

‘Where are the robots?’

Machines will expand course offerings, students’ job prospects

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MALTA – Rachel and Richard are about to open doors for Kishwaukee College students.

Who are they, you ask? Tabletop robots that will be integrated into the college’s electronics department, and also benefit other departments, according to the college’s electronics instructor, Charles Raimondi.

From the time he joined the college five years ago, the department’s advisory board has been asking: “Where are the robots?”

Little did Raimondi know that when he helped a student get a job as a maintenance technician at Crest Foods in Ashton, it would start a relationship – one that led Crest Foods to donate a two-story robot to the college.

The college couldn’t retrofit its wing to accommodate such a massive machine, so Kish swapped that robot for Rachel – a Fanuc LRMate 200ID-30iB robot, which can weld, move parts and generally make assembly lines move more smoothly.

“This is a very versatile robot,” Raimondi said. “What we’ll use it for is wide open. The doors are wide open.”

One of his three student workers, Alea Akers, 19, of DeKalb, echoed Raimondi’s sentiment and said it applies on a couple of levels. She wasn’t sure what career she wanted to pursue, but followed the advice of a friend to check out the electronics program.

“I wasn’t aware of all the different career fields you can go into with it and all the job opportunities,” Akers said as she gave a demonstration of the robot Wednesday afternoon, moving blocks with a remote control, and then putting the robot on autopilot, a program she’d built into Rachel to perform tasks.

Now, she’s gone from a vague interest in engineering to considering a career in automation with robots – potentially right here in DeKalb County, where she’s gotten her education.

“It gives you a lot of peace of mind knowing you don’t need to move days away from everything you’ve ever known,” she said. “You can stay at home and have a future here – where you’ve grown up. This opens a lot of doors, especially for people who are struggling financially.”

Beyond the donation, the college did invest in the robotics movement, buying Richard at a steep discount – \$22,000 compared with the regular price of



Kishwaukee College student worker Alea Akers of DeKalb works with the recently donated Fanuc robot Wednesday at the college. The addition of the robot will allow the school to expand its course offerings. Mark Busch – mbusch@shawmedia.com

\$50,000, Raimondi said. Richard is much more full training-ready, and equipped with vision, as well.

Raimondi said many local companies, such as Target Distribution Center, either are using robots or entering that realm. He said for every worker replaced by a robot, multiple jobs are created to maintain and program the machine – right down to greasing it and making sure it’s properly wired.

“Robots are meant to take away the mundane tasks, so you don’t have that repetitive motion people are doing on a line and falling asleep,” he said. “Instead, you put a robot in place, but you’re not taking away a job. You’re creating two jobs, three jobs. Where one job is lost, there might be three or four more created.”

Raimondi just underwent Finuc training, meaning his students will be

able to be trained and certified, opening even more doors to more jobs.

While the robots’ effect on curriculum will truly first be realized in the spring and beyond, Raimondi said he’ll work with students on programming this fall. The department is in flux, changing its name to Electronics Industrial Automation, and adding two certificates in industrial automation. This fall, basic robotics will be offered as a new course, and more courses should be added in the spring – although it takes about a year to get deans, curriculum review committees and the state to sign off on them.

“But we can still run the courses just as temporary,” he said.

He said computer aided design students will get the chance to design fixtures for Rachel, and the automated engineering technology students will

manufacture the fixtures.

Raimondi urges that robots are the future, but to get there certain myths of the past need dispelling.

“People think factories are dirty, and work is mundane and boring,” he said. “Getting rid of these myths is what we need to do. The modern workplace is clean, it’s air-conditioned.”

Jessica Anderson, assistant marketing director for the college, said the goal always is to help students learn here and live here.

“The goal is to keep them local, keep them in our community and find them good jobs,” she said. “There’s been a lot of talk recently about a college education being good for some things, but really all you need is a certificate or a two-year degree to become a welder, a certified robotics technician and make great money here in your community.”