Mike Uffner and Matt Kersey cut the ribbon at Chevrolet of Dover, located at 1450 S. DuPont Highway. The acquisition is a new affiliate dealership of AutoTeam Delaware. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRE LAMAR

On The over
Delaware Tech celebrates 50 years.
COVER DESIGN BY DELAWARE TECH VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS STUDENT JACOB ROSE

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Delaware’s Future Begins Here

BY JOHN SWEENEY

Mark T. Brainard, J.D.
President, Delaware Technical Community College
MOST STORIES about anniversaries begin with the past. Not this one. Delaware Technical Community College is 50 years old. So, if you know Delaware Tech, the logical question is not “What happened?” but “What’s next?”

It has always been that way. From its beginnings in 1966 to today, Delaware Tech’s focus has been on the future.

It has to be. That is where its students are heading. And so is Delaware. “Our mission is the same today as it was then,” President Mark T. Brainard said. “It’s to connect local businesses and industry with a skilled workforce. That won’t change.”

If anything, the mission is even more important today. If Delaware is to grow economically, it has to have a skilled workforce. Yet global competition and advanced technology have transformed the workplace. Delaware Tech is responding. It is not just shop class any more. It is a world of precision and skill. Just look under the hood of your car and imagine what it would have looked like in 1966.

Of course, when the people who created Delaware Tech looked into the future they did not see electronic information systems in cars, diagnostic medical sonography in hospitals, or airframe and aviation powerplant programs in Georgetown.

However, they did see the need for constant change.

William Carter is generally considered the prime mover behind the creation of Delaware Tech.

Richard Carter recalls his father’s passionate insistence on a college for the young people being left behind by a changing economy. Sussex County especially needed a boost to keep its talented young people from moving away. Richard Carter said his father campaigned for a college for Sussex, pointing out to whoever would listen that Kent and New Castle counties had colleges for their young people, but Sussex did not. The trouble was that few people were listening.

But circumstances changed. Delaware finally got around to ending racial segregation in the middle of the 1960s. By coincidence, one of the newest and best-equipped schools in Sussex was William C. Jason Comprehensive High School near Georgetown, the first African-American secondary school in the county. The state’s desegregation plans ordered its closing. Its students would be integrated into other Sussex schools.

About the same time, Gov. Charles L. Terry Jr. became interested in a new movement growing across the country: community colleges. He wanted Delaware involved in the movement. William Carter seized the opportunity. The William C. Jason School was the ideal spot for such a college.

His persistence paid off. So in 1966, the Delaware General Assembly passed legislation creating Delaware Technical and Community College. But, this being Delaware, a condition was added: Delaware Tech would have a presence in all three counties. Thus, a statewide system was born.

That was just a start. The system had to be built.

Barbara Weatherly, the daughter of the college’s first president, Dr. Paul Weatherly, recalls the passion the system’s founders had for the school. Dr. Weatherly had been recruited from South Carolina, where he worked in that state’s community college system. He quickly joined with Delaware advocates and set to work creating a local system.
"At that time, people thought of Delaware Tech as being a calling, like going into the ministry," Ms. Weatherly said. "It was going to change the face of the state. It was going to provide opportunity to people who never had opportunity before."

It came together piece by piece.

How?

"The bedrock of the college was always staying connected to the local community, to what its needs were and to use those advisory committees," Dr. Orlando J. George said. He was the school's president from 1995 to 2014.

The advisory committees came in at the start, Dr. George said. For every major, there was advisory committee of practitioners – professionals who were experts in their field, who were working in the industry every day. For nursing, there were doctors and nurses; for manufacturing, there were manufacturers and technical specialists. All to keep the college up to date on the skills and competencies needed in each field. People shrug and ask, "Who listens to a committee?"

"Well, we did," Dr. George said.

When the practitioners said a change was coming, the college adapted. Dr. John R. Kotula, the college's second president, said these dual commitments to students and the needs of Delaware industry pushed the school in new directions. That close attention to developing trends led to the addition of the allied health programs.

Again, they started slowly, Dr. Kotula said. But staying close to the changing needs of the state's businesses and industries brought more additions. Next came dental hygiene. Then biotechnology and specialties like cardiovascular sonography.

But the students were always special too.

"I always think about the irony of the extremes," Dr. Brainard said. "You have the students coming in the front door, ready to go. They are prepared and motivated. Whether they want to study nursing or law enforcement, they are ready."

Resources and capacity remain the college’s greatest challenge…a solution like SB 137 would give Delaware Tech something it does not have now – the ability to make longer-term plans.

— Dr. Mark T. Brainard
The college’s board of trustees is seeking a permanent solution. That is why the board and administration are behind Senate Bill 137, which would authorize a statewide property tax.

“Essentially, the bill would fund a community college infrastructure fund through a modest statewide property tax based on the same model as the state’s vocational school districts,” Dr. Brainard said. “This dedicated revenue stream enables Delaware Tech’s Board of Trustees to issue bonds, and the college would no longer be dependent on the state for its capital needs – saving the state $6 million a year.”

Dr. Brainard and other college officials have been busy talking to community and business groups to explain the proposal and to ask their support.

He said a solution like SB 137 would give Delaware Tech something it does not have now – the ability to make longer-term plans.

In the meantime, the innovation continues.

Consider the advanced manufacturing program for Delaware high school students. It is part of Gov. Jack Markell’s Pathways to Prosperity initiative. To build a better pipeline of skilled workers, Delaware Tech worked closely with the Delaware Manufacturing Association to create a curriculum for high school students that would keep them in school, provide practical manufacturing experience, earn college credit and put a little money in their pockets. The students participate in 600 hours of hands-on learning in the college’s high-tech training center and a paid summer “craftsmanship” experience with local manufacturers.

Businesses love it.

“Bloom Energy is proud to have been a part of the Delaware Tech Manufacturing Pathways Program since its inception,” Bryan B. Horsey, manager of public affairs for the Bloom Manufacturing Center of Delaware, said. “The program has helped Bloom to reach candidates early, so they are more prepared for opportunities in our Delaware operations. Bloom Energy is looking forward to hosting a group of Manufacturing Pathways Program interns again this summer.”

Last summer the FMC Newark Plant maintenance department took three high schools students as interns. They started by shadowing mechanics, but before long they became part of the maintenance team, Dan Pierce, FMC Newark plant manager, health and nutrition, said. “At the end of the summer, the students left being prepared to make informed choices about their future. The mechanics had a real sense of pride knowing they had passed along years of experience in a short time.

“We had exit discussions during the last week with the students and the responses were ‘We are doing this again next year, right?’” Mr. Pierce said. He deemed the experience a success for both the students and FMC.

Lou Garzarella, AstraZeneca’s senior director of site engineering and facilities management, said the students worked alongside experienced employees performing equipment maintenance and materials receiving
within the company’s automated warehouse. He added, “We’ve found the students to be motivated in their assignments while positively contributing to our plant operations and getting real world experience directly related to their studies.”

So what really is next for Delaware Tech?

No one knows. However, Richard Carter, a Delaware historian, has a good idea.

“I have been looking around for some time for the ‘next big thing’ for Delaware,” he said. In the 19th century, the peach industry pumped up the state’s economy. In the early 20th century, the poultry industry helped keep Delaware from hitting bottom during the Great Depression. In the late 20th century, the Financial Center Development Act gave the state a big boost.

“We’re now at a point where we need something big time,” he said. “I fully expect Delaware Tech to be in on the ground floor of finding that ‘next big thing’ and helping our state to achieve it.”

John Sweeney is a Delaware writer and editor