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Gaston College has been awarded nearly $200,000 from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to create an innovative, multi-employer manufacturing apprenticeship consortium that will be built upon a single program established for STEAG Energy Services in August of 2013.

Substantial progress has already been made on the initiation, planning, and design of this project. Gaston College will act as a Program Sponsor once this apprenticeship program is registered with the North Carolina Department of Commerce's NCWorks Apprenticeship Office. With this NSF support, Gaston College will work with regional industry partners who will sponsor 20 to 30 skilled trades apprentices in on-the-job training assignments and company-funded community college courses as soon as the Fall of 2015.

"We are happy to receive funding from the National Science Foundation to build a unique apprenticeship alliance with advanced manufacturers in Gaston and Lincoln counties," said Dr. Patricia Skinner, President of Gaston College. "The grant will help our students receive critical hands-on experience and related classroom instruction that will prepare them for good paying jobs in specialized occupations while also addressing this area's growing demands for a skilled manufacturing workforce," said Skinner.

This new PACT consortium will be extraordinary because Gaston College is designing it with special program requirements in mind. It will be flexible enough to meet the changeable requirements of large and small manufacturing employers in different industry segments. At the same time, it will be structured enough to qualify for state agency registration as a manufacturing apprenticeship program that can certify graduates in nationally recognized skilled trades occupations. Successful apprentices will receive job-specific training and a cost-free education while earning a paycheck from local employers. Those who complete this apprenticeship program will qualify for nationally recognized certifications in a skilled trade and an academic credential from

Gaston College (a certificate, diploma, or Associates degree). They will also achieve a National Career Readiness Certificate, (bronze, silver, gold or platinum) a nationally recognized portable work skills credential to add to their portfolio and resume.

Another important goal of the PACT project is to recruit and train greater numbers of women in recognized apprenticeship programs supported by advanced manufacturing companies. As is true across the country, women are under-represented in manufacturing technology programs at community colleges in this region. Gaston College plans to create a classroom and laboratory environment that helps women to better prepare for advanced manufacturing careers. Faculty will attend professional development seminars offered by the National Institute for Women in Trades, Technology, and Science that focus on retention strategies for women in technology fields. As more women enter its engineering and technology programs, Gaston College will be enriching the diversity of candidates getting ready to fill high-tech jobs.

Without the prospect of funding from the National Science Foundation, Gaston College would have found it difficult to cost-justify the project planning and scheduling of related instruction necessary to expand the scale of the single apprenticeship program it now hosts. Without the continuous support of STEAG Energy Services, Gaston College may not have developed the industry connections needed to recruit additional companies into the PACT consortium now taking shape. STEAG's president Hans Hartenstein and chief financial officer Brigitte Hartenstein, have been tireless advocates of German-style skilled workforce development initiatives in the Charlotte region. STEAG has received community and energy industry recognition for these efforts. It may be a leading example for Gaston College's new manufacturers' alliance as well.

The PACT program office will be located in the Engineering and Industrial Technologies Division at Gaston College. A part-time Success Coach will be hired to assist students throughout their two or three-year apprenticeship. Gaston College PACT project team members are Dr. Dennis McElhoe, Vice President for Workforce and Economic Development; Dr. George Hendricks, Associate Dean of Engineering and Industrial Technologies; Diane Metcalfe, Director of Business and Industry Training Services; Virgil Cox, Dean of Engineering and Industrial Technologies; Luke Upchurch, Director of Grants and Special Projects; Kathy Livsie, Program Coordinator of the Manufacturing Technology Program; and Michael Horrigan, Workforce Development Consultant.