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- Technology
- Campus Issues
- Sustainability
- Government
- Funding
- Academic Programs
- Workforce Development
- All News Topics

Getting it from here to there: Distribution and logistics industry grows more complex

By John Pulley, Published January 19, 2009

In July, Britain's The Sun newspaper reported that a truck driver who had departed Turkey with a 32-ton load of luxury cars missed his final destination by some 1,600 miles.

Relying on satellite-navigation technology to find an address on Coral Road, in Gibraltar (a territory of the United Kingdom on Spain's southern coast), the Syrian driver ended up on a dead-end street in Lincolnshire, England.

Oh, that Coral Road.

The bizarre incident symbolizes the impact of globalization and information technology on the transport of people and goods—and the necessity of expanding expertise in the fast-changing field of transportation, distribution and logistics (TDL). In the U.S., community colleges have taken the lead to bolster the country's logistics infrastructure. Well before "bailout" and "economic stimulus" became mainstays of casual conversation, two-year institutions were ramping up logistics training programs that are needed to keep the economy rolling.

"Community colleges are ideally positioned" to meet demand for logistics training, says Gibson "Sunny" Morris, executive director of the Arkansas Delta Workforce Innovations in Regional Economic Development (ADWIRED) Academy, one of 39 federally-funded, regional economic-development coalitions. "I think they are probably the linchpin."

At one time, businesses viewed shipping as a cost of doing business. No longer. In an era of just-in-time manufacturing, emerging markets and next-day delivery, being able to transport people and goods efficiently and safely is becoming a critical factor in the economic success of companies, regions and countries.

"The company that can deliver goods the fastest will get the contract," Morris says. "It's a competitive edge."

That's the view in Memphis. The city is home to the world's largest cargo airport, the country's largest laptop repair company and the world's largest provider of spinal implants. Greasing the wheels of economic development (and the hopes of the region's impoverished counties) is a multimodal transportation logistics infrastructure that encompasses air, ground, rail and water. Eager to keep a good thing going, community colleges in the ADWIRED program are building a training pipeline to supply the next generation of TDL workers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. market accounted for more than 80 percent of the global logistics business. That figure has declined to about 30 percent, and the country's control of industries such as shipping has slipped, says Dennis Sweeney, a 30-year veteran of Federal Express and principal investigator of a program funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to establish the Mid-American Transportation Technology Center at Mid-South Community College (Arkansas).

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“The upside is we could open new markets,” says Sweeney. “Things on the horizon right now will make the global supply chain system more important to the U.S. than the Panama Canal widening.”

Even before the current economic downturn, the federal government had begun providing community colleges with seed money to develop TDL initiatives. Among the catalysts are programs created by President Bush to develop training for high-growth jobs and grants to encourage community-based job training. The U.S. Department of Labor’s WIRED initiative has brought together federal, state and local government agencies, institutions of education, foundations, companies and trade groups “to address the challenges associated with building a globally competitive and prepared workforce.”

In addition to the Arkansas Delta, regions undertaking TDL-related initiatives are Southern California (advanced manufacturing supply chain) and north central North Carolina (logistics and distribution).

“Regions are looking at the TDL sector as a support system for other industries to come into town,” according to a U.S. Department of Labor spokesperson with knowledge of the initiatives.

In Washington state, Tacoma Community College (TCC) has used an NSF grant to develop a certificate and degree program in secure logistics, transportation and supply chain management. NSF also granted funds to create a National Center of Excellence in Transportation, Distribution and Logistics. In early 2009, the agency will release a competency model for the TDL industry, according to an NSF spokesperson.

It wasn’t long ago that the primary requirement for a shipping expert was the ability to read an address label. Skills gaps were plugged on the job.

By 2006, however, 74 percent of manufacturing employers reported “a shortage of qualified logistics workers at both the entry-level and more technical intermediate level,” according to a grant application for federal funds submitted by community colleges in Texas.

Today’s TDL pros need to know about global positioning systems (GPS), geographic information systems (GIS), relational database management and radio frequency identification (RFID) technologies—not to mention foreign currencies, customs and other challenges involved in crossing borders. Until now, the U.S. has been slow to develop its logistics workforce.

“If you went to Rotterdam and stopped anybody in a warehouse and said ‘How do I get this to Germany?’ 80 or 90 percent could tell you all about the prices, import/export licenses, transportation considerations and customs classifications,” says Sweeney. “If you did the same thing in the U.S. today, you’d be lucky if one in 20 people in a warehouse knew anything.”

The California Transportation and Logistics Institute (CaTLI) is doing its part to remedy the disparity. The coalition of 13 community colleges and four campuses of the California State University System is working with industry groups to provide a continuum of training in transportation logistics. With two major ports (Long Beach and Los Angeles) and an economic powerhouse (Silicon Valley), Southern California expects to add 350,000 logistics jobs by 2030, current economic doldrums notwithstanding.

“In the short term there is a slowdown,” says Joe Darin, CaTLI’s program administrator, “but in the long term we expect it to grow.”

Goods valued in excess of \$40 billion move through the combined ports of Seattle and Tacoma every year. The logistics workforce charged with moving things along includes many people who were hired straight out of high school with no technical skills. Some of them have become managers.

Since 2006, TCC has endeavored to retrofit the Puget Sound logistics workforce with new skills. Last year, the college rolled out an associate-degree program. Next up is a new RFID lab.

As is typical of community colleges, TCC strives to meet the needs of the industry, which “is looking for ways to get education done without the traditional methods of sitting in a classroom,” says Sweeney. To accommodate new and incumbent logistics

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workers, the college uses a "blended delivery" platform that combines on-site instruction, interactive remote classes and recorded lectures. "How we deliver the course is key," says Charles Crawford, TCC's dean for business. "The luxury to not work and go to school doesn't exist anymore."

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