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NIU will take role in \$320M digital lab

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DeKALB – Northern Illinois University is going to be part of a \$320 million digital manufacturing lab that President Barack Obama announced Tuesday.

Obama, speaking at the White House, described a first-of-its-kind manufacturing hub that could transform American manufacturing through collaboration among industry, academic and governmental leaders, according to a Northern Illinois University news release. Being part of that partnership puts NIU on a national stage, said Promod Vohra, dean of NIU's College of Engineering and Engineering Technology.

"We are a part of one of the first consortiums to create a hub to streamline manufacturing," Vohra said. "NIU has been doing a lot of work in training, innovation and research, and that work is being recognized."

University of Illinois-affiliated UI Labs will manage the hub on Chicago's Goose Island.

"There isn't a better place in the country to host a manufacturing site like this than northern Illinois," Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Channahon, said in a news release.

The digital lab will receive \$70 million from the U.S. Department of Defense to tackle manufacturing challenges.

"Illinois is at the forefront of a high-tech manufacturing revolution that will make our state the center of high-tech job creation," said Gov. Pat Quinn in a prepared statement. "This first-of-its-kind digital hub will make companies more competitive and stronger by providing them with the most cutting edge tools and technologies. It will be the birthplace for innovations that will change the world in which we live, work and play."

U.S. Rep. Randy Hultgren, a Winfield Republican whose district includes part of DeKalb County, agreed with Quinn's assessment.

“Bringing Illinois’ strong manufacturing base into the digital age is essential to spur economic growth, grow our global competitiveness and ultimately get Americans back to work,” Hultgren said. “By combining the expertise of industry with our community colleges and universities, the digital lab can apply the latest technology to improve manufacturing machines and factories – making Illinois an epicenter of innovation.”

The lab will be an applied research institute. It will both develop and demonstrate digital manufacturing technologies and deploy and commercialize these technologies across key manufacturing industries.

“As the dean, I’m always interested in connecting with industry,” Vohra said. “We need those connections to understand the challenges faced by industry to better prepare our students to meet the challenges.”