



# RALLYING POINTS

Businesses arriving and expanding in North Carolina are creating thousands of jobs. Colleges and universities, along with public and private sector partners, are uniting to fill them with skilled workers.

**N**orth Carolina history was made in March, when Vietnamese electric-vehicle manufacturer VinFast chose 2,500-acre Triangle Innovation Point in Chatham County for its first North American plant. The \$4 billion investment is the state's first passenger-car factory and its largest economic development project to date.

VinFast plans to build cars and buses at the factory, as many as 150,000 per year when production begins in mid-2024. That will require plenty of skilled workers — eventually about 7,500. And that doesn't include ones to operate the factory's supply

chain, which is expected to develop across the region and North Carolina.

It took many people to get the VinFast deal to its current point. And it'll take even more to keep it moving forward. State and local officials, along with educators and private partners, are rallying to train and grow the needed workforce. N.C. Community College officials, for example, have already earmarked \$38 million for training customized to VinFast's needs. But that's just tip of what will be needed for workforce development in a host of industries statewide.

Boom Supersonic, for example, will create more than 1,750 jobs by 2030

at Piedmont Triad International Airport near Greensboro, where it's investing \$500 million to build supersonic passenger jets. Toyota is creating 2,100 jobs by 2025 at a \$3.8 million electric-vehicle battery plant that it's building at the Greensboro-Randolph Megasite. Add to that the 3,000 jobs Apple is bringing to Wake County as part of a statewide \$1 billion investment and the up to 1,000 jobs Google is creating at the Durham engineering hub it's building, part of a \$7 billion investment nationwide.

In Gaston County, for example, where N.C. Department of Commerce reports the July unemployment rate

was only 3.7%, plastic packaging manufacturer Sibo Venture, for example, is investing \$10 million at a 6.2-acre site in Gastonia Technology Park, where it will build a factory and create about 25 jobs over the next four years. The U.S. Postal Service will need a yet to be determined number of workers at the 620,000-square-foot building its leasing at Gateway85, a 300-acre industrial park along Interstate 85 between Gastonia and Lowell, and fresh-foods manufacturer Hans Kissle broke ground at the Apple Creek Corporate Center, where it's building a \$42.2 million factory that will create 219 jobs, in June.

All businesses are struggling to hire employees quickly, so workforce needs are critical, says Greg Smith, Gaston College's vice president of economic and workforce development. "At one time, we used the term 'skills gap,' and we would talk about needing to get our residents up-skilled for the new jobs in our area," he says. "But today, it's more about having a people shortage, and that's tough all around."

## HELPING BUSINESSES

Training workers to fill the growing number of jobs statewide requires an extensive workforce development effort. Leading it is the N.C. Community College System. Margaret Robertson, vice president of workforce development at Central Carolina Community College, helps plot strategies for training the army of workers that'll be needed over the next decade. Partnerships, she says, is the name of the game. And winning it will require public and private sector entities to unite in a variety of

ways. "We're working with nine other community colleges across our region and partnering with them in new ways to develop training and education programs to fill many jobs, whether it's VinFast in Chatham County or Toyota in Randolph County," she says.

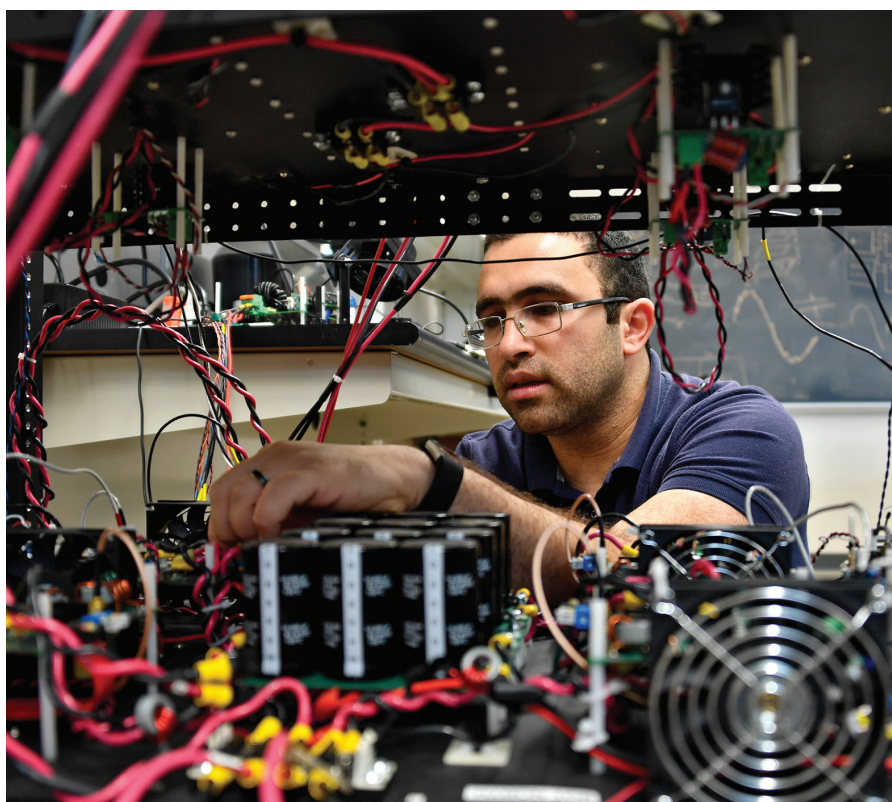
"These are massive employers. So, how do we respond to their workforce needs and appeal to a whole region of individuals who want to work at those places?"

North Carolina's regional Workforce Development Boards play an integral role in helping businesses find workers. "We think of workforce as an ecosystem, and the N.C. Department of Commerce, with its workforce development boards and career centers, is a huge part of the recruitment piece," Robertson says. "They have resources that can help ensure people have access to

training, and it really is about all of us working together to create success."

There are 22 workforce boards statewide. Each addresses needs specific to its locale. "Every county belongs to at least one of those boards," says Association of Workforce Boards Executive Director Stephanie Deese. "The local boards ensure we have a workforce in our communities that matches the skills local employers need," she says. "Our boards offer specific programs for adults, youth, displaced workers and business services, where they can assist businesses with work-based learning. [They] work with their local businesses to identify the jobs they're trying to fill, and they work with the community college system to get people trained for those jobs."

Workforce demand goes beyond recently arrived companies. Robertson



Student working on a solar project.



says existing employers have ongoing needs, too. “We have a lot of great employers who are already in place, and they want to tap into our workforce, too,” she says. In addition to training and education efforts, apprenticeships are filling workforce needs of existing businesses. Apprenticeship is more than a buzzword. It’s an essential workforce-development program that provides on-the-job training, and in many cases a paycheck, too, for high school and college students, along with workers looking to retrain.

Central Carolina Community College is working on training models that bring students to a classroom one day a week and send them to work-based learning at local businesses the other days. “When they come out of their apprenticeships at the end of eight or 10 weeks, they have job interviews already lined up with existing employers,” Robertson says. “These apprenticeships ensure our businesses that they have a robust pipeline of workers.”

## **HELPING WORKERS**

While Workforce Development Boards serve businesses and industries, Commerce’s network of NCWorks Career Centers help individuals upgrade their skills and find jobs. But they don’t do it alone. They also rely on a grassroots effort in their respective communities to define what’s needed and what’s available. “We have a system that’s online called NCWorks, where anybody in North Carolina can visit NCWorks online and look for available job opportunities,” Deese says.

North Carolina’s seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 3.4% in July, according to N.C. Department of Commerce. Chatham, Buncombe and Swain counties had the lowest unemployment rate in the state — 2.9%. Scotland County had the highest — 7.6%. Most economists consider 4% to 5% to be full employment.

The July unemployment rate in Robeson County was 6.2%. So, the focus at Robeson Community College is short-term training, putting residents to work quickly. “We’re taking a deep look at the job market, the shortages, and building continuing education programs around those,” says Eric Freeman, the college’s vice president of workforce development, continuing education and institutional services. “We’re working on increasing access to training by offering classes online, on nights and weekends, and in a hybrid format, whatever individuals needs are.”

Robeson Community College focuses on workforce needs in several industries, starting with transportation. The county’s proximity to several well-traveled interstates, including 95 and 74, provides an onramp to workforce development for supply chain management, distribution centers and truck driving. “We’ve started a truck driving school here, and the classes are full,” Freeman says. The American Trucking Associations says the county was short more than 80,000 drivers in 2021, and that number could double by 2030. Labor shortages in all transportation sectors have contributed to recent supply chain issues.

## **HELPING INDUSTRIES**

Robeson County recently received \$35,500 to complete a due-diligence analysis, including environmental assessments, archaeological analyses and mapping, of its COMtech Business Park, the first move to attracting businesses and creating jobs. The money was provided by Golden LEAF Foundation, which was established more than two decades ago to distribute the state’s portion of the national tobacco settlement to economic development projects in distressed communities that were long dependent on the state’s now dwindling tobacco industry. It has funded at least one project in each of North Carolina’s 100 counties, says Scott Hamilton, the foundation’s president and CEO.

Golden LEAF’s Community-Based Grants Initiative, for example, works across the state’s eight prosperity zones. Golden LEAF sets aside money for community improvement, inviting counties in each zone to apply for a share. “We are halfway through a second round of working in each of the prosperity zones and currently doing work in the Southeastern prosperity zone, where each county can apply for funding of projects of up to \$1.5 million,” Hamilton says. Its Board of Directors awarded UNC Health Southeastern in Lumberton \$500,000 in April 2020. The grant went toward expanding resources at its Gibson Cancer Center, where an \$8 million expansion recently added access to care and created jobs.

Golden LEAF funded 57 projects totaling \$73.6 million in 2021. For Hamilton, one stands out — a



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## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TRAINING N.C.

\$1.9 million workforce and talent development program that supports the growing biopharma and pharmaceutical industry in eastern North Carolina. Five counties — Wilson, Edgecombe, Nash, Johnston and Pitt, where the July unemployment rate was 4.3% — make up the Biopharma Crescent. The cluster, which is a stone's throw away from the Research Triangle Park, includes some of the industry's biggest international players such as Merck, Pfizer and Novo Nordisk.

Pharmaceutical and biopharma companies need workers. "The Biopharma Crescent has leveraged the training programs at those community colleges to demonstrate the need for people with those skills in the biopharma and pharmacy industries in eastern North Carolina," Hamilton says.

But those community colleges don't go it alone. East Carolina University in Greenville provides equipment for them to use in their programs, so individuals can train in their own communities, gaining the skills needed for immediate employment in the industry. The higher education partnership also provides a pathway for community college students to transfer to ECU, where they can apply credits earned toward a bachelor's degree. "We have a great partnership with ECU to serve the pharma industry, particularly Thermo Fisher Scientific and Mayne Pharma here in Pitt County, because the demand for skilled employees continues to grow in that sector," says Thomas Gould, Pitt Community College's vice president of academic





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Students getting hands on experience in the aviation program at Guilford Tech Community College.

affairs and student services.

Seven years ago, Golden LEAF awarded Pitt Community College \$650,000 to create the Pharmaceutical Services Network, an oral solid dose training program for the pharmaceutical industry. Courses began in 2017. PSN@PCC includes a partnership with N.C. Biotechnology Center and Pitt County Schools. Gould says the program focuses specifically on training for Mayne Pharma and Thermo Fisher, which announced it was adding almost 300 jobs in Greenville last year. "This is a state-of-the-art high tech oral solid dose training facility, and we can train both individuals just starting out in pharmaceutical manufacturing and incumbent workers already employed," he says. "It is the only oral solid dose training facility in the southeastern region of the United States, and I would say hundreds of individuals have gone through that program."

High school students can enroll



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in PSN@PCC immediately after graduation then land a well-paying job in pharmaceutical manufacturing upon completing the program. The community college also offers a one-semester BioWorks certificate program, which plows a direct pathway to an entry-level job in the industry. It's popular with adult learners who are wanting to upskill or reskill.

North Carolina's textile industry remains an important contributor to the state's economy. And like the others, it needs skilled workers, too. Gaston College, for example, married its Textile Technology Center in Belmont with Catawba Vally Community College's Manufacturing

Solutions Center in Conover to form the Manufacturing and Textile Innovation Network. MTIN is building a regional workforce skilled in advanced materials and textile-testing development. "Textiles are much more specialized than they used to be," says Gaston College's Smith.

MTIN's multipronged mission is to create an end-to-end matchless resource for diversified manufacturing, applied research and development, textile testing, prototyping, business incubation and training. It serves companies globally and branches out into the manufacturing of other products.

Gaston College also has partnered with N.C. State University to create

the Fiber Innovation Center, where students will learn the process of creating textiles that can be incorporated into everyday goods. "The Fiber Innovation Center will be built near the Textile Center, where we'll collaborate to assist the textile industry across the entire United States because there's really no other center doing what we do," Smith says. ■

— Teri Saylor is a freelance writer from Raleigh.



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