



April 4, 2022 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cutting-edge learning lab coming to Kendallville

Kendallville, IN – As one of the nation’s top-ranked regions for concentration of jobs in manufacturing, Noble County will soon be home to a brand new, state-of-the-art learning lab to support the fourth industrial revolution, also known as Industry 4.0.

The new Industry 4.0 lab, to be housed at the Community Learning Center (CLC) in Kendallville, will provide hands-on learning opportunities for youth, teens, and adults to learn about “Smart Factory” environments that are transforming the manufacturing world. The cutting-edge lab, the first of its kind in the region, will give learners an understanding of the Industrial Internet of Things (IIOT) and opportunities to gain skills required of highly-trained technicians that are in high demand, needed to set up, operate, and maintain these systems.

Noble County’s Industry 4.0 lab project is the culmination of local organizations coming together and collaborating. Sparked in late 2020 by the Noble County Economic Development Corporation (EDC), the lab has become the organization’s top priority to support the growing number of local industrial employers investing to modernize their operations.

“Over 30 million dollars has been invested in the last couple of years by local industrial companies to utilize robotics, autonomous vehicles, visual inspection systems, and other additive manufacturing systems. As these technologies come online, employers need workers to have the skills to use and manage them,” explained Gary Gatman, executive director of the EDC.

Manufacturing provides well over half of the total payroll in Noble County and offers jobs with average annual earnings of \$50,000. The coalition of partners behind the lab anticipate, over the next decade, between 800 and 1,200 individuals will be trained and certified in advanced robotics and industrial automation skills. Recognizing the need to develop a talent pipeline, other organizations quickly joined the EDC to pursue the development of the Industry 4.0 lab. They include the CLC, Dekko Foundation, Impact Institute, and Freedom Academy.

Meetings in late 2020 kicked off collaborative efforts to develop resources, plan spaces, and establish equipment and curriculum needs. Within a few months, the group was ready to support the CLC in their submission of a grant proposal. In December, the Don Wood Foundation announced a \$472,094 grant award for the purchase of an Amatrol Smart Factory learning system to equip the first phase of the CLC’s lab.

“Each individual and organization brought their strengths to the process, which culminated in a well-organized and collaborative effort to benefit individuals and businesses in this corner of the state,” said Jim Walmsley, director of the Impact Institute. “Industry 4.0 directly aligns with our mission to impact lives and create career and college-ready students. We foresee students having the ability to enter the workforce directly after completing a two-year high school program or be better prepared for their next educational step in this field. The lab will also allow us to serve a demographic of students not currently participating in our shared CTE programs,” Walmsley explained.

Following a unanimous vote of support by the Superintendent's Council, representing all 13 area schools served by Impact Institute, Walmsley said he anticipates enrollment for high school students in a new Smart Technologies and Automation program to open this spring to attend classes during the 2022-23 school year.

Locating the Industry 4.0 Lab at the CLC was an easy choice because of the center's spirit of collaboration and the complementary programs and organizations that are located there, according to Barry Rochford, strategic communications officer at the Dekko Foundation, which has provided capital and operational support to the CLC and moved its office there in 2021.

"It's a bit poetic that the oldest section of the building, constructed in 1915, will house a high-tech lab for advanced manufacturing that promotes cutting-edge, 21st century skills," Rochford noted.

In addition to CTE programs for high school students, the Industry 4.0 lab will serve adults, including existing workers at local manufacturers, through the Freedom Academy's evening and weekend courses. Freedom Academy courses will begin when remodeling work at the CLC is complete. That work is now underway, and expectations are high to begin offering adult programs this spring.

Supporters of the lab hope to see a multi-generational talent pipeline developed to fill jobs requiring Industry 4.0 skills, jobs that typically pay several more dollars per hour than traditional manufacturing jobs. They say those who complete programs at the lab will position themselves to earn a high wage and experience a better quality of life.

"At the Dekko Foundation, we think young people are more likely to grow up to achieve economic freedom when they complete high school with a plan for their next step and they know why that's the right choice for them," explained Rochford. "For some that might be college; for others it might be vocational certification or entering the workforce. The industry 4.0 lab will help young people know that next step."

Efforts to capitalize on having the Industry 4.0 lab at the CLC are continuing to expand.

"We are working to connect all generations," added Julia Tipton, CLC director. "We are also working with Noble County schools to offer robotics camps and other innovative experiences to help prepare the next generation."

The Noble County EDC and Freedom Academy say they are excited to explore opportunities to offer summer camps to local middle school students at the lab. Looking ahead, the coalition of organizations also plans to equip the second phase build-out with an advanced, enterprise-level training system from Amatrol. That expansion is among several projects included in Northeast Indiana's "Growing with Vision" plan that was recently selected by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation to receive \$50 million through the Indiana READI program. How those funds will be distributed has not yet been determined.

"To say that Noble County and the region requires a thriving and growing manufacturing sector is a gross understatement," summed up Gatman." In simple terms, the success of the manufacturing sector here will determine whether or not workers have good jobs, and our local economies thrive."

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