



THE  
FUTURE

WORKFORCE

A Makers completed curriculum  
and a nationally registered apprenticeship  
program are in the final approval stages.

The next generation of skilled  
sewers is in the works.



Sewing instructor Angela Herrera teaches upholstery skills in Tarrant County College NW's summer course, Career Exploration Camp. The course provides students entering 7th and 8th grades the opportunity to explore careers and to learn about work readiness and entrepreneurship. Photo: Robin Valetutto, TCC NW CIE.

## TEXTILE MANUFACTURERS NEED SEWERS.

People entering the workforce need jobs that can lead to fulfilling careers. So why has it been so challenging to bring the two together? What has been missing is a way to attract new people to the industry, and standardized training and certification that will ensure a level of competence to satisfy manufacturers and provide an equitable wage for sewers.

Pockets of interested parties, including small manufacturing companies, high schools, technical colleges and jobs coalitions have joined forces throughout the U.S. to address the need for skilled workers in the textile industry. One such partnership is between Roseville, Minn.-based Industrial Fabrics Association International (IFAI), a member-owned, member-driven trade association representing the global industrial fabrics industry, and the Makers Coalition of Minnesota, a coalition of businesses, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations and service providers coming together to build a trained cut-and-sew industry in the United States. The two groups teamed up in 2014 to form the IFAI Makers Division, a nationwide workforce development initiative to meet the demand for skilled labor in the cut-and-sew industry.

Currently, the two organizations are developing relationships with schools to implement the Makers Industrial Sewing Curriculum and establishing a National Standards of Apprenticeship program for sewing machine operators through the U.S. Department of Labor. “This is going

to be a real benefit to the industry,” says Jonathan Curry, IFAI Makers Division supervisor. “Employers will be able to have confidence that if they’ve hired sewers on an apprenticeship level, then the employee will have acquired the skills covered in our curriculum.”

Although both groups’ scope of work is broad, the Makers Coalition Foundation is the creator of the curriculum content and manages the apprenticeship program, and the Makers Division handles the execution portion and the connection with the industry.

### BUILDING SKILLS, ENSURING SAFETY

The Makers Industrial Sewing Curriculum and the apprenticeship program each supplement and support the other to affect the entire industry, from entry level employees to manufacturers and suppliers. The curriculum program is designed to qualify candidates for entry level industrial sewing positions. After successfully completing the course, graduates will possess an understanding of industrial sewing machine basics, quality basics of stitching and fabric, industrial sewing terminology, employers’ expectations and workplace conduct.

The national apprenticeship program will offer sewing machine operators opportunities to succeed in a high-demand industry career. The program will also provide textile manufacturing companies with the means to develop a highly skilled workforce to help expand their businesses. In turn, suppliers will also benefit from the apprentice program. “The nice thing about the apprenticeship program being nationally recognized is that it’s not bound by state lines,” says Linden Wicklund, division supervisor, IFAI. “A sewer can go to school in one state and do an apprenticeship in another, so manufacturers across the country can participate in the program even before the curriculum is active in their area.”

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Tarrant County College, Northwest Campus transformed a 20,000-square-foot warehouse space off campus for its sewing programs. Photo: Robin Valetutto, TCC NW CIE.



Hiring an apprentice also gives manufacturers an opportunity to see if the sewer is a good fit for the company before hiring the person permanently.

#### PILOT PROGRAMS

Tarrant County College NW (TCC NW) in Fort Worth, Texas, will be the first school to offer the new sewing curriculum in fall 2016. “We’re very enthused to partner with IFAI’s Makers Division to upgrade our educational program within our commercial sewing and fashion sewing programs to add greater value to our students’ learning outcomes and investment,” says Robin Valetutto, coordinator of special projects, Community and Industry Education Services, TCC NW. “We’re planning to incorporate parts of the curriculum into

## FUNDING THE FUTURE

The Industrial Fabrics Foundation (IFF) has committed \$120,000 over the next two years to support the Makers Division in its efforts to get the Makers Division Industrial Sewing Certificate program established in more schools. “The decision to fund this program was very easy,” says Amy Bircher, founder and president of MMI Textiles and IFF chair. “The foundation stands for education, innovation and development within our industry. This comes at a time when the industry is growing, manufacturing jobs are coming back and the need for professional development couldn’t be greater. The vocations of sewing and welding—the kinds of things that are used in a manufacturing shop for finished product—hardly exist anymore.”



Instructor Cindy Terwilliger assists student Mary Lou Jacobs in upholstery basics at Tarrant County College's off-campus workforce education facility in Fort Worth, Texas. Photo: Robin Valetutto, TCC NW CIE.

the furniture, boat and auto upholstery classes this fall as well.”

Launching the Makers Industrial Sewing Curriculum is part of Tarrant County College's larger strategy to revive its sewing program—and from all indications, that's exactly what's happening. “When I assumed the role of vice president of Community and Industry Education at TCC NW two years ago there were zero students enrolled in the sewing program,” says Dr. Arrick Jackson. “When I left in July 2016 enrollment was full at 10 students.”

The furniture and auto/boat upholstery classes are also now full and have waiting lists. “When I came on board in January 2016 that program was dormant as well,” Valetutto says. “We quickly redirected our marketing strategies and relationship-building efforts to reach former students, as well as recruit new potential students, and hit the ground running.”

Partnering with high schools within the area school districts using the curriculum is also on the horizon for TCC NW. “Before we grow in that direction we want to ensure the current workforce-focused college sewing classes are up and running with sustainability, and that we have the space for an extended high school commercial sewing program,” Valetutto says. “But for now we will continue to incorporate inspired sewing projects into our summer College for Kids, Junior Achievement and middle school Vital Link camp programs.”

### GENERATING INTEREST

Finding students interested in sewing careers is an ongoing challenge for schools and manufacturing companies alike. Wisconsin-based Milwaukee 7 Talent Partnership is a cooperative economic organization for the seven southeastern counties of the state. The organization is working to attract, retain and expand diverse businesses and talent. “We've been focusing on the industry clusters

identified as high-growth industries as a part of research conducted in 2010/2011 by the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.,” says Anne Nordholm, Ph.D., director of education and training partnerships with the Milwaukee 7 Talent Partnership. “All of the asset clusters on which we focus (Water, Technologies, Energy, Power and Controls, and Food and Beverage) have many companies that engage in manufacturing—and they found that advanced manufacturing went across all the high-asset clusters as a high-growth industry.”

Milwaukee 7's interest in the Makers Industrial Sewing Curriculum and national apprenticeship program began approximately a year ago when the organization was contacted by international handmade men's shoe manufacturer Allen Edmonds, Port Washington, Wis. Allen Edmonds contacted Milwaukee 7 to express concern about a lack of awareness and interest from those entering the workforce in becoming industrial sewers.

Milwaukee 7 began meeting with Allen Edmonds and companies that made up the Makers Coalition of SE Wisconsin, and eventually connected with IFAI Makers Division. “The Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) is working on demonstrating that there is an obstruction to expansion in these businesses if there is insufficient talent for the skills and jobs that need to get done, and the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board is also involved in helping recruit people for the course,” Nordholm says. “It's an ongoing process.”

TCC NW has had success garnering interest from students through its website and various outreach programs, including outdoor community events like Open Streets and the Fort Worth Bridal Show. It has also tapped into the local sewing and alteration businesses. “They had plenty of help-wanted signs in their windows,”

Jackson says. “And they may have employees that are partly skilled but not completely skilled. We have ways to help pay tuition so the cost would be minimal. We identified students in programs similar to sewing who might have an interest as well. Automotive students might be interested in automotive upholstery, which would require them to learn to sew.”

### JOBS BOARDS

As schools incorporate the Makers Division Industrial Sewing Certificate curriculum into their sewing programs the talent pool will grow, and with that so will the need to connect trained sewers to manufacturers with open job postings. “I get a lot of inquiries from folks who want to know where they can

find the graduates of the sewing programs using the Makers Division curriculum,”

Curry says. “But since it’s just now being implemented we don’t yet have a pool of graduates.”

Now that the curriculum has been finalized and schools are implementing it, the trained sewer job pool will grow. IFAI is currently working on launching a Makers Division jobs board as well as a general specialty fabrics industry jobs board. “The Makers Division’s jobs board will include a place where students can post their resumes and members can connect with students for apprenticeships or eventual hiring,” Wicklund says. 📍

Sigrid Tornquist, a writer and editor based in St. Paul, Minn., is a frequent contributor to IFAI publications. For contact information on the sources used in this article, turn to page 78.



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