

Media Relations

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UNH to Open New Advanced Manufacturing Center Thanks to N.H. Company

Olson Center Honors Dedicated Alum, Business Leader While Preparing Students

DURHAM, N.H. — The state’s manufacturing industry will get a boost in highly-skilled workers with hands-on experience when the University of New Hampshire opens the John Olson Advanced Manufacturing Center this fall. The center is made possible through the generosity of Charlestown-based Whelen Engineering, which is honoring retiring president John Olson with a \$5.3 million gift to the university.

Manufacturing is the largest economic sector in New Hampshire, and to help keep it that way, the Olson Center will focus on three main areas: high-precision machining, light materials and flexible electronics. The center will help bridge the skills gap in the nation’s \$1.7 trillion manufacturing industry, and serve as a home for academically derived technology incubators, next-generation manufacturing technologies and a cross-curricular approach to engineering and manufacturing concepts.

Olson graduated from UNH with a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering in 1957, and two years later began his career at Whelen, which has a facility in Chester, Conn., as well as Charlestown. He has been Whelen’s president since 1976, and oversaw the opening of the Charlestown facility in 1984. He is the recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award from the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences.

“Much of our growth and success has been due to the passion for excellence in engineering that John Olson has fostered within the company,” said George W. Whelen IV, owner of Whelen Engineering, Inc. “John made sure we always looked for a better way and used cutting-edge technology whenever we could. Since he opened the Whelen facility in Charlestown, he has made many connections with the engineering programs at his alma mater. Finding qualified and motivated employees is very important for any business but particularly for an engineering company.”

The center, planned for the Goss International building on the west edge of campus, will introduce students to innovative manufacturing technologies and allow visualization of manufacturing concepts to complement the skills learned in traditional classroom settings. It will serve as a pipeline for trained, skilled workers who will be able to successfully step into the state’s manufacturing sector with practical knowledge and experience.

Whelen Engineering designs and manufactures high-quality audio and visual warning equipment for the automotive, aviation and mass notification industries around the world. Between its two plants, the company employs more than 1,500 people and is the only maker of emergency warning and lighting equipment to manufacture its products in the U.S.

For the university, the new center will be a boon to its engineering and science programs, as well as other departments.

“We are absolutely delighted with the opportunity that George Whelen IV and Whelen Engineering are affording our students, faculty and the state,” said Sam Mukasa, dean of the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences. “Manufacturers and various other engineering firms around the state speak of our engineering graduates as smart and well trained, and the Olson Center will give students the very important third piece of their education: practical experience. The center will also foster development of some research projects between faculty and colleagues in the private sector, thereby having an enormous positive impact on the state’s economy.”

Mukasa also noted that “in the sciences and engineering, we are constantly searching for a way to slow the export of the students educated at UNH to other states and the Olson Center gives us a competitive advantage to retain talented and skilled engineers and scientists right here at home.”

One of the largest gifts in the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences’ history, this latest donation builds on the history of philanthropy that Whelen Engineering and John Olson have built at UNH. More than \$2.5 million has been donated for scholarships and to support UNH’s Tech Camp for students in grades 6 through 12. In 2007, Whelen Engineering donated an outdoor mass-notification system to the Durham campus to be used during emergencies. Whelen’s mass notification systems became required at all nuclear power plants in the wake of the Three-Mile Island disaster, and the country of Denmark purchased the system, installing it at more than 1,200 sites around the country.

For Olson, having his career recognized in this way by the Whelen family is an honor.

“It pleases me to see that UNH students are now going to have a manufacturing facility where they can tinker and innovate the manufacturing of tomorrow,” he said. “I have stated many times that manufacturing was central to our ability to win two world wars. We now have tremendous competition from overseas in manufacturing, and owe it to the next generation to prepare them well to hold their own and keep this country strong. Staying ahead of the competition in innovation and efficiency will be key. I think that UNH students can do that.”

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state’s flagship public institution, enrolling 13,000 undergraduate and 2,500 graduate students.

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