

## Community colleges: key players in New York's economy

By Robert B. Ward

Founded just after World War II, the Ulster Tool and Die Co. started as a machine shop. The industry saw many enterprises founder over the following decades due to low-cost, international competition. Ulster Tool and Die survived, but faced its own crisis in the early 1990s. The closure of IBM's mammoth Kingston campus eliminated the tool company's most important customer, and ever-more aggressive overseas competitors threatened to take the rest.

Today, though, the former tool-and-die company is stronger than ever. Renamed FALA Technologies in 1996, it engages in state-of-the-art manufacturing and develops advanced technology products and services for the semiconductor and nanotechnology industries.

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Entrepreneurial ownership clearly plays a role in such a success story, but President/CEO Frank Falatyn gives much of the credit to another competitive advantage: workers with cutting-edge skills acquired at local community colleges.

“When my people need to learn new skill sets, we go to the community colleges,” Falatyn says. Not only nearby Ulster County Community College, but the institutions serving Dutchess and Orange counties have trained FALA's workers and helped beat the competition.

Computer-aided design, for instance, is a basic tool in the company's work. As three-dimensional and solid-modeling CAD applications entered the market over the past decade, FALA had a choice of keeping its workers up to date or losing its competitive edge. Ulster County Community College approached the company with a training program and helped FALA choose the design software that now is the basis for a significant segment of business.

FALA's experience is by no means unusual. Business owners and managers across the state commonly point to New York's 36 community colleges as highly responsive to employers' needs for trained workers. A Business Council survey of companies that had used community-college skills training found 70 percent rated such programs “good” or “excellent.”

Those skills cover a wide range—from CAD to chemical technology, accounting to accessories design, mortuary science to marine technology. And there's a bonus: Federal and state funding can offset much of the cost for employers.

Experts say some other states are far ahead of New York in using community colleges as part of the package of tools to build the workforce generally, and to attract new businesses in specific technological sectors. But the Empire State is ramping up its efforts. Leaders in the Capital Region, for instance, are promoting an academic-industry cluster centered around nanotechnology, and looking forward to development of an AMD chip-making plant in Saratoga County. Hudson Valley Community College is already preparing students for such careers, having graduated its first class in semiconductor manufacturing technology this year.

Governor Spitzer and the Legislature included \$2.1 million in this year's budget for the New York State Foundation for Science, Technology and Innovation (NYSTAR) to support high-technology workforce development programs at Hudson Valley, Onondaga and Monroe community colleges.

“We need community colleges to be full partners in technology development efforts in every region of the state,” said Edward Reinfurt, acting executive director of NYSTAR.

And community-college education is far more than training in specific skills. Nearly two-thirds of SUNY community-college students who are seeking an associate's degree or certificate are in programs other than career and technical education. And some 25 percent of bachelor's-degree graduates from State University of New York campuses started their higher education in com-

munity colleges, Acting Chancellor John B. Clark told an Albany forum in June. The forum—sponsored by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, SUNY's public-policy think tank—brought together top figures from community colleges in New York and California, as well as leaders of key state agencies involved in workforce development in the Empire State. (For a transcript of the forum, visit [www.rockinst.org](http://www.rockinst.org).)

## Beyond skills development

More than 32,000 SUNY community-college students received associate's and other degrees this year. Enrollment has been growing strongly—up by 20 percent in just the past five years, Dr. Clark reported. Many of those students rely on the low-cost, close-to-home nature of community colleges for a good jump on further education and careers in teaching, business, and other fields.

At the Rockefeller Institute's forum, college leaders emphasized the business community's importance in shaping both their overall mission, and specific programs.

"Employers tell us they want to hire people who can read, write, compute—those who have critical thinking skills, those who can solve problems," said Donald C. Katt, president of SUNY Ulster.

## Four decades of growth

That combination of wide-ranging education and a direct connection to the working world is part of a long tradition. Public junior colleges, later known as community colleges, started in 1901 with the founding of Joliet Junior College in Illinois. Other states, such as California and Texas, created junior-college systems before World War II. Some institutions emphasized post-secondary vocational training, while others were intended to create a glidepath to four-year, liberal-arts education.

The movement was delayed in New York by opposition from private institutions and the lack of a public university system. After the war, Governor Thomas E. Dewey appointed General Electric Co. Chairman Owen D.

Young to head a commission that shaped creation of the State University of New York, with community colleges as one key element. By 1958, 11 such institutions were enrolling students; 19 more opened under Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller's tenure from 1959 to 1973.

SUNY community colleges reached a milestone this year, surpassing 1 million degrees awarded since the institutions' founding, according to Acting Chancellor Clark. Annual enrollments continue to climb sharply. In the mid-1960s, enrollment at SUNY and City University two-year colleges—including agricultural and technical schools—totaled fewer than 80,000. By 2000, 180,000 full- or part-time students attended community colleges that were part of the SUNY system, and another 63,000 were in CUNY schools. Over the next five years, SUNY's community-college enrollment rose by a further 28,000, and CUNY's by 10,000.

That growth reflects a national trend, according to Richard P. Nathan, co-director of the Rockefeller Institute and a nationally recognized authority on workforce development.

"The most important change in higher education in the United States over the last 40 years is the growth of community colleges," Nathan said. In 1963, enrollment at community colleges nationwide totaled 740,000, he said. By the mid-1990s, the number was 5 million. Today, it's nearly 12 million.

With high-school graduations on the rise in New York, community-college enrollment is expected to grow further in coming years. And if some other states are any indication, New York's community colleges could have room to increase their market share among high-school grads. The California Community College System, for instance, educates more than 2.5 million annually—nearly 10 times the number in New York. Very low tuition (several hundred dollars per semester for a full-time courseload) is one factor in the difference.



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