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College talk causes concern

Community college in Erie could erode existing programs, Crawford chamber, PMI officials say

By [John Bartlett](#)

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MEADVILLE -- Discussions among Erie County leaders about possibly creating a community college struck a chord in Meadville.

And it wasn't harmonious.

"We are concerned, very concerned," said Jerry Knight, executive director of Precision Manufacturing Institute in Meadville, a nonprofit agency that offers work-force training and other educational programs.

Much of what Knight said he has read and heard about the community college discussions in Erie appear to largely duplicate what PMI and other schools and programs in the region provide, Knight said.

Charlie Anderson, Meadville-Western Crawford County Chamber of Commerce executive director, said he shares Knight's concerns.

"We are talking taxpayer money and we have to be aware of that and possible duplication," Anderson said.

The worst thing would be to develop a community college program in Erie that duplicates existing programs and causes them to erode, Anderson said.

But those leading the discussions in Erie said the concerns of Knight and Anderson are misplaced.

"What we are doing is very preliminary at this stage," said Sean Wiley, Erie County director of administration. "We are investigating and digging into the community college concept ... and see if it is a good fit for Erie and the region.

"There are a lot of different concepts and ways to put it together, and we have to see what makes sense," Wiley said.

Mike Batchelor, president of the Erie Community Foundation, said the issues raised by Knight and Anderson are "premature."

PMI offers a wide range of work-force training and vocational, technical and education programs, including some associate's degrees and curricula that can lead to four-year degrees through agreements with Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and other schools.

"It appears a lot of what (Erie's community leaders) are talking about is already being done," Knight said. "They just need to make use of it. I would venture to say most every identifiable (training) gap they see is already being done, certainly if they are talking about partnering as a way to do that."

Wiley said part of investigating the merits of a community college is to see what already exists and

works in the area.

"We would be reluctant to duplicate anything that is going well, and we think PMI is great," Wiley said. "We want to complement what already exists and is working."

Some of the education and training ideas under discussion for a community college go far beyond the types of programs offered at PMI and are directed at the arts and general education, Wiley said.

Batchelor said at this point all that has been decided is to invite an expert to provide a better understanding of the options for a community college.

On Nov. 30, a community college consultant and Sandi Vito, deputy secretary for work-force development for the state Department of Labor and Industry, are expected in Erie to meet with community leaders on the community college proposal.

"They might say to build on what PMI has," Batchelor said. "There are so many ideas about community and technical colleges that we need an expert to point us in the right direction. Nothing has been ruled in or out."

Knight said he has more than a bit of frustration that no one bothered to check with PMI to see how it could fit into the discussions of a community college.

"All they have to do is use us," Knight said. "They talk regionalism, but too often regional for them is from Girard to the (Millcreek) mall," Knight said.

Anderson said it would "have been nice" for Erie's leaders to draw Crawford and other neighboring counties into the discussions early on.

Low cost of tuition is one of the top advantages of a community college and organizations like PMI.

PMI's tuition ranges from \$400 to \$800 per course, which typically equates to a semester's program for a part-time student, PMI officials said. The tuition for a full-time student at Lehigh Carbon Community College near Allentown is about \$1,250 per semester, county officials said.

PMI, a licensed, private nonprofit school, is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology and earned that body's School of Distinction award in 2005.

In May, PMI moved into a new \$4.5 million, 32,000-square-foot facility in Meadville's Bessemer Commerce Park, which is filled with more than \$10 million in state-of-the-art equipment. PMI in September began offering classes at a satellite facility in Conneaut, Ohio, and soon will offer programs in Sharon.

Knight said PMI could offer programs in Erie, or help arrange transportation for Erie-area residents to attend programs in Meadville.

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