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Nabil Nasr
Guest essayist

(January 25, 2006) — The erosion of manufacturing has cost upstate New York more than 80,000 jobs since 2000, nearly a quarter of its manufacturing employment. This region includes Utica to Buffalo and Rochester as well as the Southern Tier.

Having lost jobs that had average wages 30 percent higher than other sectors in the region, many former manufacturing employees now work for lower wages and reduced benefits, or have left New York state altogether. This pattern is being repeated across the United States.

Major global forces will increase the pressure on our manufacturers. Fortune 500 companies continue to aggressively pursue low-cost, overseas suppliers. Emerging economies, particularly China, have a historically unprecedented combination of low-cost skilled labor, access to advanced technology and focused government intervention that give them powerful competitive advantages.

Manufacturing can survive in upstate New York only if bold, creative new approaches are applied to the causes of challenges facing regional manufacturers.

The Center for Integrated Manufacturing Studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology is analyzing clusters of manufacturers across 30 upstate New York counties. A full report will be issued early this summer.

One of the major findings of our research is the need for a renewed emphasis on innovation and efficient translation into commercial products with better performance and quality.

Fortunately, our colleges and universities possess a vast array of world-class intellectual capital, equipment and facilities that, combined with the entrepreneurial drive and market insight of manufacturers, can be a potent competitive force.

The network of Technology Development Organizations is another important source of expertise and support for the manufacturing sector. RIT-CIMS, for example, provides expertise to make it easier for companies to tap into the research and development capabilities and infrastructure available on campus. We hope to expand these efforts by using the results of our study to facilitate additional partnerships with business and industry groups allowing for open access to new technology and the vast array of resources available through regional and state programs. This type of collaboration allows for speedier commercialization.

The Council on Competitiveness, a national consortium of industry, labor and university leaders, in its recent report, "Innovate America," called for a better educated work force, a national commitment to research and development and a regulatory infrastructure that accelerates innovation. The council is promoting new federal legislation to create a National Council on Innovation to develop a comprehensive agenda for strengthening innovation among the federal government, states, academia and private sector.

Given the critical mass of manufacturing and intellectual expertise in upstate New York, we have as a region a unique opportunity to serve as a model of new cluster-based initiatives that will not only help local manufacturers but can be emulated both by other regions of the state and the country.

Nasr is assistant provost and director, Center for Integrated Manufacturing Studies, Rochester Institute of Technology.

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