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Lake Washington Tech opens hi-tech lab with help from Oregon and South Korea

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Amid robotic arms, microwave signal-emitters and the latest in applied electronics technology, Gary Piper was exactly where he wanted to be.

Lake Washington Technical College (LWTC) had just unveiled their new electronics training lab at a Nov. 12 ribbon-cutting ceremony, developed by the school and donations by Korean company ED Co., Ltd and Mentor Graphics of Wilsonville, Oregon.

Attending LWTC part-time to broaden his skills, the lab offered the Boeing software engineer the opportunity to try out some innovative ideas on advanced robotics.

"I'm trying to come up with my own design," Piper said, "and apply for a patent."

LWTC hopes Piper, 54, will be the first of many such students from the Puget Sound and beyond, looking to retrain or get ahead of the curve in the fast-growing technology sector. The state-of-the-art laboratory is another coup for the school's leadership, working closely with industry leading companies to develop curriculums that prepare students to join their companies.

"With this partnership, we're getting calls from other manufacturers and companies," said LWTC Director of Research Myung Park. She said attracting contributors to various programs at the college got off the ground with a 2006 trade mission visit to South Korea with LWTC President Dr. Sharon McGavick and State Gov. Christine Gregoire.

"Now we've got KIA and Hyundai Motors asking about how we can do customized training (for their products)," Park said.

Earlier this year, the school announced a similar program with Harley-Davidson for training specialized mechanics.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was attended by Mentor Graphics development manager Ian Burgess and ED Co. President Yong Hoo Park.

The ED Corporation, a worldwide electronics company based near Seoul, South Korea, donated approximately \$1 million in vocational training equipment based on advanced robotics, fluid and standard mechatronics, automation, embedded electronics and communication and information technology. Mentor Graphics donated an \$8 million outlay of computers and a server powerful enough to handle a high-level electronics design software, used by many leading foreign and domestic manufacturers.

The new lab will supplement a revamped electronics program taught at the school by Instructors Joe Gryniuk and Peter Welty. Students can typically earn an Applied Arts of Science degree from the program in two years. Gryniuk said the school might have a problem in the future once the program is in full-swing: keeping the students long enough to graduate them before companies snap them up.

“The industry reinvents itself every 18 months,” he said. “These companies, stepping up to the plate -- it enables us to offer training you can’t get anywhere else.”

According to McGavick, the agreement is unusual for companies that are traditionally wary of sharing technological designs for vocational purposes. ED also guarantees they will upgrade the hardware on a yearly basis, ensuring that the school is able to stay on the cutting edge. While ED has signed an agreement similar to this in the past, this is the first agreement for the company in the U.S.

“For them, it’s kind of an experiment too,” said McGavick. “What we’ve learned is, this is all about relationships. They have things and we have things that each can share in.”

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LWTC Executive Director of research Myung Park talks about the college's new electronics and technology program with Minh S. Cho, president of Bellevue CBMC a Christian networking organization.

Carrie Wood/Kirkland Reporter