Area institutions help meet demand for workers

By Gilles Bousquet, Bruce Barker, Charles Sorensen and Dean Van Galen

As the leaders of western Wisconsin's institutions of public higher education serving 31,500 full-time students, we were pleased to co-host the BE BOLD 2 Summit Dec. 5 at UW-Eau Claire.

The summit gave our region an opportunity to hear first hand the findings and recommendations of the recently released Competitive Wisconsin study, "BE BOLD 2: Growing Wisconsin's Talent Pool."

The study identifies existing and emerging gaps between the knowledge and skills employers require and those the workforce possesses. It focuses on five specific "skills clusters" for Wisconsin's major employer groups: systems and network software development, accounting and financial analysis, nursing and health-related professions, mechanical engineering and metal manufacturing.

Significant talent shortages in some of these areas are expected as the workforce ages and fewer people enter the "pipeline" to replace them. For example, the study finds that more than 46 percent of registered nurses are planning to retire during the next nine years; the average age of welders is 56, and 40 percent will have to be replaced by 2019; and demand for business and financial management talent in the next 10 years is projected to surge by 40 percent.

We agree with the following BE BOLD 2 report observation:

"Doing nothing is not an option. In this new world where globalization is changing everything and competition is faster and far less forgiving than ever before, we must aggressively pursue a bold system and strategic collaboration dedicated to securing a stronger future for ourselves and the generations to come."

Our institutions stand ready to help Wisconsin adapt to these current and future challenges. Talent development, as the BE BOLD 2 report notes, is critical to our state's economic health - and talent development is the core mission of our colleges and universities.

Today, that mission is more relevant than ever, and our institutions are responding with innovative solutions.
For example:

- Chippewa Valley Technical College, working with business owners and an industry focus group, designed and constructed a new state-of-the-art welding and metal fabrication lab and expanded its electromechanical technology, industrial mechanic and machine tooling technics programs to produce more graduates, with higher levels of skill, in all of these areas.

- At UW-Eau Claire, programs teaching geospatial technology skills have increased significantly, and graduates with these skills are being pursued by businesses and government agencies across Wisconsin and beyond. This fall, the university's new Geospatial Lab has doubled the number of students able to use geospatial technology.

- The UW-River Falls Hudson Center offers courses in a location and at times convenient for adult learners seeking to earn degrees, primarily in business administration. With fall 2012 enrollment reaching a record 414 students, the Hudson Center is helping reduce the shortage of workers with skills in accounting and finance.

- The UW-Stout Discovery Center FABLAB, a digital fabrication workshop that began at MIT, allows innovators, business, industry and other users to define problems, create prototypes and develop solutions to real-world challenges. The FABLAB will provide access to a variety of tools, including computer-aided design and desktop manufacturing technologies, to help bring innovative ideas to life.

The BE BOLD 2 Summit provided an important opportunity for those of us in higher education to engage in a substantive discussion with our counterparts in business, industry, manufacturing and economic development to explore ways we can strengthen our existing partnerships and forge new ones to ensure our region and Wisconsin, in the spirit of our state motto, continue to move forward.

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