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Emelia Miller poses for
a portrait at UnityPoint
Health-Trinity Rock Island
Hospital on Tuesday,
April 28, in Rock Island.

Katelyn Metzger

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As we continue to evolve and grow our business coverage, we want to highlight a change made in the last year to this publication.

For the past six years, this publication has served as a valuable resource for the Quad-Cities business community, highlighting local companies, economic trends and the people helping shape our region. While the name is changing, our commitment to delivering thoughtful, relevant business journalism remains exactly the same.

The transition from QCT Business to QCT Biz reflects both where we've been and where we're headed. The new name is modern and memorable. It honors the legacy we've built while creating a stronger identity for the future.

The change also supports our continued investment in digital products, particularly our growing QCT Biz newsletter. As we expand our reach across print and digital platforms, consistent branding is increasingly important. By bringing our quarterly publication and newsletter together under the QCT Biz name, we're creating a more cohesive experience for readers and advertisers alike.

While the name on the cover may be different, readers can continue to expect the same focus on the businesses, entrepreneurs and economic developments that drive the Quad-Cities forward.

-ANALISA TROFIMUK
Editor

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Residents, businesses continue exodus out of Illinois

As the old saying goes, people tend to vote with their wallet. When a particular business or product no longer meets their standard of quality or service, they simply choose another. Likewise, when it comes to where someone lives, they tend to vote with their feet and move to what they perceive are greener pastures.

According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau, between July 1, 2024 and July 1, 2025, Illinois had a net domestic outflow of 40,017. This means the state had 40,017 more of its residents move out of Illinois to another state than it had people move from another state to Illinois. Illinois had the third-highest net migration outflow behind only California (-229,077) and New York (-137,586). New Jersey (-37,428) and Massachusetts (-33,340) came in fourth and fifth, respectively. By comparison, Iowa's net domestic migration was fairly neutral, losing a net 970 residents to other states.

Over the past 10 years, Illinois hasn't recorded a single year of positive net domestic migration. During this time, Illinois has had a cumulative net domestic outflow of nearly 850,000.

The state receiving the largest influx of residents from other states was North Carolina, which reported

a net domestic migration of 84,064. This was followed by Texas (67,299), South Carolina (66,622), Tennessee (42,389) and Arizona (31,107).

The recent data reinforces the continuing trend of Americans leaving high-tax, high-cost-of-living states for low-tax, low-cost-of-living states. In a 2026 survey by the Illinois Policy Institute, Illinoisans say the biggest issue (58.1%) is high taxes. Historically, Illinois has one of the highest tax burdens in the nation. Illinois residents face high property taxes, income taxes, sales taxes and gasoline taxes, among many others.

In a report by WalletHub, Illinois has the highest combined state and local tax burden in the country. A median Illinois household faces an effective tax rate of 16.87%, which equates to almost \$13,000 in taxes. This is well above the national average of just 11.02%.

But it's not just residents that are leaving states like California, New York and Illinois, it's also businesses. When a company's tax, cost or regulatory burden becomes too much, it simply moves to a more business-friendly state. In recent years, high-profile corporations like Boeing, Caterpillar, Guggenheim Partners, Tyson Foods, TTX and Citadel, among many others, have all moved their headquarters out of Illinois to other states they deemed to be more business friendly.

In a recent survey of CEOs by research and insight provider ChiefExecutiveGroup, Illinois ranks No. 48 out of the 50 states in terms of being business friendly. Once again, only California and New York ranked worse than Illinois. Iowa ranked No. 15.

As a longtime resident of Illinois, I've seen more than my share of individuals, families and businesses abandon Illinois for other states. Many have moved to the Iowa side of the Quad Cities. For Illinois politicians wanting to attract residents and businesses to the Land of Lincoln, ranking No. 48 in both net domestic migration and business friendliness is a fairly dismal record. Saying that Illinois is "slightly better than California and New York" does not make for a successful marketing campaign.



MARK GRYWACHESKI

Economy

Mark Grywachski is an expert in financial markets and economic analysis and is an investment adviser with Quad-Cities Investment Group, Davenport.

Over the past 10 years, Illinois hasn't recorded a single year of positive net domestic migration.

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What I'd ask your CEO:

Five uncomfortable questions

ANDREA BELK OLSON

If I were invited into your boardroom for one candid conversation with your CEO, I wouldn't start with revenue targets, competitive threats or last quarter's performance. Those are outcomes. I'd start with the decisions underneath them. Because, in mid-sized markets especially, companies rarely fail or struggle from lack of effort. They stall from lack of clarity, and clarity is almost always a leadership issue.

Here are the five uncomfortable but clarifying questions I would ask:

First, what is your core differentiator and are you actually organized around it? Every strong strategy is anchored in a clear guiding principle: the one thing you choose to be known for and build around for the long-term. Yet most leadership teams behave as if differentiation is additive. They want premium service delivery and superior operational

efficiency and breakthrough innovation and revenue predictability. But a true differentiator requires emphasis, focus, and disproportionate investment.

You cannot organize around everything. If you haven't explicitly defined the principle that guides decisions (where you will overdeliver and overinvest) your organization will default to spreading resources thinly across competing priorities. That's not balance but dilution.

The companies that move forward fastest are not the ones that attempt the most or try to be the best at everything — they are the ones that align the sharpest. Their hiring, metrics, capital allocation, customer selection and operating rhythms all reinforce the same core choice. So, I would press your CEO: what is the guiding principle that drives your trade-offs? Where have you doubled down to make it real? And just as important, what have you chosen not to pursue because it doesn't fit? If your differentiator doesn't clearly shape decisions, it isn't guiding anything.

Second, do you truly understand your customer and does your leadership team agree on what they value most?

This sounds foundational, but it's where misalignment often begins. One executive believes customers choose you for responsiveness, while another thinks it's price. A third insists it's product innovation or legacy relationships. These subtle differences aren't philosophical. They indicate a disconnect between the internal organization and your external audience. In regional markets especially, companies often assume they understand their customers because they've known them for years. But familiarity is not insight. Long-standing relationships can mask shifting expectations, and what customers appreciated five years ago may not be what earns loyalty today.

True customer understanding is not about demographics or satisfaction scores. It's about clarity on the core problems you solve better than anyone else and why that matters to them. If I asked each member of your executive team to articulate, in one sentence, the primary reason your best customers choose you, would I hear the same answer? And would your customers agree with it?

When all your leaders don't share a clear, unified understanding of what your customers truly value, priorities, messaging and investments start to compete and blur while people chase different definitions of success. Customer understanding at the top isn't a marketing, communications or branding exercise, but the anchor that keeps strategy, operation, and growth moving in the same direction.

"Every strong strategy is anchored in a clear guiding principle: the one thing you choose to be known for and build around for the long-term."

- Andrea Belk Olson

Third: Where is your current success that's masking future risk? Many mid-sized companies enjoy stable revenue from legacy customers, long-term contracts or entrenched local brand equity. Stability feels like strength, but sometimes it's insulation from reality. Markets evolve quietly before they shift suddenly. And then competitors reposition, talent expectations change and technology redefines operations. I would ask your CEO to identify which parts of the business feel the most secure and then examine them first. Are your top three customers driving margin or merely volume? Is your most profitable product sustainable, or simply unchallenged? Are you mistaking familiarity for defensibility? The greatest threats rarely announce themselves. They sit inside your most comfortable assumptions.

Fourth: Is your organization clear on what must change this year? Not everything that could improve or every initiative in the pipeline. Only the one or two shifts that matter the most. Strategy fails in execution when leaders communicate ambition but not priority. Teams get flooded with initiatives, each positioned as critical. And when everything is important, nothing is. In conversations with CEOs, I often find a gap between executive urgency and organizational understanding. Leaders believe the direction is obvious, yet employees struggle to interpret it. So I would ask: if I walked your frontline today and asked what the company must get right in the next 12 months, would I hear consistency? Would they describe behavioral shifts or just financial targets? Change sticks when people understand what to do differently, not just what number to hit.

Finally: What are you avoiding? This is the most uncomfortable question and often the most revealing. Every leadership team has a conversation it postpones, a product line that underperforms but carries political weight, a senior leader who no longer fits the direction or a pricing model that no longer aligns with the value delivered. Avoidance shows up as over-analysis, pilot programs or "next quarter" timelines. But unresolved tension drains strategic energy. Employees feel what leaders won't say and when CEOs sidestep hard decisions, teams learn to do the same. So I would ask plainly: what decision have you already made privately but haven't acted on publicly? Clarity requires courage. And courage is visible.

These questions are not designed to provoke defensiveness. They are designed to create focus. In mid-sized markets, where relationships are tight and reputations travel fast, leaders often default to consensus and incrementalism. That instinct builds stability but it rarely builds differentiation. The role of a CEO is not to preserve comfort, but to make choices clear enough that the organization can align behind them.

If your CEO can answer these five questions with specificity — not with platitudes, or aspirations, but with concrete trade-offs — you likely have a strategy with teeth. If the answers feel vague, ambiguous or overly optimistic, you have work to do.

Because growth doesn't come from working harder on the same assumptions, it comes from confronting them. And sometimes the most valuable thing you can offer your CEO is not another dashboard, but a better question.

Andrea Belk Olson is the CEO of Pragmadik, a strategic change agency, serving multi-billion-dollar companies. She is a 3x published author, contributor to Harvard Business Review, INC magazine, Entrepreneur Magazine, World Economic Forum, a TEDx Speaker, and a SCORE Subject Matter Expert. She is also an instructor/coach for the University of Iowa's Entrepreneurial programs.

1

What is your core differentiator and are you actually organized around it?

2

Do you truly understand your customer and does your leadership team agree on what they value most?

3

Where is your current success that's masking future risk?

4

Is your organization clear on what must change this year?

5

What are you avoiding?



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Culinary arts teacher **Brooke Rich** provides instructions at the baking course at the Regional Innovation Center in Eldridge, April 10, 2026.

Cesar Toscano

Culinary arts courses in the Quad-Cities provide robust, applicable programs

CESAR TOSCANO

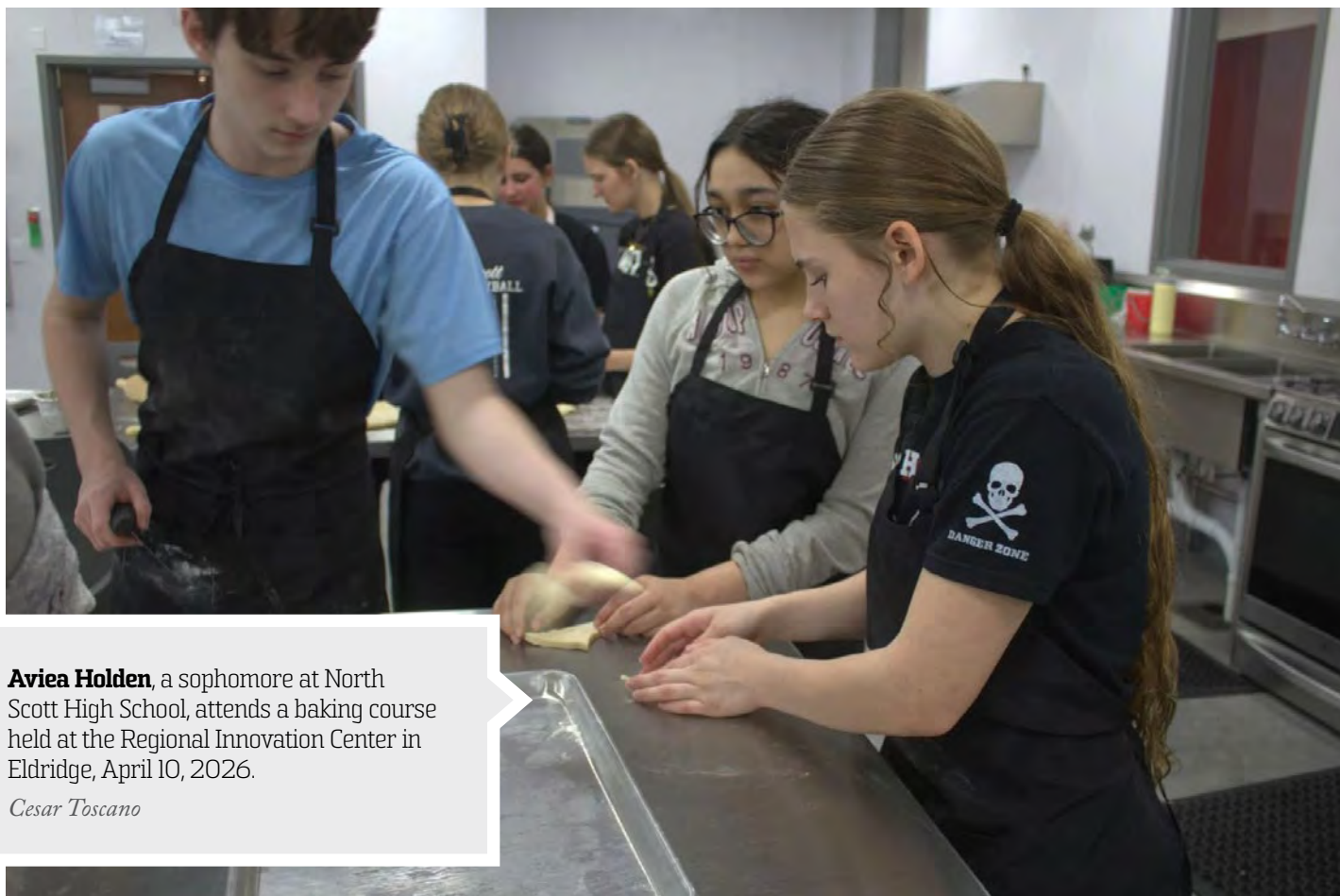
ctoscano@qctimes.com

Lana McCoy patiently braised pieces of pork as part of her cooking class at North Scott's Regional Innovation Center.

In the classroom, which smelled of garlic and chili powder, North Scott High School students quickly paced themselves, some putting the last touches on their assignments — a set of pork birria tacos.

The students wore plastic gloves as they delicately transferred cilantro and cheese to the tacos.

North Scott School District's Regional Innovation Center was built in 2024 with a focus on career and technical education. One of the programs the building features is a culinary arts program that expands on the basic culinary arts courses offered at the high school.



Aviea Holden, a sophomore at North Scott High School, attends a baking course held at the Regional Innovation Center in Eldridge, April 10, 2026.

Cesar Toscano



North Scott School District's Regional Innovation Center was built in 2024 with a focus on career and technical education. One of the programs the building features is a culinary arts program that expands on the basic culinary arts courses offered at the high school.

Other courses include trade staples such as construction and healthcare. While other sectors have seen declines, these industries have seen a rise in employment.

But one possibly surprising industry that has seen stable employment has been the leisure and hospitality industry, particularly in food services. For students at North Scott and across the Quad-Cities, they are starting to forge a career in the industry before even leaving high school.

DAVENPORT'S PROSTART PROGRAM

One of the other well-known and established high school culinary programs is Davenport School District's ProStart program. The culinary program is part of a national program with a curriculum written by the National Restaurant Association and supported by the Iowa Restaurant Association. The programs provide clearer pathways to certification and flow well into Eastern Iowa Community Colleges' culinary program and 32 other connected culinary programs.

Jenee Cross is the culinary arts teacher at the Davenport high schools and said her role is helping guide students in their culinary arts journey.

"Some students might be really interested in starting in baking, and what can they do with it? Where can it lead them? Or some people might have really good people skills, so maybe they're more suited for front of the house. So really, as a teacher, recognizing where my students' strengths are, and leaning into those and feeding them to their next opportunity where they can be successful," Cross said.

Cross also said that whether students pursue culinary arts directly or not, they gain skills related to business. Classes include teaching proper portions, not just for the satisfaction of the customer, but also to make sure a business is making a profit.

"You don't go into the restaurant business to give away food," Cross said. "You go into it making money, and there's such a small profit share in a restaurant or food service world that you really have to do that math and teaching."

"There's so many different avenues in the food industry that isn't just working in a restaurant. They really do employ a lot of people that do food marketing, food science. Everybody eats, so food is always going to be around."

- Jenee Cross

Some of her classes have attended cooking competitions, receiving high marks for their portion controls.

In an ever-changing world, Cross said, culinary arts is an industry with more job security than most as the use of artificial intelligence grows.

"I have been to food shows where

you've seen robot chefs and people trying to launch that," Cross said. "But there's nothing that can really mimic a human making somebody's food because of the human experience, because if you just think of like your ancestors in the kitchen making food, and it's really hard to dehumanize that. It's a very human thing."

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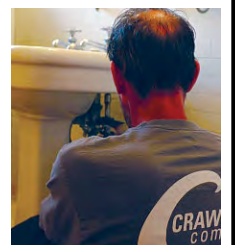
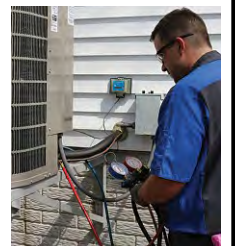
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A plate of birria pork tacos made by North Scott High School students at the Regional Innovation Center in Eldridge, April 10, 2026.

Cesar Toscano



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Many of her students have continued into careers such as the hospitality and food service industries.

"There's so many different avenues in the food industry that isn't just working in a restaurant," Cross said. "They really do employ a lot of people that do food marketing, food science. Everybody eats, so food is always going to be around."

NORTH SCOTT'S TOP CHEF PROGRAM

North Scott High School has a lineup of basic cooking classes to more advanced courses taken at the Regional Innovation Center, such as the Top Chef course.

Brooke Rich, who leads culinary courses, said the courses can be basic enough to teach students how to make eggs to more advanced courses where students build more complex dishes, such as a burrito bowl, with each part made by separate groups, with the goal of combining all ingredients into one cohesive meal.

Challenges like that teach the soft skills required in a real-life kitchen. Rich said some students come lacking some skills such as time management, conflict resolution and communication. That's why her classes teach those skills foremost, even spending half of the semester building on them.

"The perception is that they're just going to walk in and be like, head chef right off the bat," Rich said. "Because, that's what I run into a lot with my classes, is the kids, they want to be Big Bossy Pants head chef every time, where it humbles them a little bit to be dishwasher for a day."

Rich said one of her "standards" for her course is employability.

One additional element that helps students is credentials, Rich said. In Intro to Foods, students are required to take a ServSafe food handler certification. This certifies the student knows sanitation and how to serve food properly. Advanced courses then continued those more kitchen-side lessons, such as how to run a team and rotate positions, to safety skills like smoke points of oil and what to do if a fire broke out.

Rich said students who come out of the program with a passion for cooking and baking, with a dedication to the kitchen and the restaurant world, can typically follow through with the Scott Community

College Culinary Academy. The program takes a year and a half, with a certificate at the end.

McCoy is one of those students considering continuing with Scott Community College after high school. McCoy, a junior, said she picked up the Top Chef and other culinary courses because she has always had a talent for cooking and enjoys making food for others.

But, McCoy said, there are always things to learn even when you are good at it. She is taking a baking class to work on her baking skills, which she said is a lot more difficult than cooking, since it's "like a science" rather than the go-with-the-flow pace of cooking.



North Scott High School students cook pork birria tacos for Top Chef, an advanced culinary class taken at the Regional Innovation Center in Eldridge, April 10, 2026. *Cesar Toscano*



Brooke Rich said some students come lacking some skills such as time management, conflict resolution and communication. That's why her classes teach those skills foremost, even spending half of the semester building on them.



North Scott High School students cook pork birria tacos for Top Chef, an advanced culinary class taken at the Regional Innovation Center in Eldridge, April 10, 2026.

Cesar Toscano

McCoy said another valuable skill she learned was time management, and has been working on not being the last one to finish cooking.

McCoy said the class has been fun so far.

"The people are great. Honestly. It's really fun to work with people, and it's definitely a good way to connect with people. And you could do a lot with it, you could travel and you could cook in different places."

McCoy recently started working at the Eldridge trampoline park, Fun Station, with the hopes of working up to the kitchen.

Two of her classmates, Kayden Lieven and Ryko Lee, also worked at Fun Station. While the two juniors no longer work at the trampoline park, they gained experience in the kitchen.

The two of them joined the kitchen in their freshman year as they were taking their Intro to Foods class. And the course helped them; they were learning how to provide cleanliness in the kitchen, check the temperature of foods accurately and prevent exposure to foodborne illnesses.

Lieven said his time at the Fun Station's kitchen and culinary art courses has taught him how to "enhance the flavor of certain products."

"If it's not good, it's a learning lesson you could always reflect off of. And then if it is good, at the end of the day, you got a nice new meal," Lieven said.

Finding the right balance was Lee's issue that he resolved after taking courses and working.

"I learned from my mistakes," Lee said. "I'd come here to put way too much seasoning on something, or overcook or undercooked something, and it kind of helped me learn it's like, I don't need too much of that. I don't need too much of this. And so that was my biggest issue, so that really helped me here."

The two juniors' part-time work has shifted; Lee still works in the food industry but is spending his time on the service side while Lieven switched over to a car wash. Lieven said he misses working in the food industry, especially having taken the culinary art courses this year.

Lee said the program is "the place to go for if you want any culinary experience."

The two of them aren't sure they will go into the culinary arts or the food industry but said the experience was valuable. Lieven said the food industry is in top three career choices, but he would prefer to work in the trades.

After Top Chef ended, the baking class began. Sophomore Aviea Holden has already gotten her start in the industry, working part-time at Davenport's Café d'Marie.

Holden originally started as a table busser but has been able to help in the kitchen since she started. At times, she has helped cooks make sandwiches and prep vegetables.

Holden said in the classroom, the focus is on listening to directions and trying again, even when mistakes happen.

"We've made, like, a hundreds of mistakes, which is supposed to happen, because you're learning," Holden said. "Sometimes our cheese will curdle, which is okay, because at home, because of that class, I don't curdle my cheese when I'm making, like macaroni and stuff, because we curdled our cheese, and it was not that good. So when I had to make a recipe at home, it became very simple because I remembered what to do."

Asked if she'll pursue culinary arts, Holden said she is uncertain but she enjoys making food for her loved ones.

"But I think about going into cooking when I'm older sometimes, because if I really don't know what to do I could find a good place to work at and just have a cooking job," Holden said.



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Greyson Tuftee, 20, works on creating structural channel at Oertel Metal Works on Tuesday, April 14, in Davenport.

Katelyn Metzger

Building a pipeline:

High schoolers gain on-the-job experience at Oertel Metal Works

SARAH WATSON
swatson@qctimes.com

Greyson Tuftee has always liked building things.

His grandfather, who was an engineer at Caterpillar, showed Tuftee how to weld when he was a kid. Tuftee was hooked.

When he got to high school at North Scott, Tuftee signed up for all the welding classes he could.

"I was like, I want in to all of them," Tuftee said.

Industrial machinery mechanics, machinists and rolling machine setters are among the most in-demand, high-paying jobs in the area that the Quad Cities Chamber identified as part of its August 2025 High Priority Jobs report.

During his junior year, Tuftee's adviser connected him with Oertel Metal Works, a metal fabrication contractor in Davenport that was looking to take on and train future welders and metal workers at a time when they were hard to come by.

Oertel, a subsidiary of McCarthy-Bush Corporation, does all kinds of metal fabrication, such as steel beams for Linwood Mines and railcar parts.

Tuftee interviewed and Oertel leaders thought he'd be a good fit for the program. He worked at Oertel during his senior year on days he didn't have classes. Oertel supervisors assigned him miscellaneous shop work to start — running a press brake, roll-forming, sawing, grinding parts and sweeping the floors.

Now, Tuftee is 20 years old and recently completed his first year of a five-year sheet metal apprenticeship through Sheet Metal Workers Local 91 while working at Oertel.

Tuftee is one of 12 high school apprentices Oertel has taken on since 2024.

At the time, Oertel couldn't hire quality employees fast enough to keep up with the work, said Brian Krzyaniak, Oertel's president. The demand for dependable, skilled metal workers was high and the people they were hiring often didn't last.

So, they turned to training the next generation.

"We tried a lot of different avenues, through Indeed and through LinkedIn," Krzyaniak said. "But what we found was going out and working with the local schools and working with high school apprentices that are in welding classes and shop classes, bringing them in and teaching them from the ground up was successful."



Rock Island High School student **Eric Biswell**, 17, cuts a motor mount at Oertel Metal Works on Tuesday, April 14, in Davenport. Biswell, who started welding in eighth grade with his grandfather, knew that he always wanted to go into the trades.

Katelyn Metzger



United Township student **Logan Miller**, 17, poses next to a press brake at Oertel Metal Works on Tuesday, April 14, in Davenport. *Katelyn Metzger*



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Greyson Tutee, 20, measures a cut on a structural channel at Oertel Metal Works on Tuesday, April 14, in Davenport. Tutee enjoys his position because he has such wide range of projects that he works on.

Katelyn Metzger

The market has softened in recent months for metal fabrication, Krzyaniak said, but big picture, there's still a shortage of workers in skilled trades.

CNC machinists are the most difficult position to fill, Krzyaniak said.

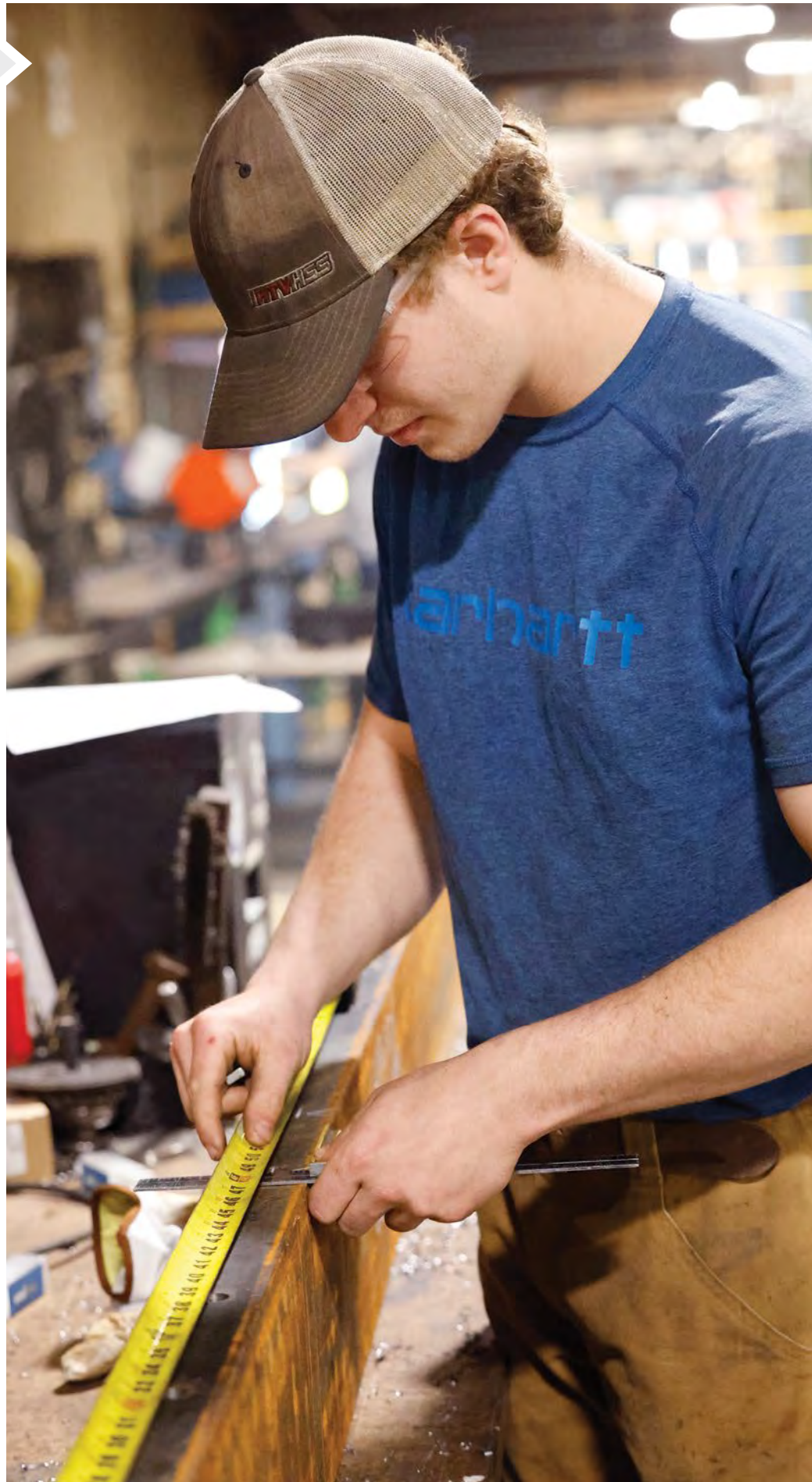
Industrial machinery mechanics, machinists and rolling machine setters are among the most in-demand, high-paying jobs in the area that the Quad Cities Chamber identified as part of its August 2025 High Priority Jobs report.

There were 794 machinists hired in the six-county area of the Quad-Cities in 2024 and an estimated average of 88 job openings annually that aren't filled by workers changing employers for a similar job.

The report found the Quad-Cities has a higher concentration of welders than the national average, and that region has had success developing a workforce pipeline of welders through high school apprenticeships.

"It gives the employees an opportunity to make sure this is what they want to do."

– Brian Krzyaniak



There were 794 machinists hired in the six-county area of the Quad-Cities in 2024 and an estimated average of 88 job openings annually that aren't filled by workers changing employers for a similar job.

Oertel Metal Works currently works with three students from local schools. Twelve students have gone through the program since 2024.

Katelyn Metzger

Welding is an occupation that is seeing more robotic integration, according to the report, and the manufacturing community is demanding more experienced welders with robotic integration training.

Four of Oertel's employees who came to Oertel as high school students went on to the Local 91 sheet metal

apprenticeship. Oertel currently employs three high school students — one from United Township High School and two from Rock Island High School.

Krzyaniak explained how the process works.

Oertel works with multiple high schools that have identified juniors who show an interest in a welding trade. Leaders at Oertel interview the candidates and sometimes bring them in to show them what Oertel workers do and how they do it. The summer between their junior and senior years, selected candidates work 40-hour weeks with Oertel with union entry-level pay and benefits.

During their senior year, they have a flex schedule where they work part-time at the shop when they don't have classes.

Oertel pairs each student with a mentor — usually Andrew Schau — to teach them the ins and outs of working in a shop.

"It gives the employees an opportunity to make sure this is what they want to do," Krzyaniak said.

In fact, two of the high school apprentices decided halfway through their senior year they wanted to go a completely different route. One decided to go into ministry and another decided to be a diesel mechanic.





Eric Biswell, 17, cuts a motor mount at Oertel Metal Works on Tuesday, April 14, in Davenport. *Katelyn Metzger*

"But hats off to them. They got in here, realized this isn't the right fit, it's not what they want to do for their career," Krzyaniak said. "Now's the time to find out, right?"

On one April day in the shop, Tuftee was cutting structural channel beams for Linwood Mines, another Bush Construction subsidiary.

Tuftee has also been contracted at Purina and Linwood Mines to fix things that have broken, put in safety guards or take out and reinstall a part.

The demand for welders is part of what drew him to the industry. He hopes one day to open his own business as an on-demand welder in his hometown, McCausland.

"One of the things I heard a lot was that they're always looking for welders," Tuftee said. "It just seemed like kind of a no-brainer to me."

Logan Miller, a 17-year-old United Township High School student, has a few family members in the Local 91, and plans to stay on with Oertel after high school. Miller is at Oertel from 7 a.m. until noon and then goes to school from 12:30 p.m. to 2:15 p.m.

On the April day in the shop, Miller was operating a press brake, making parts that would be welded on a train car to patch them up.

"It's a really good start for people that are wanting to get into this career," Miller said.

Oertel a member of new trade training program

This fall, Eastern Iowa Community Colleges and Quad-Cities area manufacturing businesses are launching Iowa's first chapter of a trades-focused training program designed to build a pipeline of industrial maintenance technicians locally.

The program provides paid hands-on experience at area businesses such as Oertel and an Associate of Applied Science degree in industrial maintenance technology through the community college.

Students enrolled in the program work three days a week with a sponsoring employer and attend classes two days a week.

It's through a partnership with the Federation of Advanced Manufacturing Education, which has 45 chapters across the country.

Participating employers in the Quad-Cities are Amcor Global Rigid Packaging Solutions, LMT Defense, Novelis, Oertel Metal Works, PCT Ebeam and Integration, Smith Filter and SSAB.

The program grew out of a need for industrial maintenance technicians, according to the Quad Cities Chamber. The Chamber's Top 100 High Priority Jobs Report identified an average annual opening of 124 jobs for industrial machinery mechanics and machinery maintenance workers.



Inside Collis, the work is changing.

And so are the people doing it.

The robot is bigger than the one it's replacing. Wires run panel to panel. Diagrams map every connection. One mistake, and the system stops.

Issiaha Stickell is in the middle of it, working through the wiring, figuring it out piece by piece.

"I've been working on that," Stickell said. "Getting the wiring diagram for it. It's all interconnected with PLCs."

Fifteen years ago, he was on the production floor. Now, he's a programmable logic controller (PLC) electrician, helping bring new robotic systems online at Collis LLC in Clinton, Iowa.

He worked his way up to it.

"I want to learn as much as I can," Stickell said. "Anything that'll make the job easier."

That mindset is what Collis is building around. When Plant Manager James Isaacson stepped into his role, the challenge was clear.

"We developed an internal cross-training matrix to analyze nearly every employee and identify skill gaps,"

Isaacson said.

"We quickly realized we didn't have the internal resources to train adequately for some of these functions."

The equipment was advanced. The expectations were high. But the internal structure to build those skills wasn't there.

Robotics was one of the first pressure points. Programming errors. Crashes. Downtime slowed production and created frustration across teams.

"We were seeing these different things, and the logic that wasn't being written properly," Isaacson said.

The work was there. The people were there. The training was not. So, Collis looked outside its walls and found a partner in Eastern Iowa Community Colleges (EICC).

What started with robotics training quickly expanded to electrical systems, hydraulics, troubleshooting and leadership development.

"I think the most advantageous thing for us was flexibility," Isaacson said. "We were able to send our employees to EICC's facilities for a couple of hours a

day if needed, or all day. The proximity was a nice addition as well."

The training met employees where they were. Close to the plant. Built around schedules. Directly tied to the work happening on the floor. For Stickell, that connection was immediate.

"The skills that I'm learning here at EICC are directly being utilized in the workplace," he said.

He saw it most clearly in the areas he didn't know yet.

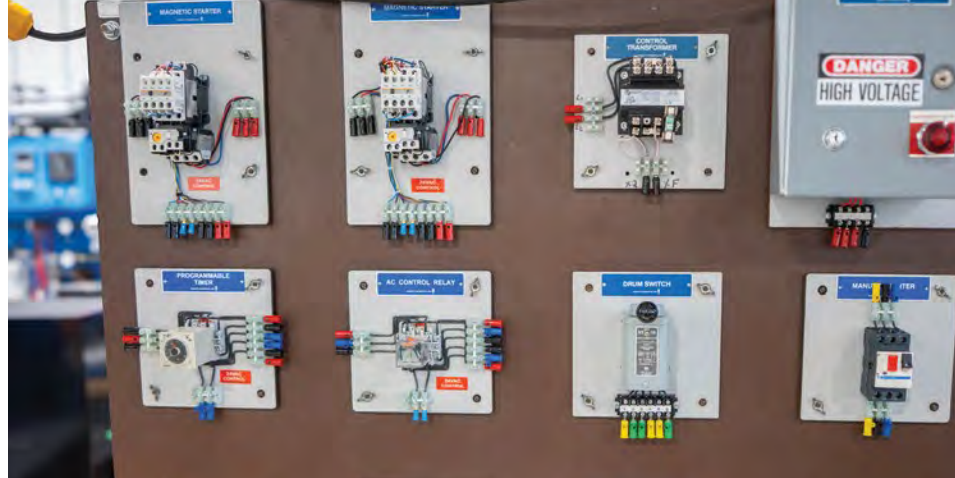
"The fluid power systems course was really helpful for me because I didn't actually know a whole lot about hydraulics or compressed air," he said. "I've used it a lot since I went through it, and I think it's definitely helped me get through troubleshooting issues quicker."

Isaacson sees that difference across the operation.

"They're able to get a machine back online in half the time of what it used to take them," he said.

That kind of improvement changes more than production numbers. It changes how a team works.

"It just expands their skill sets,"



ABOUT COLLIS LLC

Collis LLC is a tier-one manufacturer based in Clinton, Iowa, producing components for the small appliance industry. The company specializes in refrigeration shelving and assemblies used in freezers, refrigerators and under-counter units.

With roots dating back to the early 1900s, Collis has grown into a key regional manufacturer, combining advanced automation with a skilled workforce to meet modern production demands.

Isaacson said. “They get more confident and comfortable around some of the equipment and machinery that they’re working on.”

For him, that is the point.

“I’m a huge proponent of taking those people that want to grow and helping them grow,” he said.

Instead of looking outside for every new skill, Collis is investing in the people already there. Building knowledge. Creating pathways. Giving employees the chance to move into more technical and leadership roles. That opportunity matters.

“There’s a ton of employees here that

have never had that opportunity to really excel and try to grow their own personal knowledge,” Isaacson said.

For some, stepping into a classroom again was not easy. But the results speak for themselves. More than 30 Collis employees have now participated in customized training through EICC, building skills across robotics, electrical systems, safety, and leadership. And for employees like Stickell, it’s opening doors.

“The courses I’m taking here at EICC are going to potentially help me move further into the company,” he said.

He is already thinking about what

comes next. With continued training, there is a path toward becoming a lead PLC electrician. More responsibility. More ownership of the systems he now helps build and maintain. That kind of growth does not happen by accident.

It takes access. It takes partnership. And it takes a willingness to invest in people before they need to be ready.

At Collis, that work is already underway. The machines are evolving. The systems are growing more complex. And right alongside them, so are the people.

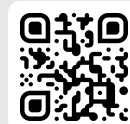


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St. Ambrose University sophomore **Emelia Miller**, 20, poses in a patient room at UnityPoint Health-Trinity Rock Island Hospital on Tuesday, April 28, in Rock Island. Miller participates in the hospital's Patient Care Technician Career Pathways Program, which gives her hands-on experience before graduation.

Katelyn Metzger



Career Pathways program

provides new opportunities at
UnityPoint Health — Trinity

GRETCHEN TESKE
gteske@qctimes.com

Emelia Miller enrolled in St. Ambrose University for a nursing degree. Thanks to a local hospital program, she already has experience in the field.

A sophomore at the Davenport university, Miller is in the pre-nursing program with her sights set on starting in the nursing program next year. But first, she had to find work.

"I really needed a job in healthcare, because that's one of the requirements," she said.



Emelia Miller poses for a portrait at UnityPoint Health-Trinity Rock Island Hospital on Tuesday, April 28, in Rock Island.

Katelyn Metzger

Depending on the state, nursing schools require students to have healthcare experience before they can complete their degrees. Miller was looking for a way to balance the requirement and her college courses when she went to a career fair at her school.

UnityPoint Health — Trinity had a booth advertising flexible healthcare positions. After discussing her needs and schedule, it seemed like an easy fit, she said.

"I really liked them out of all the other people I talked to and how they went about everything," she said.

Miller filled out an application, went through two interviews and a month or two later was enrolled in the Career Pathways program at UnityPoint Health—Trinity.



A non-degree program, Career Pathways is designed to help people enter the healthcare field without the cost or time requirement of receiving a degree.

A non-degree program, Career Pathways is designed to help people enter the healthcare field without the cost or time requirement of receiving a degree. Lauren VanNatta, the Career Pathways navigator for UnityPoint Health - Trinity, said it's a dual program designed to tackle two problems at once.

Nationwide, the workforce in the medical sphere is dwindling, she said, a trend that started with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The American Hospital Association noted in a 2021 report that hospital employment fell by nearly 94,000 jobs since February 2020. Job vacancies for various nursing positions increased by up to 30% between 2019 and 2020, according to the report. With no recovery in sight, hospitals have been getting creative with the employees they already have and are searching for ways to help fill in the gaps.

VanNatta said one of the strengths of the program is it allows the hospital to address the specific workforce needs the hospital has in order to fill the needs of



One of the strengths of the program is it allows the hospital to address the specific workforce needs the hospital has in order to fill the needs of the community.

the community. It also allows the hospital a chance to provide opportunities to its own employees to help better their futures.

The opportunities are entry-level, VanNatta said, as the hospital is trying to

focus on people who have not yet had an opportunity to continue their education. The Pathways program works just like a full-time job, with staff transferring into the program from their previous role.

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All roles in the Career Pathways program are open to both internal and external candidates, with multiple cohorts per year to ensure those willing get to participate in the program they prefer.

Throughout the duration of the program, the staff receive education, training and on-the-job work experience that correlate directly with the department the staff member is going to work in. Currently, UnityPoint — Trinity is offering the program for patient care technician (PCT), phlebotomy, respiratory therapy and surgical tech roles.

Miller went through the PCT program, which allowed for a variety of new experiences. As a PCT, she assists the nurses with blood draws, baths, bed changes,

checks vitals and assists in hourly rounds.

But before she started any of that, she asked plenty of questions first, she said. Being new to the healthcare field, she wanted to make sure she would have adequate time to learn the job and ask as many questions as she wanted.

"I wanted to make sure it was super in-depth, because working with patients but never having worked in healthcare is scary," she said.

She was assured there would be adequate training, and she could extend

that period if she chose to, she said.

That stuck out to her and helped calm her worries.

All roles in the Career Pathways program are open to both internal and external candidates, with multiple cohorts per year to ensure those willing get to participate in the program they prefer. From a workforce development perspective, VanNatta said, getting to look at what the hospital needs and fill those positions with internal staff helps create new job growth and provide more services for the community.

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"We're looking at areas of the hospital that have some of the higher needs. A lot of these are ones people don't think about right out of the gate. It helps create a better awareness of those programs and understanding there are numerous roles in the hospital people can look into and grow into as well."

— Lauren VanNatta

"Some of these folks that we are bringing in didn't see this opportunity happening otherwise."

– Lauren VanNatta



Emelia Miller changes a patient bed at UnityPoint Health-Trinity Rock Island Hospital on Tuesday, April 28, in Rock Island. *Katelyn Metzger*

"We're looking at areas of the hospital that have some of the higher needs," she said. "A lot of these are ones people don't think about right out of the gate. It helps create a better awareness of those

programs and understanding there are numerous roles in the hospital people can look into and grow into as well."

From a staff perspective, VanNatta said, those coming into the program have a

chance at a better income and get a sense of pride at completing programs that help better their future. Some participants, she said, are the first in their families to receive a certificate or degree of this kind.

"This job has made me realize how much I want to be a nurse and has solidified that for me. It made me realize this is my calling."

– Emelia Miller

"Some of these folks that we are bringing in didn't see this opportunity happening otherwise," she said. "The people who have the grit and can-do attitude and put the work in, they make it."

Miller was one of those people who put in the work. She trained for about a week-and-a-half, she said, and followed around a variety of different people. It helped her learn where things are and

how everything works on the floor, she said.

She was able to work a few 12-hour shifts, she said, and meet a lot of new coworkers at once.

"Everyone training me was so nice, and I work with a lot of them now. They are the sweetest people," she said.

The flexible hours were a big plus for her, with the requirement being only 24 hours a month. She gets to choose her own schedule and pick up shifts when she wants to, with the summer employment being an option, too.

The first time she was left to the job on her own, she was nervous, she said. But her coworkers supported her and as her confidence in her skills grew, so did her confidence in her choices.

"This job has made me realize how much I want to be a nurse and has solidified that for me," Miller said. "It made me realize this is my calling."

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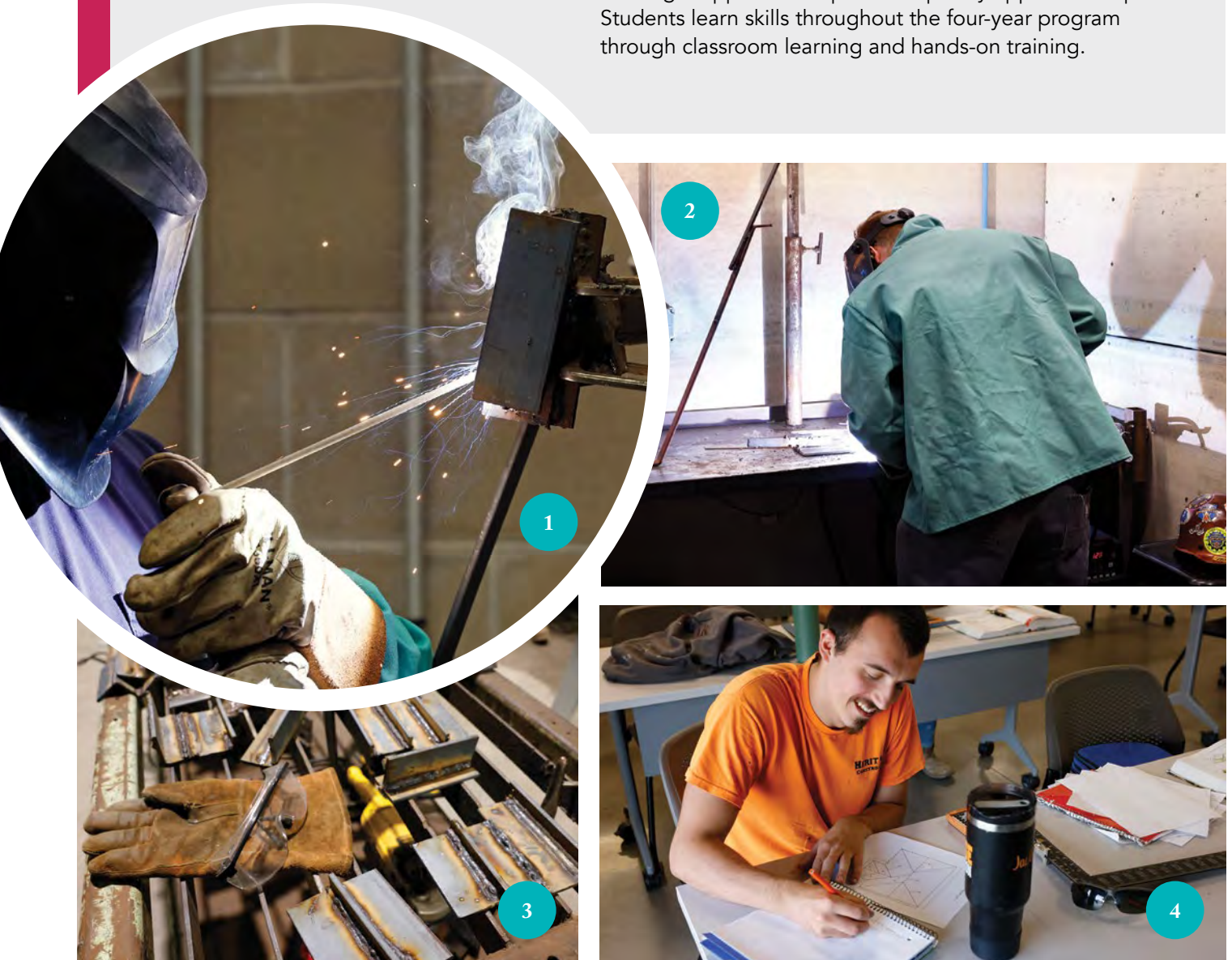
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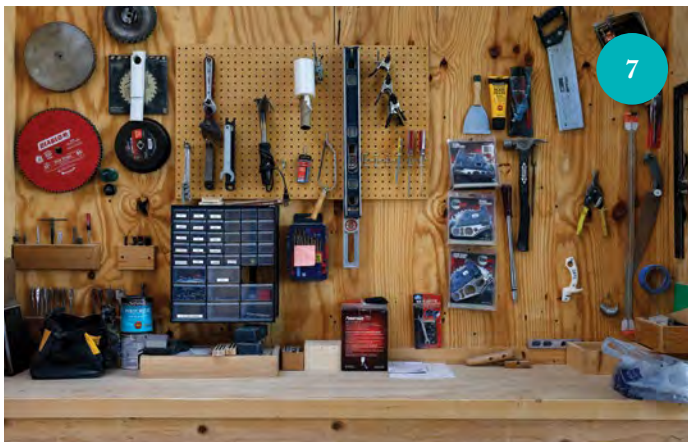
KATELYN METZGER

kmetzger@qctimes.com

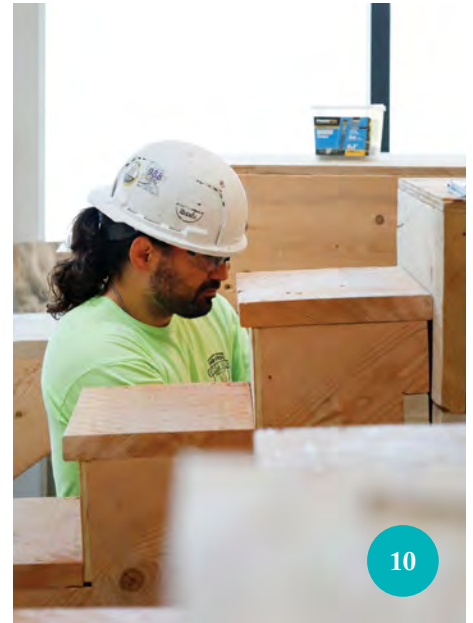
The Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council Apprentice & Training Program helps build the future's workforce through union training via two programs – the Millwright apprenticeship and Carpentry apprenticeship. Students learn skills throughout the four-year program through classroom learning and hands-on training.



1. A student practices a vertical shielded metal arc weld during a millwright class at the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council on Wednesday, May 6, in East Moline. **2.** A student practices a horizontal shielded metal arc weld during a millwright class at the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Union on Wednesday, May 6, in East Moline. **3.** Welding tools lay on a welding lab table to be used during class at the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council shop in East Moline. **4.** As an apprentice at the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Union, about 40% of a student's time is spent in the classroom and 60% is spent in the shop participating in hands-on training.



5. Instructor Jay Bernrich teaches a general carpenter class at Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council on Wednesday, May 6, in East Moline. **6.** The Carpenters union includes a wide variety of trades such as: commercial and residential carpenters, concrete form builders, floorcovers, millwrights, roofers, insulators, siders and cabinet makers. **7.** Tools used for carpentry are neatly stored at the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council shop in East Moline. **8.** Third-year carpenters apprentices build staircases in the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council shop on Wednesday, May 6, in East Moline.



9. Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council Apprentice & Training Program is a four year program, with 160 hours of classroom training per year. Earning potential within the union starts at \$40,000 during year one, hitting as high as \$100,000 once at Journey level, the most advanced level of the program. 10. Third-year carpentry apprentice Anthony Pacheck works on a project in a stair framing class at the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council on Wednesday, May 6, in East Moline.

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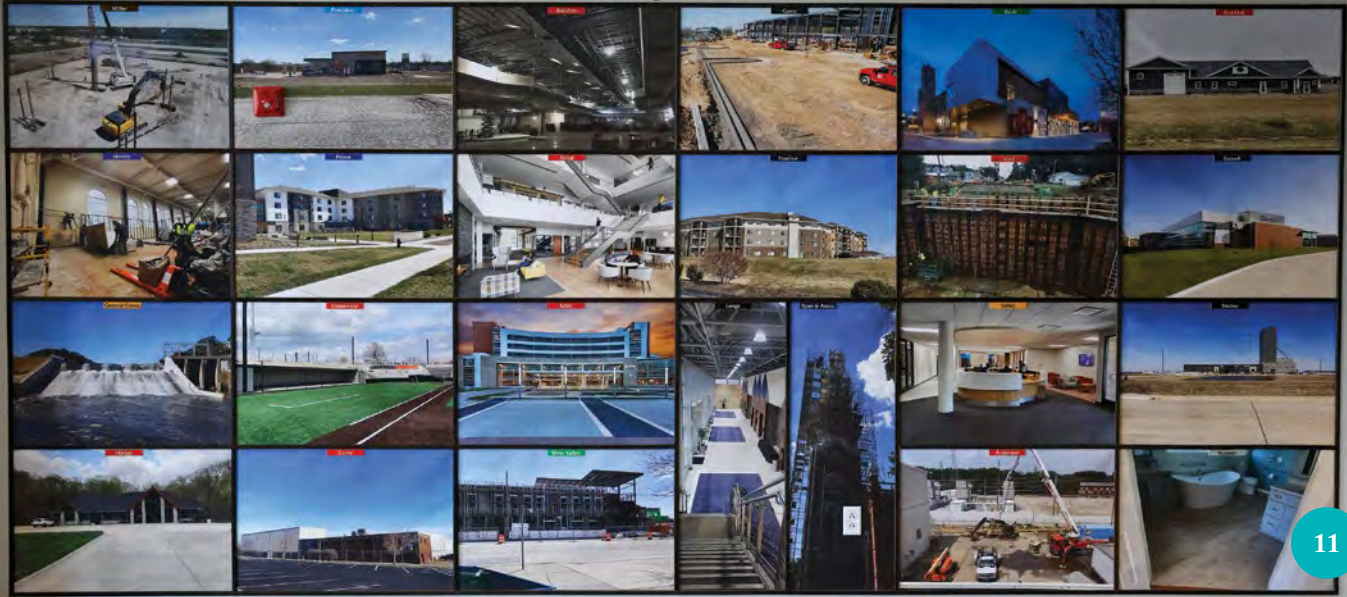
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11. An exhibit in the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council lobby shows off work done by union contractors and carpenters within the Quad-Cities, which often focuses on commercial builds.



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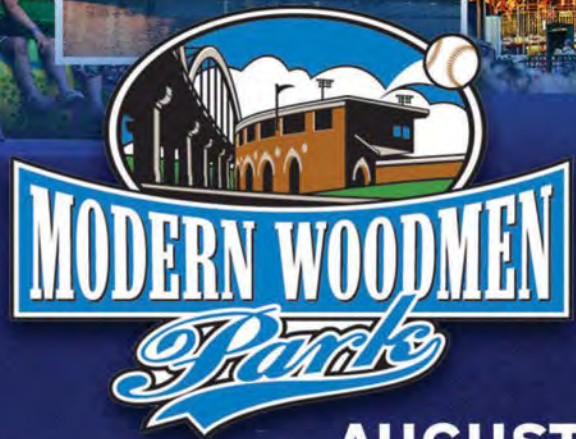
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		CR ³⁰ 6:30 PM	CR ¹ 6:30 PM	CR ² 6:30 PM	CR ³ 6:00 PM	CR ⁴ 6:30 PM
CR ⁵ 1:00 PM		PEO ⁷ 6:30 PM	PEO ⁸ 6:30 PM	PEO ⁹ 6:30 PM	PEO ¹⁰ 6:30 PM	PEO ¹¹ 5:30 PM
PEO ¹² 1:00 PM					WIS ¹⁷	WIS ¹⁸
WIS ¹⁹		BEL ²¹	BEL ²²	BEL ²³	BEL ²⁴	BEL ²⁵
BEL ²⁶		DAY ²⁸ 6:30 PM	DAY ²⁹ 6:30 PM	DAY ³⁰ 6:30 PM	DAY ³¹ 6:30 PM	

AUGUST

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						DAY ¹ 5:30 PM
DAY ² 1:00 PM		PEO ⁴	PEO ⁵	PEO ⁶	PEO ⁷	PEO ⁸
PEO ⁹		FW ¹¹ 6:30 PM	FW ¹² 6:30 PM	FW ¹³ 6:30 PM	FW ¹⁴ 6:30 PM	FW ¹⁵ 5:30 PM
FW ¹⁶ 1:00 PM		DAY ¹⁸	DAY ¹⁹	DAY ²⁰	DAY ²¹	DAY ²²
DAY ²³		BEL ²⁵ 6:30 PM	BEL ²⁶ 6:30 PM	BEL ²⁷ 6:30 PM	BEL ²⁸ 6:30 PM	BEL ²⁹ 5:30 PM
BEL ³⁰ 1:00 PM						



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Dr. Jeremy Thomas, president of Black Hawk College, poses for a portrait in his office on Monday, April 20, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger

Education economics:

Black Hawk College contributes \$291M to the local economy

GRETCHEN TESKE

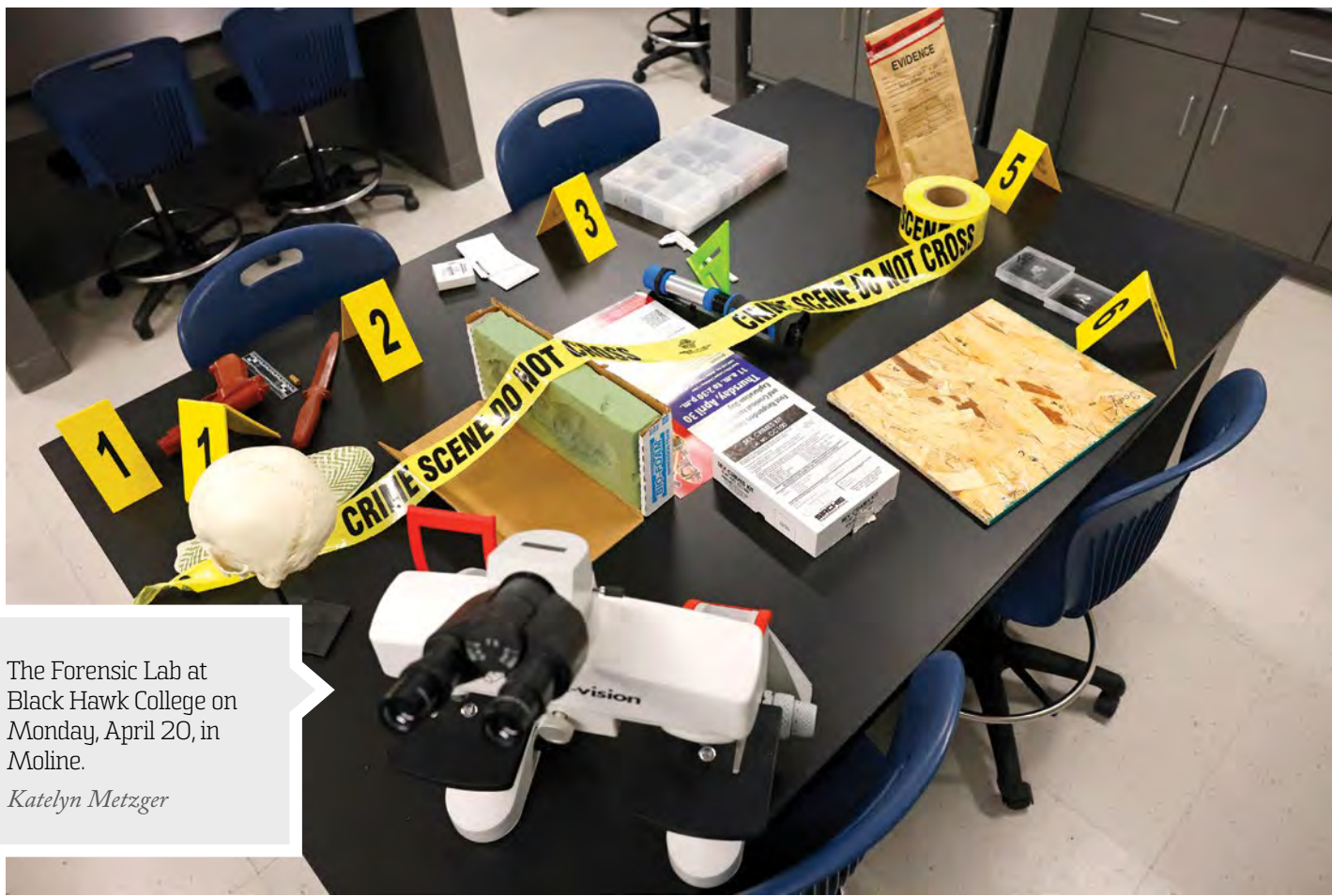
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A Quad-Cities-based community college is making a big impact on the community it serves.

Black Hawk College in Moline employed a study that showed the school

is an economic engine for the region, contributing nearly \$291 million to the local economy during the 2023-24 fiscal year. The study, conducted by Lightcast, used two lenses — an economic impact analysis and an investment analysis — to estimate benefits to key stakeholder groups and to the region, according to a news release.

"This report makes clear that Black Hawk College is more than a place of learning," said Jeremy Thomas, president of Black Hawk College. "For nearly 80 years, we have been a driver of economic growth in our region. When we invest in our students, we are investing in our workforce, our employers, and the long-term strength of our communities."



The Forensic Lab at Black Hawk College on Monday, April 20, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger

"Our impact is national, and sometimes we don't even realize it."

- Jeremy Thomas

The economic impact study was commissioned by Black Hawk College after the state of Illinois commissioned its own, Thomas said. Data released in April indicated community colleges have a \$27.2 billion impact on the state, which led the college's leadership to commission its own study to go deeper into Black Hawk's impact on the local region, he said.

"One of my many jobs is to talk about how we impact our students and, more importantly, the community in which we serve. We often focus in on the individual

but truly, it's a larger impact, and now we have the data to back that up," he said. "I'm not having to sell what Black Hawk means to our community. That's always been easy for me since I got here."

Prior to accepting the job at Black Hawk College, Thomas worked in Oklahoma and was attending a community meeting when it was announced he was leaving his position for the community college in Moline. It turned out that a woman he'd served on a board with for years was a Black Hawk College alumna.



Between the two campuses, Black Hawk offers 85 different certificate and degree programs.

"Our impact is national, and sometimes we don't even realize it. The report really focuses in on that," he said. "Being able to see the numbers was eye-opening, but at the same time I was not overly surprised."

Black Hawk serves nine counties in northwestern Illinois, covering a population of more than 225,000 residents. During the 2023-24 fiscal year, Black Hawk College served more than 8,000 students and during the 2024-2205 school year grew by 9%. That number is looking closer to double digits for this upcoming school year, Thomas said.

"That puts us at the top of the state average. When you look at all the community colleges, we're well above most of our peers, and growth over the last two years was well above the national average," Thomas said, adding the national average is hovering around 3%. "It's very deliberate. We've invested in our campus, we've invested in our students. And I think it's showing."

Part of the reason for growth, he said, is the diversity of the two campuses. The main campus in Moline has historically

been more transfer-focused, but the tide is shifting on that narrative.

At the eastern campus in Galva, the population is more agriculture and career and technical education focused. Between the two campuses, Black Hawk offers 85 different certificate and degree programs.

Another big statement setting Black Hawk apart is the local impact. The study showed 98% of Black Hawk College students remain in the area after graduation.

Thomas said the fastest growing programs at Black Hawk are in career and technical education — a national trend that's hitting home in Moline.

"You're even seeing four-year schools to try to figure out how to get into the certificate game, because, again, savvy students," Thomas said.

Right now, the college is seeing about half of students coming in to earn credits before they transfer, but the other half are coming in for the career and technical side.

The programs are all designed with the help of industry partners to make sure Black Hawk is offering the training that

Quick stat:



Black Hawk College students that remain in the area after graduation.

matches the jobs available in the community. It's a win for everybody, he said, with employers getting quality workers, Black Hawk turning out strong graduates and students getting into jobs quickly in the area.

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Thomas said one way Black Hawk is able to maximize on this plan is by scrutinizing its own work. Programs designed a few decades ago are not the same programs needed today, he said, using the example of computers.

At one point, every degree required a computer program of some sort, but with students already coming in with that knowledge, it's no longer necessary. Black Hawk does the same thing with its curriculum, he said, to dig into courses to see what is no longer necessary and what courses they can add in instead.

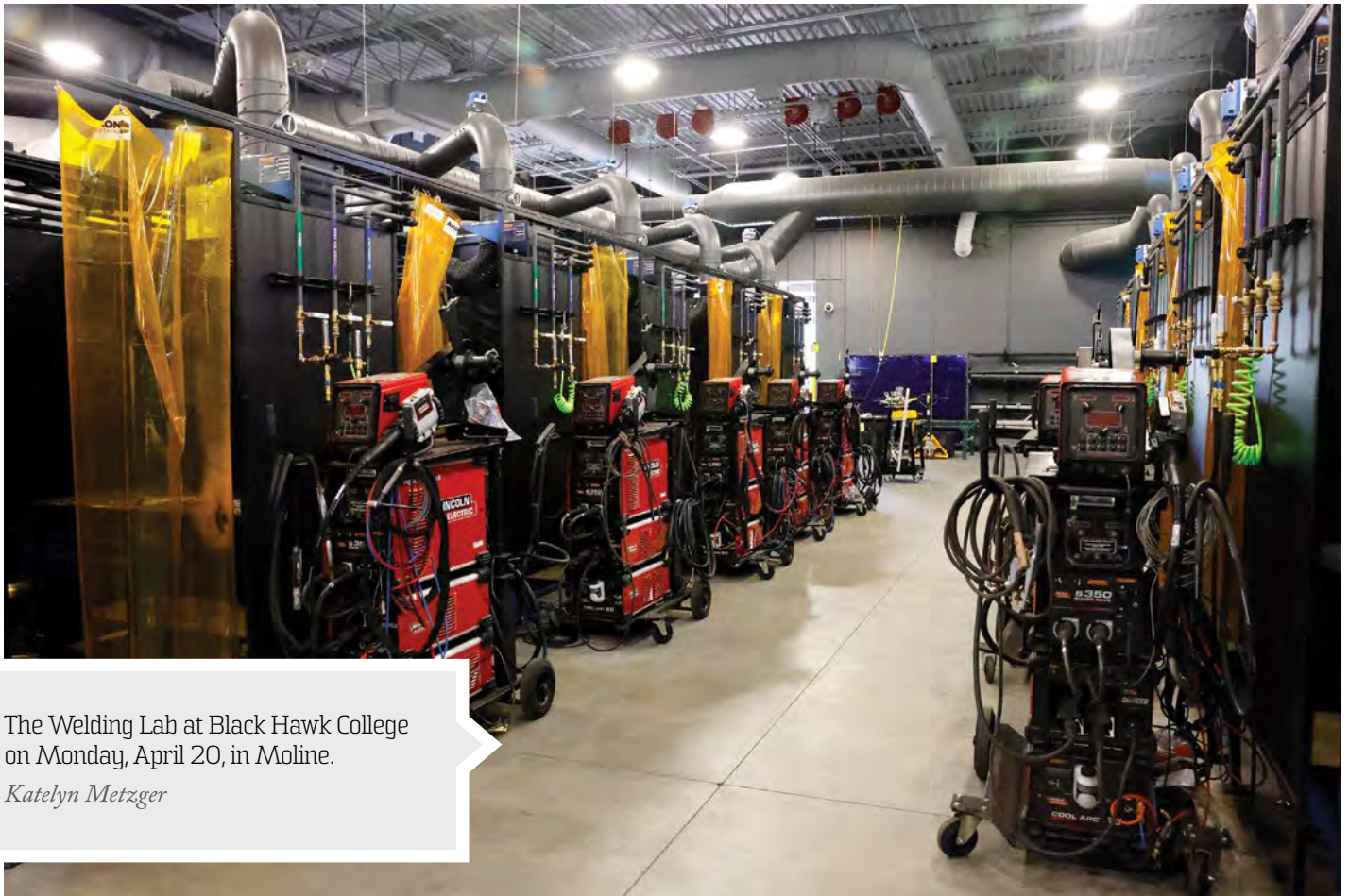
A big piece of that accessibility, Thomas said, is keeping the costs low. Black Hawk has the lowest tuition rate in the area, he said, and that's done on purpose.

College should be accessible for students who want access to a quality, affordable education at home. Especially as the attitude surrounding community college shifts, and they are looked at as a first option, instead of a second or third.

"The student of today is much more savvy about that sort of stuff than in previous generations," Thomas said, adding students are not as focused on

using community college as a launching pad for a university, but instead looking to see how a school like Black Hawk can help them get their career started. "I think the institutions that can articulate that add a value. I think that's important, (and) I think that's part of why we're now becoming the choice, or at least one of the choices, and not an afterthought."

Putting students first helps the community as well, Thomas said, adding the economic impact comes from multiple angles, including student impact, salaries and Black Hawk as a business.

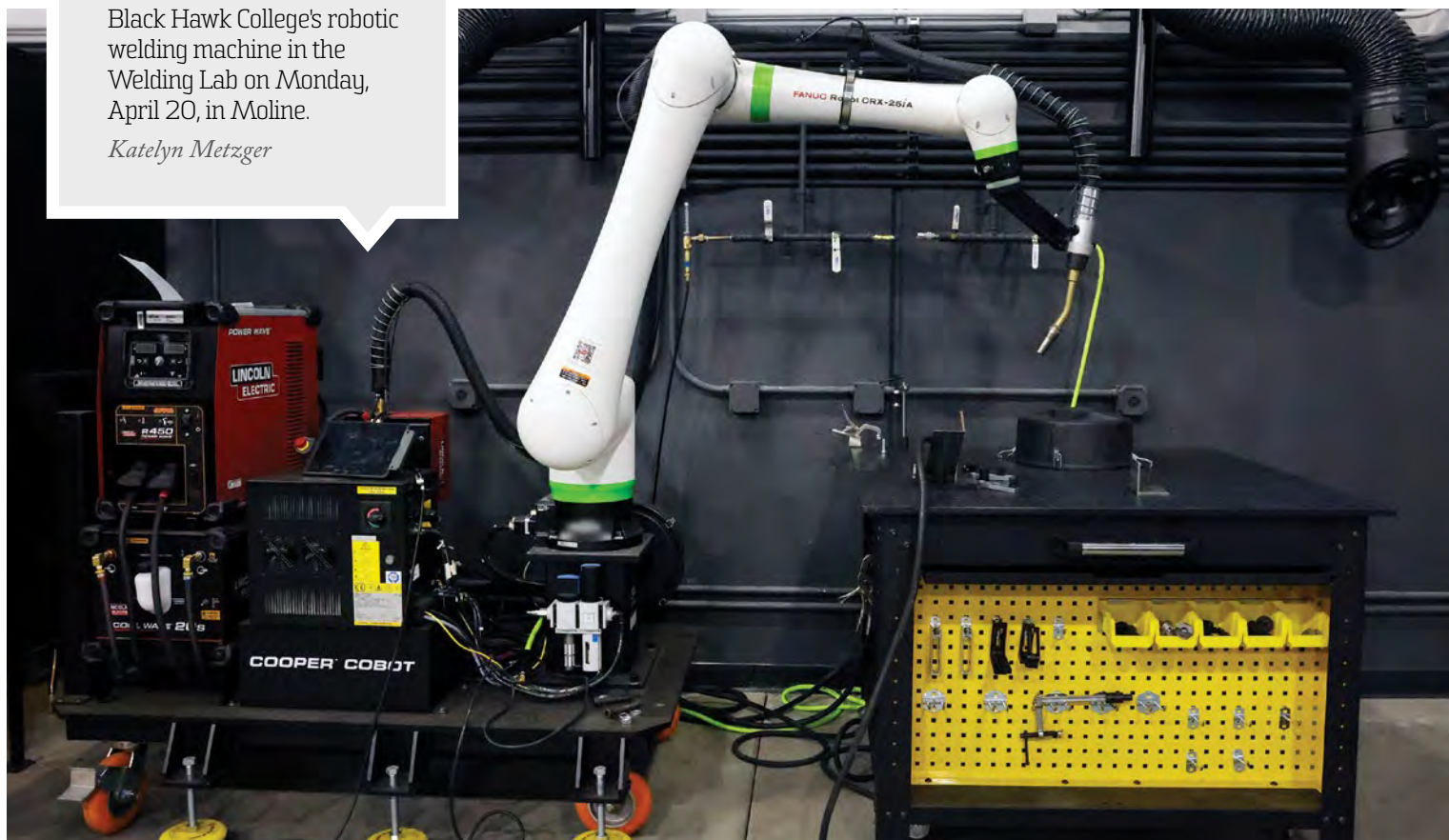


The Welding Lab at Black Hawk College on Monday, April 20, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger

Black Hawk College's robotic welding machine in the Welding Lab on Monday, April 20, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger



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The Industrial and Preventive Maintenance Lab at Black Hawk College on Monday, April 20, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger

"We have a little over 500 full-time and part-time faculty and staff. When you add all those people up together, most of them live local. They don't drive hours to come in, and that really changes the picture there quite a bit," he said. "When you look at the overall impact, you're talking about \$291 million just in that one year they sampled."

That number varies year to year, Thomas said, but it's a hefty impact for a school of Black Hawk's size. Black Hawk is not the only community college in the area, and with other major institutions in the region, it competes for students just like



any school. But Black Hawk is still able to support one out of every 50 jobs in the community. And that's something to be proud of, he said.

"That shows just how great a value our students are getting," he said. "In 80 years, we've touched a lot of lives at Black Hawk College."

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