as bilingual.

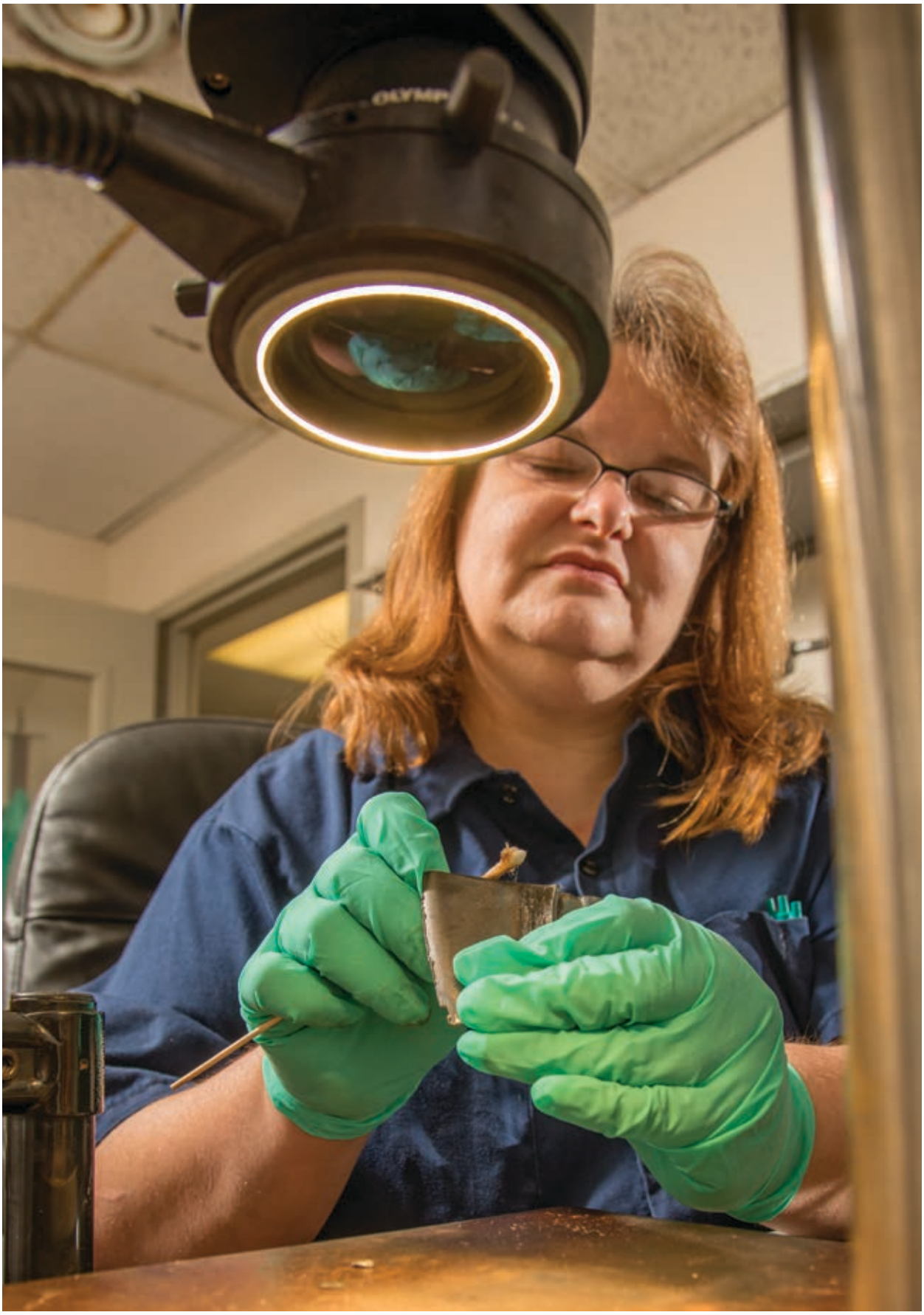
Manny Cortez is a 51-year-old forklift driver and safety specialist at Lippert Components Inc., a leading manufacturer of parts for the RV, manufactured housing, and truck and bus industries. He is benefiting from language lessons, coursework, and on-the-job training made possible by the Horizon Education Alliance collaboration.

A native of El Salvador, Cortez came to the United States in 1990 with no money, an eighth-grade education and, in his words, "a bag full of dreams." After working 14-hour days as a $4.25-an-hour painter for a gas pipeline company in Chicago, he moved to Goshen in 2000, seeking better schools, a welcoming community and more lucrative employment. Today, his and his wife's combined salaries have made possible a three-bedroom home.

"I am living the American dream," he says.

Still, the language barrier and a lack of skills have kept Cortez from moving ahead — and prevented Lippert from tapping his full potential. So, Cortez and 15 of his co-workers are now going beyond their regular work week to attend the Lippert Technical Academy. Participants benefit from taking weekly classes, doing home study, and applying their new skills on the job. Cortez' classes — designed by Ivy Tech and the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council — will qualify him as a Certified Production Technician. He's also taking online English classes, provided free through the local alliance.

English language coach Yazmin Ramirez (left) works with Veronica Corona, a single mother who recently immigrated from Mexico. Thanks to Ramirez' coaching — funded by a local collaborative called the Horizon Education Alliance — Corona passed her high school equivalency exam in English.



Benteler employee Christina Kreischer, 45, is a team leader who tests metals and welds at the plant. Though she already has a bachelor's degree in chemistry, Kreischer enrolled in the company's certification program to upgrade her skills and increase her employment options.

"[Lippert] wants people to learn more skills and have more opportunities for other positions," Cortez says. "I'm 51, and I'm in college!"

Cortez, who still often needs his American-born daughters to translate for him, is taking some of his courses in Spanish so he can better grasp the detail and nuance of his technical training. But, also because of his English-language training, he's confident he will be able to take his certification exam, as well as the high school equivalency exam, in English. Cortez says he's not interested in leaving the company — he serves as a mentor to three other employees — but he will now have skills that can translate elsewhere.

Helping Elkhart County residents pass certification and equivancy exams in English is also the goal of Yazmin Ramirez, an English-language coach who provides free English and math classes through the local alliance for adult residents of Elkhart who are out of school. Her students, ages 18-80, come from a range of Spanish-speaking countries. Lately she's seen an influx of highly educated refugees from Venezuela — doctors and engineers whose language limitations keep them from using their valuable abilities.

"Our goal is to get them up to speed with English so they can transfer these skills," Ramirez says. "The first Venezuelan I had was an ob-gyn, and she had to work in a factory. She had to work at a McDonald's. It's sad to see how highly educated people want to work and that there are so many jobs that employers can't fill."

A confidence boost

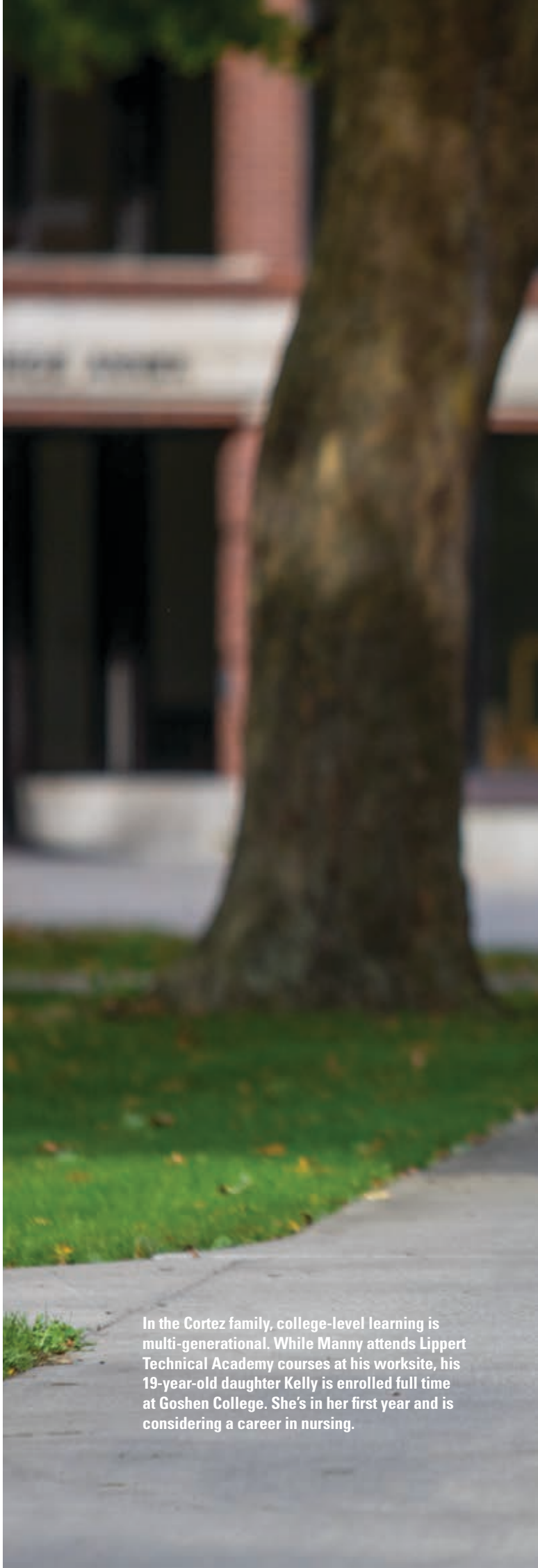
Typical of Ramirez's students is Veronica Corona, a single mother in her 30s who came from Mexico to work in one of the local plants. Starting at the most elementary level, she stuck with the program for about six months but had to drop out because of a family medical emergency.

She eventually came back and worked her way up to the fourth level — equivalent to the English proficiency of a seventh- or ninth-grader. With encouragement from Ramirez, she prepared for the high school equivalency exam in Spanish. She still lacked the confidence to take the exam in English, but with more pushing by Ramirez, she took the test and passed it the first time.

"That gave me so much happiness," Ramirez says. "Her confidence level went sky high." Now proficient in English and essentially holding a high school diploma, Corona can go on to earn a college-level certificate.

Educational institutions play an essential role in preparing Elkhart's future workforce and supporting its Latino residents, and an anchor is Goshen College. Rebecca Stoltzfus, the college's newly installed president, is leading an institution much transformed from the days when she was a student there and her own father was president.

The college, founded in 1894 and long affiliated with the Mennonite Church, now serves a student body that is 23 percent Latino. And if all goes according to plan, it will soon be a federally recognized Hispanic Serving Institution,



In the Cortez family, college-level learning is multi-generational. While Manny attends Lippert Technical Academy courses at his worksite, his 19-year-old daughter Kelly is enrolled full time at Goshen College. She's in her first year and is considering a career in nursing.

a designation for colleges with student bodies that are at least 25 percent Latino. Stoltzfus sees this as a perfectly natural transformation given the area's current demographics and the college's unique history.

"From the start, Goshen was created to provide access to rural youth and to educate first-generation Mennonite youth," she says. "It's been part of our identity to be a place that serves first-generation students and opens the door to higher education."

Moderately selective and academically rigorous, Goshen has found that not all students are sufficiently prepared for college work. And with a current graduation rate of 68 percent, Stoltzfus admits: "Completion is an issue." Latino students are not always less prepared for higher education than their white counterparts, Stoltzfus says, yet many are learning in a second language and adapting to a different culture.

One sticking point is writing ability. Stoltzfus says the college has added sections of its introductory composition course to help address increasingly wide variations in students' writing skills.

As to culture, she says, one aspect stands out: "Where the American mindset is to launch their children and have them develop as individuals, Latinos may be more oriented toward family and community. We encourage them to have more realistic expectations." She often has to explain to Latino parents, for instance, why it's important for students to live in dorms rather than with their families.

One Goshen student who well understands these distinctions is Lizeth Ochoa, a second-year student who arrived from Mexico with her parents when she was 9 months old. The transition to college was a big one, she says, as much for her 11-year-old sister as for herself.

"We are deeply connected. Our family always comes first no matter what," Ochoa says. "And it just didn't feel the same." That transition was difficult, she says, even though her family lives just a few miles away in Elkhart. Although Ochoa came back to live on campus for another year, she says several of her Latino friends did not.

"They left because their families said they needed them back at home," says third-year student José Chiquito, a Mexican immigrant who is majoring in sustainability studies. "It takes time for first-generation immigrants to build wealth and stability, and support from home is very necessary."

Support from the college is important, too. The challenges faced by its growing number of Latino students have prompted Goshen to hire more trained advisors, develop faculty capacity for assisting the students, and conduct research on Latino culture and student success — "all so that our Latino students feel safe and welcome," Stoltzfus says.

The college also employs a full-time parent and family advisor, herself a Mexican-American, who meets regularly with the Latino community and translates when necessary. "Goshen enrolls the whole family," student Jorge Soto says.

Goshen College President Rebecca Stoltzfus confers with students Lizeth Ochoa (left) and Jorge Soto. Both students are undocumented immigrants, and the college is committed to supporting them. "It's been part of our identity to be a place that serves first-generation students and opens the door to higher education," Stoltzfus says.

Third-year student José Chiquito embraces political activism — and Goshen College officials encourage that. Chiquito, an undocumented immigrant, joined other representatives of the college to help prevent construction of a proposed immigrant detention center in Elkhart.

For all the good these efforts do, federal immigration policy looms as a growing and overarching concern. Ochoa, Chiquito and Soto are all in the country under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, a provision that allows children who were brought into the country by undocumented parents to get renewable two-year permits to stay in the United States. President Donald Trump has threatened to end the popular policy, putting DACA children and their families on edge.

Undocumented … and anxious

"Being an undocumented immigrant is the thing you think about every day," Chiquito says. "We are constantly following the news. There is not one day when you can shut it out. There is no peace of mind."

And yet, here again, Goshen has its students' backs. Should Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents come looking for undocumented residents, the college has a system to send alerts via text, and it has assured students that residence halls are safe havens.

"Mennonites have a history of conscientious objection," Dean of Students Gilberto Perez Jr. says. "An order from ICE doesn't mean we would willingly follow it."

The college also encourages students to be politically involved. Chiquito, for instance, has traveled to the Indiana Statehouse and the U.S. Capitol, and he joined with other representatives of the college to help prevent construction of a proposed immigrant detention center in Elkhart. "A lot of colleges would be reluctant to get involved in community issues," Perez says. "A lot of colleges would have stayed away. But social justice is not just theoretical here."

Goshen would like to do even more for its Latino students, Perez says. For instance, the college wants to work with the community to provide short-term housing so commuter students, many of whom are Latino, can live on or near campus during periods of bad winter weather.

Perez wants to improve community engagement by developing a wider and deeper parent network. "We want to make it so that parents are a resource for the college, not just the other way around." He would like a faculty that is more representative of the student body, citing studies that show that "students excel when faculty looks like them."

Finally, although the college offers students help with books and even DACA renewal fees, it wants to provide even more financial support. "College is a full-time job, but most Hispanic students have to work, too," Perez says. "A $500 car repair can be all it takes to get them to leave."

In Elkhart, developing talent is all about breaking down these kinds of barriers to college and workforce success — by breaking down the walls that have for too long divided institutions themselves.

With this commitment to collaboration, a newly energized business, educational, and civic community is determined to ensure that the economy that is so strong today will remain vital for years to come. ■

In effective groups, 'systems thinking'

"It's not a single thing; it's a systems thing."

That's an overarching principle of the Talent Hubs — the conviction that a problem as complex and stubborn as boosting educational attainment can't be solved by addressing a single cause. The key is to involve the whole community, to understand how its components connect with, conflict with, and depend on each other.

Systems thinking, a hallmark of the continuous improvement process, doesn't always come naturally, or easily. Organizations tend to operate in silos, after all — one competing against another, each protecting its own turf. Each may believe its approach is best, its role appropriate and understood. Yet this is not always the case. Getting the competitors to collaborate takes a rigorous, scientific approach — one that uses data-based evidence to deeply engage stakeholders. The process often requires an outside organization to serve as an intermediary or backbone.

In Elkhart, Indiana, where the intermediary is the nonprofit Horizon Education Alliance, systems thinking has been embraced for decades.

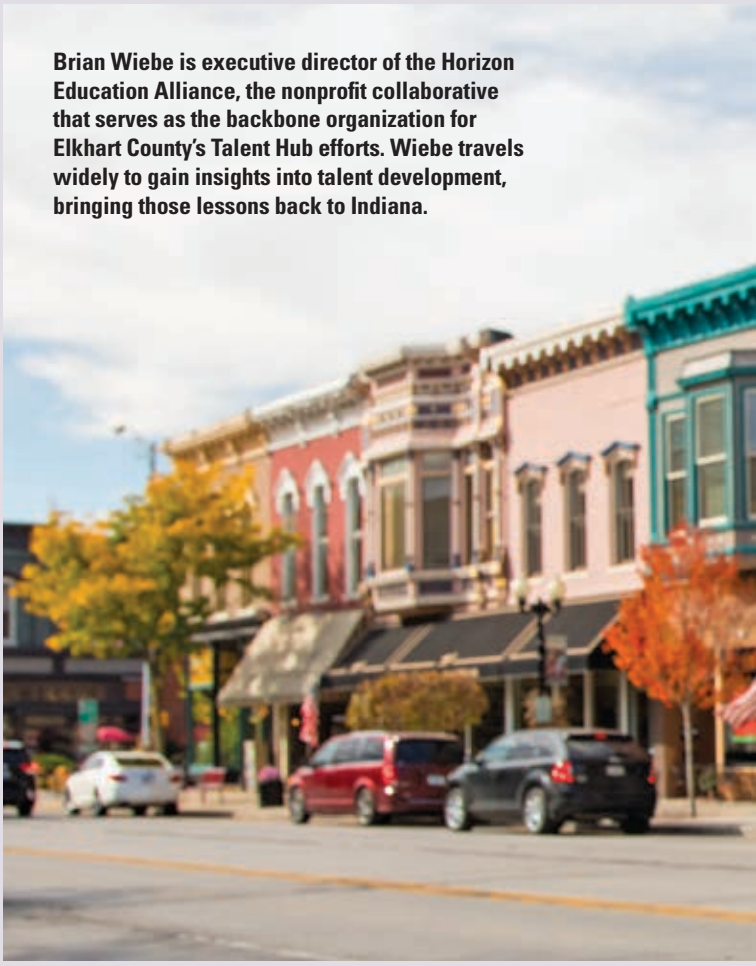
"The mission of transforming Elkhart County through education was such an ambitious goal that we instinctively knew the only way to accomplish (it) would be to engage the entire community," alliance Executive Director Brian Wiebe says. "We have learned that individual organizations often have the same struggles, but that they are trying to solve these problems in isolation."

Wiebe's group connects these organizations so they can discover gaps in resources and create solutions as a team. "Typically, we are working to create a system that either doesn't exist or improve a system that isn't working," he says.

CivicLab, an institute based in Columbus, Indiana, is a respected facilitator for this kind of work. It provides a wide variety of supports to aid the Talent Hubs sites — including workshops designed to teach alliance members and other participants about continuous improvement.

A core activity in the workshops is to help stakeholders realize that the system is a series of relationships and then to show how to improve those connections. Are the relationships producing the desired outcomes? If not, how can the stakeholders redesign them so that they do? And importantly: How can they work ***together*** to create that new design?

At a typical CivicLab workshop, this is all colorfully mapped out in what at first seem to be



Brian Wiebe is executive director of the Horizon Education Alliance, the nonprofit collaborative that serves as the backbone organization for Elkhart County's Talent Hub efforts. Wiebe travels widely to gain insights into talent development, bringing those lessons back to Indiana.

dauntingly complex diagrams. But, even as they splatter them with Post-it notes, participants soon appreciate that all these concentric circles, flow charts and organization trees actually make the roles and relationships easier to understand.

"It's important to make the system visible. It helps them find the challenge," CivicLab Executive Director Jack Hess says. "When you put it on the map, you can see the ways they interact. And people are often surprised by the solutions that emerge."

The exercise also often teaches participants that their efforts and actions don't amount to quite what they thought they did. Communities are often what Hess calls "program-rich and systems-poor." Leaders think they have been solving problems when, in fact, they've just been working around them. Wiebe says Elkhart found itself in that situation at first.

"We were managing the problem," he admits. "A lot of work was being done, and everyone could be pleased with the progress, but change was not happening at the level it needed to be.

acts as both a gear and the glue

Our educational achievement was not going up, and we knew it needed a lifespan approach."

Once the roles and the problems are defined — once stakeholders actually "see" the system — the improvement networks conduct rigorous tests of the solutions that their research identifies as promising. They implement a change idea, then adopt it, adapt it or drop it depending on what they find. (Significantly, Wiebe's first hire was a director of research.)

The alliance's networks have tested a number of such pilots, including the Certified Production Technician course at Benteler Automotive (see Page 14). Based on lessons learned, the developers made adjustments when they started a similar program at Lippert Components: They improved the orientation process, added a skills assessment for participants, and lengthened the course by several weeks.

The alliance's research is not limited to Elkhart. Wiebe, often joined by others, has made about 50 fact-finding trips since he's been at the organization, gaining insights from all over the country and even the world. He brings back research from innovative high school models, inspiring career academies and successful apprenticeship programs. Recently, he even traveled with a team of about 25 to examine apprenticeship programs in Germany and Switzerland.

Wiebe is also set for a unique road trip this fall. If all goes as planned, he'll use up the final 5,000 miles on his three-year auto lease to visit seven Talent Hubs from St. Louis to points west — including Tulsa, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, and three sites in California.

And what he learns from all of these travels will help shape Elkhart County's home-grown improvement project. In short, Wiebe is learning globally and working locally — something that every Talent Hub is encouraged to do.

As the Horizon Education Alliance says on its website: "We can't change the ocean, but we can build a stronger ship."

Port city not just wa

iting for its talent ship to come in

MOBILE, Ala. — Katlyn George was a star of her high school class in Chunchula, Alabama, an honor student with a 4.0 GPA, senior class vice president, and winner of a full academic scholarship to her local community college.

She was considering majoring in education, so in her first year she signed up for a course called "elementary math." She wasn't surprised the course was easy; after all, she assumed it was designed to help her teach math to third-graders.

The problem is, no one from the college corrected that assumption and steered her elsewhere.

Though sharing a laugh here with fellow student Joy McCloud (far left), college life hasn't always been so fun for Katlyn George, a transfer student now attending the University of South Alabama. Inadequate advising at her previous college cost her time and money.

In fact, it wasn't until George was halfway through the semester that she realized "elementary math" was actually "remedial math" — a developmental course for which she had no need and would receive no credit.

Along the costly path to a degree, such missteps are surprisingly common, particularly among students like George, who was the first in her family to attend college. At best, these missteps can delay progress and increase cost, especially among transfer students. At worst, they can prevent graduation altogether. So, three postsecondary institutions in Mobile — the University of South Alabama, Bishop State Community College, and Coastal Alabama Community College — have launched a cooperative effort to prevent them.

They are three distinctly different institutions. South, as it's familiarly known, is a four-year research university with 16,700 students on a vast suburban campus. Bishop State is one of the country's few historically black two-year colleges, struggling to preserve its unique identity. And Coastal Alabama is a consolidation of three far-flung community colleges, each of which the state determined could not survive on its own.

'The right thing to do'

Traditionally, these colleges had pursued their own goals, competing in the state and region for a steadily diminishing pool of students. But more and more these days, the schools approach student recruitment and student success from a unified perspective. They cooperate and collaborate, says Chandra Scott, director of strategic outcomes for the Mobile Area Education Foundation, "because it's the right thing to do."

It's also, officials agree, the ***necessary*** thing to do — a joint response to an urgent call to action. Thriving and diversifying since the Great Recession, this historic port city in the Alabama panhandle offers an abundance of jobs in industries as varied as shipping, aviation, and tourism, along with solid employment in the auto, paper, steel, and chemical industries. Unemployment, though higher than the national average, stands at a record-low 6.2 percent.

Yet in a state that consistently ranks near the bottom in national measures of educational achievement, too many area residents lack the skills needed for jobs that promise advancement and a family-sustaining wage. The site of some of the South's most gracious historic homes, Mobile is also dotted with shotgun shacks. At 26.7 percent, the poverty rate is more than double that of the nation. The high school graduation rate has improved recently to 87 percent, but only 27 percent of local residents hold at least a bachelor's degree. And the picture is even more dire for students of color. As an example, Mobile's community colleges collectively graduate only one of every four African-American students they enroll.

So Mobile colleges, civic organizations and businesses have accepted a self-imposed mandate to help all area students, of all ages, earn some sort of credential beyond a high school diploma as quickly and affordably as possible.

Chandra Scott is director of strategic outcomes for the Mobile Area Education Foundation, the nonprofit entity that acts as the backbone organization for the city's Talent Hub effort. She and other local leaders praise the new spirit of cooperation among the city's higher education institutions.

For businesses, that means working with schools and colleges to design meaningful, skills-based programs of study. For community institutions, it means helping students overcome obstacles to furthering their education. And for colleges, it means simplifying the transfer process and defining clearer and smoother pathways to degrees and certificates. All of these steps are designed to help students move through the system in the expected two or four years with an immediately marketable credential.

At South, that responsibility falls mainly to Transfer Coordinator Robert Charlebois, known across campus as "Pathway Bob." When Charlebois arrived at South two years ago, a university-commissioned study showed that transfer students were routinely graduating with more credits than their degrees required. In fact, according to Nicole Carr, associate vice president of student academic success, the study showed that, on average, transfer students had amassed 24 more credit hours than students who had started at South.

Excess credits aren't always a bad thing — a credit hour is meant to be a unit of learning, after all. But for many students, particularly those on financial aid, such credits are a luxury, even a dual danger. One risk is that the aid will run out; the other is that the student will drop out.

So South, in collaboration with Bishop State and Coastal, is working to reduce those excess credits. The colleges are providing more thoughtful and farsighted advising, steering students into clearly articulated pathways that avoid wasteful detours.

Unlike faculty members who must share advising duties with academic responsibilities, Charlebois is a professional advisor who works full time to match students' interests and goals with schedules and degree requirements. It's rarely a simple task. In fact, with the course catalogs of three colleges and countless possible majors to consider, Charlebois says: "It can feel like playing 3-D Sudoku."

Questionable advice

Students look to many different sources for curricular advice, some more reliable than others. In Alabama, there is the Statewide Transfer and Articulation Reporting System, which shows, for instance, when English 101 at a community college is equivalent to English 101 at a four-year institution.

The guide is useful, Charlebois says, but it can be confusing, particularly for students who are the first in their families to attend college. Students also get advice

Third-year student Tonnia Gray (center) works with Assistant Professor Cealia Slater during an education class at the University of South Alabama. Gray, a 53-year-old former nurse and bartender who now works at a convenience store, is pursuing a bachelor's degree in secondary education and plans to teach middle or high school.

Transfer Coordinator Robert Charlebois works full time — and tirelessly — to make sure incoming students at the University of South Alabama have clear and manageable pathways to success. That's why everyone at South knows him as "Pathway Bob."

from their friends (euphemistically, "peer advising"), their parents, and faculty advisors with heavy caseloads. Even with all the above, they often make costly mistakes.

"There can be a small grain of truth in what they learn from other students, and they ***think*** they know what they need, but there is often misunderstanding," Charlebois says. "You can consult all these things and still get it wrong." A fundamental problem, he says, is that transfer students too often ask the wrong question about their courses. "The question is not: 'Will it transfer?' The question is: 'Will it ***count***?'"

Katlyn George, 20, is now studying business at South, having transferred from Coastal Alabama, where she earned an associate degree in general studies with high honors. Charlebois, she says, "helped me figure out how to transfer."

Meeting with George at both Coastal and South, Charlebois combed through South's degree requirements for the business major and quickly realized that George would need three, not two, more years to complete it. So, he recommended she major in psychology with a concentration in business. "That way all my credits would transfer," George says.

That was a good thing because the "elementary math" debacle at Coastal was not the only uninformed choice that slowed George's progress. Lacking adequate guidance, she had also taken a course in "finite math" which was far below her level, as well as an American literature class that repeated a requirement she had already met with an American history class.

"These classes did nothing for me at all," George says. As a result of the setbacks, she had to take 19 credit hours one semester — a load so heavy she received her first and only B.

Another beneficiary of the pathways initiative is Tonnia Gray, 53, a former nurse, onetime bartender and current convenience store employee who returned to college hoping for a more secure retirement. After taking classes at for-profit American Intercontinental University and later at Bishop State, she is now a third-year student at South.

Many of the classes she took at American Intercontinental didn't transfer, so she was essentially forced to start over at Bishop. There, she says, she was taking five math classes — many of which Charlebois later told her were not necessary for her major.

When she transferred to South, she took one math class which, under a reverse-transfer agreement between institutions, earned her an associate degree from Bishop. Now working toward a bachelor's degree in secondary education and cultural studies, Gray plans to teach middle school or high school. And she praises Charlebois

for getting her to this point. "If I hadn't met Bob," she says, "I would have been at Bishop State two more years."

Early registration helps

A huge barrier on the path to graduation is course availability: Students are not always able to take the classes they need when they need them. But thanks to the collaboration between Mobile institutions, transfer students can register early for courses at South.

It's a significant perk. Typically, transfers are considered first-year students. They're forced to delay course registration until upperclassmen have made their picks and many classes have closed. Under the new arrangement with Bishop and Coastal, transfer students can register as second- or third-year students, giving them a better shot at the courses they need. "On the day of orientation, I already had my classes set," George says.

In another effort to hasten students toward their degrees, the colleges are encouraging them to take on 15 credits per semester, not just the 12 required to keep their financial aid.

"We had been advising students for financial aid purposes," says Roderick McSwain, director of technical faculty at Bishop State. "As long as they got the money, they didn't care. But we realized that with 12 hours a semester they weren't going to finish."

Understanding that the heavier course load can

overburden students with jobs and families, Bishop State is creating summer courses, shared courses and "mini-terms" for gateway courses that qualify under revised financial aid rules.

As with the more robust and better-aligned advising, Bishop State's "15 to finish" initiative has strengthened the bonds between colleges by essentially codifying what had been informal and unevenly observed agreements.

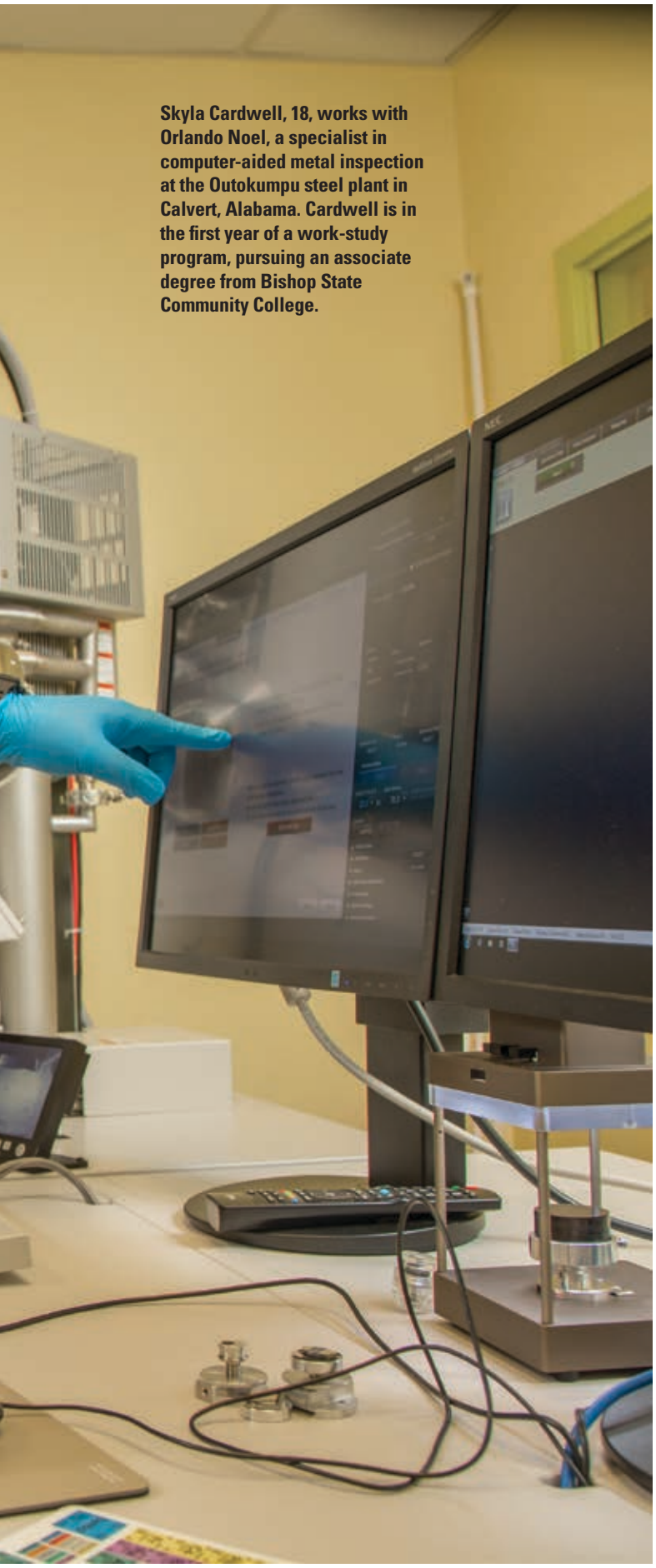
"Pathways has been a great common thread," says Chandra Scott of the education foundation. "It's helped relationships where they had been weak. It used to be an invisible connection. Now they have a real bridge to cross."

That bridge is also making better connections between education and industry. A key employer in the Mobile collaboration is Outokumpu, a Helsinki-based global manufacturer of stainless steel with a 1,500-employee plant in Calvert, Alabama, that operates around the clock.

The company's commitment to grooming talent starts in high school — with coveted internships in advanced manufacturing for juniors and seniors — and continues through cooperative programs with Coastal Alabama and Bishop State. Skyla Cardwell, 18, a first-year student at Bishop State, has a taken advantage of both opportunities.

Starting as an intern at Outokumpu as a high school senior, she worked as a laboratory technician, learning the science of metallurgy and the particulars of purchasing, warehouse organization, data collection, and quality control.

South student Victoria Peavy listens intently as "Pathway Bob" Charlebois helps map out her route to a degree. That task is rarely simple for transfer students. In fact, because he must factor in multiple course catalogs and a range of potential majors, Charlebois says: "It can feel like playing 3-D Sudoku."



Skyla Cardwell, 18, works with Orlando Noel, a specialist in computer-aided metal inspection at the Outokumpu steel plant in Calvert, Alabama. Cardwell is in the first year of a work-study program, pursuing an associate degree from Bishop State Community College.

At the same time, while studying business at Citronelle High School, she was honing her skills with Excel, Power Point and Word. A mentor helped Cardwell combine those skills and use them to create data-rich presentations for employees and fellow students.

'Really eye-opening'

"It's been really eye-opening," she says. Cardwell is now pursuing an associate degree in a work-study program at Bishop State and plans to continue until she earns her bachelor's — even though Outokumpu has already offered her a full-time job.

"I really hadn't thought about going into manufacturing until I came here," she says.

That change of heart comes as no surprise to David Scheid, Outokumpu's North American vice president for human resources. Through its internships, he says, the firm is showing students that there's more to manufacturing than they ever realized.

Outokumpu's David Scheid says programs such as the one offered through Bishop State can open students' eyes — and doors — to good-paying careers in manufacturing.

General operations, safety, the role of various administrators — "students really don't know until they see it in person," Scheid insists. He also says it's essential to work with high schools and colleges on curriculum to ensure that degree and certificate holders leave with the skills and knowledge that employers need — most notably, math skills.

For years, technical education has suffered from negative stereotyping, Scheid says. "As a parent myself, I'm saying: 'You gotta go to college,'" he admits. "But the intention is to prepare future workers for well-paying jobs in manufacturing, and not all of those jobs require a four-year degree. We're saying, 'Let's show them what's out there.' You can be 18 years old and get an entry-level job that pays $55,000 to $60,000 a year."

Indeed, Skyla Cardwell's experience proves his point.

Despite the generous pay, Outokumpu and other local industries still have difficulty finding skilled workers such as electricians and mechanical maintenance technicians. So, the company has been developing a cooperative certificate program with Bishop State.

In that program, each student is assigned a mentor, and all spend about 70 percent of their first year in a traditional classroom — either at the mill or at the college — and the entire second year at the plant, learning the business hands-on. All earned credits also apply to an associate degree.

"With the demand for employees so high, and the supply still too low, we have to step up," Scheid says.

He's speaking for his company, of course — but his words apply just as well to Mobile's entire business, civic and education community. ■

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Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. The foundation's goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

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