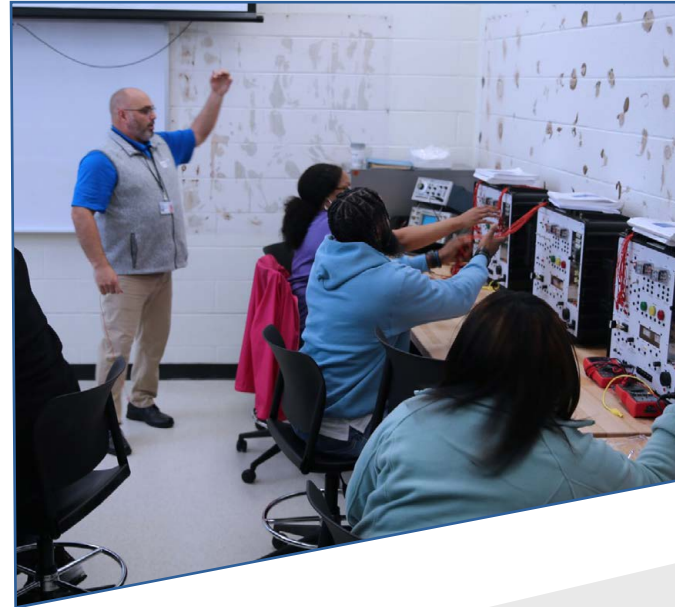






# Overview

The Rivers East Academy is a transformative initiative designed to empower high school educators in northeastern North Carolina by bridging the gap between traditional educational pathways and the evolving needs of the regional workforce. This program sought to address a critical challenge faced nationwide: the severe shortage of skilled labor and the underemployment of many with 4-year university degrees, which has been exacerbated by the over-promotion of these degrees as the primary path to career success.



**The Dream Team Leading the Project**  
(From left to right) Peyton Holland, Brandi Bragg, Jennie Bowen, Julie Cary, and Pam Taylor

**TRAINING IMPACT:**  
Over 100 educators completed the training program, enhancing their skills and knowledge.

## Goals

The Rivers East Academy focused on equipping educators with an understanding of diverse and viable career pathways in advanced manufacturing and related sectors. This initiative provided immersive, hands-on learning experiences that enhance educators' ability to guide students towards high-demand technical careers that often require less than a four-year degree.

The Academy aimed to align educational outcomes with local industry needs, thereby enhancing both student career readiness and regional economic development.

*"We are becoming really connected as well as informed about the opportunities for our students (and adults)."*

| REA EDUCATOR







## Our Partners

This initiative was brought to life through the collaboration of several key partners. The Golden Leaf Foundation played a pivotal role by providing funding crucial for the execution of the Academy's objectives. The program was administered by the Mid-East Commission and the Rivers East Workforce Development Board, with invaluable participation from local community colleges such as Beaufort, Martin, Pitt, and Roanoke-Chowan. These educational institutions offered critical resources and expertise, making them fundamental to the program's success. It could not have been done without the support of the Beaufort, Bertie, Hertford, Hyde, Martin and Pitt County School Systems. From recruiting teachers to collecting data, their support was invaluable.

Additional support from NENC Career Pathways was essential in the development and support of the project, ensuring that the program's goals aligned with broader regional workforce needs. SkillsUSA also contributed significantly by integrating an employability skills framework into the Academy's curriculum, enhancing the educators' ability to impart essential workplace skills.

# Strategic Importance

## DISTRICT-WIDE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Teachers felt that the training experience greatly contributed to fostering a shared understanding and common language across their district.

This collaborative effort underscored a regional commitment to investing in its workforce by fostering educational programs that adapt to the changing economic landscape.

By focusing on the integration of employability and technical skills, the Rivers East Academy addressed two of the most significant concerns facing our economy today: the mismatch between current educational paths and the actual demands of the job market, and the lack of essential soft skills among job applicants.

This strategic educational initiative not only prepared educators to better guide the next generation of workers, but also strengthened the region's capacity to meet the demands of a competitive global economy.





# The Case

## FOR TECHNICAL AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Countless studies over the last decade have clearly identified a significant challenge that we face in this country – a severe shortage of skilled labor and extreme underemployment of students with 4-year university degrees. There are currently 8.5 million open jobs in the U.S. and 2.3 million less workers available than this time in February 2020 (U.S. Chamber of Commerce). According to the America Works Data Center at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “If every unemployed worker took an open job in their industry, there would still be millions of open jobs.”

Additionally, the over promotion of the 4-year university degree as the ultimate path to success has led millions of individuals to invest in an educational pathway that does not align with their interests or aptitudes and that ultimately leaves them

underemployed with a significant amount of debt. According to a recent study, “Talent Disrupted”, by The Burning Glass Institute and Strada Education Foundation, 52% of 4-year college graduates are underemployed a year after graduation and 45% remain underemployed a decade after graduation. These underemployed individuals only make 25% more than a high school graduate, though many carry significant student loan debt.

Kevin Fleming’s work, “Success in the New Economy” reports that the true ratio of jobs in the U.S. is 1:2:7. “For every occupation that requires a master’s degree or more, two professional jobs require a university degree, and there are over half a dozen jobs

(Continued on next page)

requiring a 1-year certificate or 2-year degree.” U.S. labor statistics, educational data, market research, and economic data all point to the fact that, as a nation, we have not done an adequate job of properly exposing and educating students on the myriad of career and occupational opportunities available to them across multiple educational and industry pathways.

The North Carolina Employer Needs Survey continually reports the lack of employability and soft skills as the top 5 reasons that employers have difficulty hiring. With 81% of employers having difficulty hiring, 53% of them reported the lack of employability skills as the reason with entry-level employees (second only to employers having too few applicants applying for the position). Soft skills show up as the 4th reason at 34% (in this survey employability skills are defined as attributes such as work ethic while soft skills are defined as skill sets such as communication).

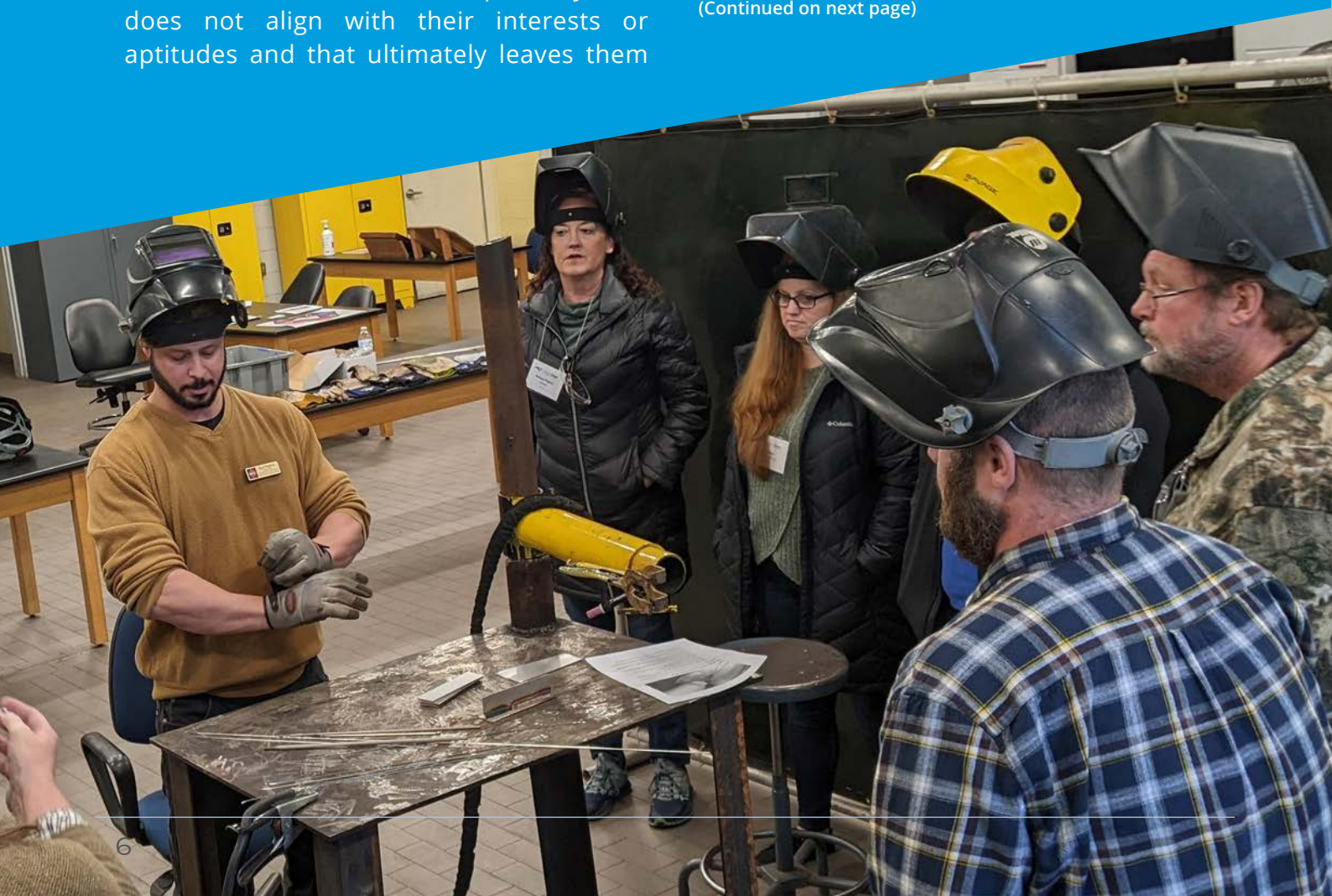
This convergence of data demonstrates the opportunities that exist in our labor market due to deficiencies in the number of individuals entering the workforce with technical training, or seeking skilled occupations. It also highlights the consistent lack of employability skills in job applicants, and the valuable role that the Rivers East Academy for Advanced Manufacturing plays in Eastern North Carolina. By creating programming that provides rich, hands-on experiences across a variety of technical areas and integrating employability skill development with turnkey lesson plans and activities that participants can integrate into their classrooms, this program is addressing two of the most significant concerns facing our local and national economy.

Couple that rich programming with relationships to local employers that can engage directly with the teacher participants and their students, and we are able to begin building a direct pipeline to employment by exposing teachers and students to high-paying job opportunities and the needed educational pathways that exist right in their backyard.



## INCREASING INTEREST

After participating in Rivers East Academy, teachers were significantly more likely to recommend Community College (CC) programs, showing a substantial increase in their enthusiasm and support.





# Blending OF TECHNICAL AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

In the Rivers East Academy for Advanced Manufacturing, we took a strategic approach to balancing exposure to the trades, engagement with industry, and a train-the-trainer style approach to employability skills to help participants:

- Have rich conversations with their students about a variety of well-paying, local career opportunities that do not require a 4-year degree.
- Understand the types of programming available at the local community colleges.
- Speak first-hand about what it was like to weld, wire, etc. in order create a more favorable view of those careers.
- Incorporate employability skill learning experiences throughout their curriculum.
- Develop a common language for employability skills across academic and Career & Technical Education programming within their school.



During each event, cohort participants were introduced to one of the SkillsUSA Framework resources through an experiential learning activity. We would facilitate at least one activity from the resource we were providing so that attendees could experience the activity as if they were the students. We would then debrief the activity as a group and discuss integration strategies for their classroom.

In addition to facilitating experiences and teaching them how to incorporate employability skills into their classrooms through the SkillsUSA Framework resources, we also worked with college instructors to integrate conversations around employability skills into each of their hands-on technical skill sessions. As participants went through welding, electrical, boat manufacturing, CAD/CNC, Automation, Industrial Maintenance, Clean Room and various other hands-on training experiences, instructors of those sessions were intentional about incorporating conversations on critical employability needed in each of their fields.

We also had strong engagement from various business and industry partners, ranging from panel discussions to roundtable conversations with participants.

A key component of those conversations was not only helping participants understand the scope and opportunities available in those businesses, but also the skills required to be successful. There were rich conversations around both the technical skills and employability skills needed to enter and grow in each of their businesses.

This integrated approach of weaving employability skills content, and training through each event showed the strong correlation between success in industry, and the presence of both technical and employability skills.

*"I confirmed that welding is not for me. I also was able to make contact with our local CC and begin the planning of a student visit."*

| REA EDUCATOR





# Skillibus

The initiative adopted and provided instruction on a very intentional method of employability skill inclusion known as the Skillibus. Developed by Wil van der Meulen with support from SkillsUSA North Carolina, the Skillibus is a tool that helps instructors, both academic and career and technical, identify and incorporate employability skill development opportunities into their course curriculum.

The Skillibus provided a logical approach to analyzing current course curricula to identify where Essential Elements of the SkillsUSA Framework may already be included. It then walked attending educators through strategies on how components of their lesson plans should place a direct importance on employability skill development.

The final aspect of the Skillibus process identified gaps (or areas that could be strengthened) with the emphasis and inclusion of the SkillsUSA Framework activities and resources.

Utilizing the Skillibus methodology in the Rivers East Academy led to the attending educators developing abilities to be intentional and direct, regarding employability skill development within their own programs.



## ENHANCED EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS INTEGRATION

**Teachers demonstrated a marked improvement in their confidence and ability to incorporate employability skills into their classrooms following the REA training.**



## PARTNERSHIPS WITH Community Colleges

The Rivers East Academy's success was greatly amplified by its strategic partnerships with local community colleges, including Beaufort, Martin, Pitt, and Roanoke-Chowan. These institutions played a crucial role in the program by providing the necessary infrastructure, expertise, and educational resources that enriched the learning experiences for the participating educators.

Staff and administrators from these colleges were integral to the planning and execution of the program sessions. They facilitated the organization and led educators through various rotational activities, ensuring that each session was both informative and smoothly run. Their proactive involvement helped tailor the experiences to meet the specific learning objectives of the academy, enhancing the overall impact of the program.

Instructors at these colleges were at the forefront of delivering hands-on learning opportunities. They engaged the educators in practical sessions that mirrored the real-world applications of skills taught in their respective fields. These interactions were not just instructional but also inspirational, providing teachers with a deeper appreciation of the trades and technologies that drive the local economy. This direct engagement helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, making the learning process more tangible and relatable for the teachers.

Moreover, the community colleges generously offered their facilities, which served as the physical venues for the immersive learning



experiences. These spaces were equipped with the tools and technologies that are critical to the advanced manufacturing and related sectors, offering educators a firsthand look at the environments their students might enter in the future.

The partnership also fostered lasting connections between the educators and the community colleges. By opening their doors and sharing their resources, the colleges not only supported the professional development of the teachers but also laid the groundwork for future collaborations that could extend into student internships, job placements, and continued educational opportunities.

Through these collaborative efforts, the community colleges not only contributed to the enhancement of the educational program but also reinforced their role as pivotal players in the regional educational and economic landscape. The Rivers East Academy, with the support of these institutions, has set a precedent for how educational collaborations can effectively contribute to workforce development and regional growth.



# Externships

A key component of the Rivers East Academy program was the introduction of externships, which provided educators with invaluable firsthand experience in the local manufacturing and industry settings. This initiative was designed to extend the impact of the Academy's training sessions by allowing teachers to spend a day on-site with regional employers, gaining a deeper understanding of the diverse career opportunities available within their communities.

During these externships, educators were immersed in the day-to-day operations of companies such as Manning Masonry, Domtar, Nutrien, Iconic Marine, Edwards Inc, and the Pharmaceutical Services Network at Pitt Community College, among others. These experiences offered teachers a comprehensive view of the skills, technologies, and work environments that characterize modern industry sectors. By observing and interacting with professionals in action, teachers acquired a practical perspective on the application of the skills they teach and discuss in the classroom.

The benefits of these externships were twofold. Firstly, they enriched the educators' knowledge base, empowering them to provide more accurate and enthusiastic career guidance to their students.

Secondly, they fostered stronger connections between educational institutions and local industries, helping to align educational programs with the specific needs of employers. This alignment is crucial for preparing students to enter the workforce with the competencies demanded by employers, thereby enhancing their employability and career prospects.

The externship program was instrumental in highlighting the importance of practical, hands-on learning experiences in education. Feedback from participating educators consistently emphasized how these real-world experiences enhanced their appreciation for industry-specific skills and helped them visualize potential career paths for their students. This direct engagement with the workforce not only motivated the educators but also provided them with tangible examples and stories to bring back to their classrooms, making their teaching more relevant and impactful.

## CONNECTING WITH *Employers*

A cornerstone of the Rivers East Academy program has been its robust engagement with regional employers, aimed at forging strong relationships between educators and the local manufacturing industry. The program initiated this interaction through "Shop Talk" sessions, which were featured during the first cohort. These sessions were hosted by Trey Goodson of NC East Alliance and included prominent companies such as Grady White Boats, Hyster-Yale, NC Biotechnical Center, Fuji Silysia, and others. The discussions, which are still accessible on the MadeinENC YouTube Channel, provided educators with insights into industry expectations and the variety of career opportunities available within the region.

Recognizing the value of more personal interactions, the program transitioned to "Table Talk" sessions. These discussions allowed for deeper engagement, enabling teachers and employers to exchange ideas and discuss the practical skills needed in the workforce more intimately. Participating employers included a mix of

returning companies and new additions such as Iconic Marine, Catalent, and Weyerhaeuser, among others. The format change was well-received, enhancing the dialogue between educators and industry representatives and fostering mutual understanding.

One educator expressed the impact of these interactions, stating, "Incorporating the experiences learned from <my externship> into my teaching will enable me to create a learning environment that urges students to explore diverse career pathways and develop the skills necessary for success in the 21st-century workforce." This direct feedback highlights the practical benefits of firsthand industry exposure.





# THE *Made In* INITIATIVE ACROSS 6 COUNTIES

The “Made In” initiative, spearheaded by the Rivers East Workforce Development Board in collaboration with local economic developers, chambers of commerce, school systems, community colleges and other local entities, promotes the unique industrial opportunities across Beaufort, Bertie, Hertford, Hyde, Martin, and Pitt counties. This program showcases the rich “Live, Work, and Play” aspects of each county through dedicated websites, which feature roadmaps to local careers in advanced manufacturing, wage flyers, and engaging video content. These resources serve multiple community stakeholders:

- Economic Developers use the materials to highlight the skilled local workforce and educational programs, attracting new businesses to the area.
- Chambers of Commerce draw on these campaigns to showcase the quality of life and economic opportunities available, appealing to potential residents and businesses.
- Educators and Career Advisors, particularly those who have participated in the Rivers East Academy, utilize the “Made In” content to show students and job seekers the array of career opportunities available locally. Teachers incorporate this real-world information into their curriculums, helping students understand the practical applications of their studies and the exciting career paths available within their own communities.

Assisted Martin County Aging and Adult Services during their annual Christmas party for 400 seniors at the Bob Martin Agricultural Center.



Each county's “Made In” campaign is uniquely tailored to reflect its industrial and cultural landscape, effectively enhancing local industry visibility and aligning educational efforts with market needs.



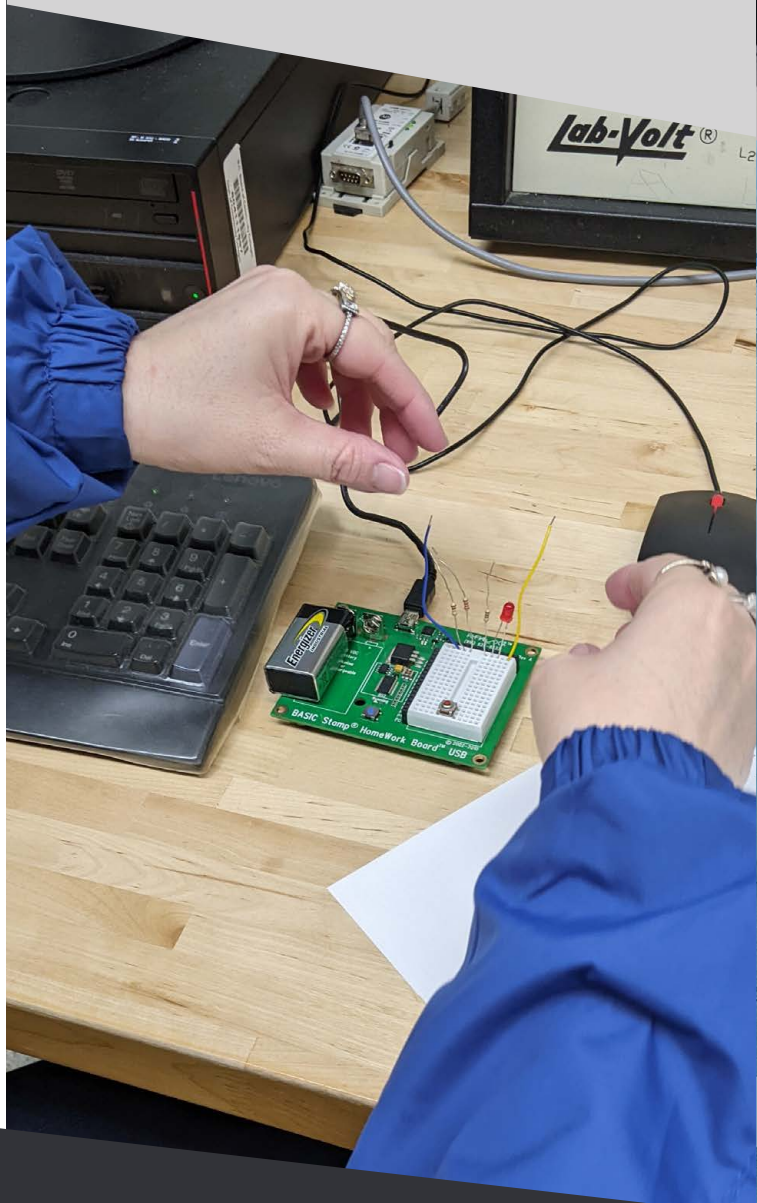
# Results

Rivers East Academy received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants on the value of the employability skill lessons they learned throughout the experience. More than 100 participating educators were traditional academic instructors or counselors. While learning and experiencing a wide variety of technical skills was critical in helping them understand how to talk about different opportunities with students, it was the employability skill activities that gave them the mechanisms to integrate those conversations in their classrooms. The employability skill activities were designed to be intra-curricular and work alongside any curriculum. Participants found them easy to integrate into existing lesson plans and even did so while actively participating in the cohort.

One of the strengths of focusing on a regional area was being able to have multiple teachers from each county and each school go through the program. This allows for teachers to be more intentional with integrating employability skill development and conversations about technical training program seamlessly across classes. It allows for greater reinforcement and support across both academic and career & technical education programming.

Also, by having these cohorts of teachers engaged with industry professional and community college instructors all having conversations around the same employability skills framework, it establishes a common language that will make it easier for students to learn, demonstrate, and articulate the skills needed for successful employment.

**FUTURE ENGAGEMENT:**  
There was strong interest among participants in attending similar events in the future, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the program.



*"The hands-on nature of the training is so valuable, because you can explain exactly what the students would be learning if they decide to enroll in the programs."*



*“Bringing in teachers to shadow our leadership in the manufacturing environment has not only given these passionate teachers the opportunity to learn about our organization and the variety of jobs/careers we have, but it has also given our leadership team a real boost by reminding them of the importance of developing our future workforce.”*

**MARY PINKSTON**  
HR DIRECTOR  
ICONIC MARINE

*“Emphasizing the potential for growth and advancement in these fields can motivate students to consider trades as a viable and rewarding career path.”*

**KEITH KINLAW**  
DEPARTMENT CHAIR CIM  
AND WELDING TECHNOLOGY  
PITT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*“...<REA Educator> had never really understood mechanical engineering technology until she attended the Rivers East training. By seeing the various skills and techniques the students learn in that program, she is better able to promote it to the students in her school. The exposure and knowledge you provide for educators and employer partnerships are crucial for our rural communities.”*

**LISA HILL**  
VICE PRESIDENT OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS  
BEAUFORT COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# Expanding

## EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER INITIATIVES

Building on the successes and lessons learned from the Rivers East Academy initiative, efforts are underway to replicate its impactful strategies and further enhance local education and career development programs. In Beaufort County, we are collaborating with Beaufort County Community College (BCCC) to train Adult Basic Education teachers and NCWorks Career Advisors. This training is designed to equip them with the necessary tools and knowledge to more effectively recruit and support students for technical programs at BCCC. By providing these educators and advisors with a deeper understanding of the technical career pathways available, they can better guide their students and job seekers towards fulfilling and in-demand careers.

Simultaneously, in Pitt County, we are working closely with the AVID program in local middle schools to immerse teachers in the region's diverse career opportunities. This initiative aims to empower educators with firsthand knowledge of local industries, enabling them to effectively advocate for their students to consider job opportunities right in their own backyard. By exposing teachers to the range of careers available locally, they can inspire and inform students from a young age about the viable and attractive career paths that their community offers.

These targeted efforts in Beaufort and Pitt counties not only build on the foundational work of the Rivers East Academy initiative but also expand its reach and impact, ensuring that more educators are prepared to guide their students toward successful careers and contribute to the economic vitality of their regions.

*“Table Talk easily affords me the opportunity to share our trade with teachers who may not be familiar with the vast array of opportunities that exist for young people in the skilled trades arena.”*

**TIM MANNING**  
OWNER  
MANNING MASONRY



