

# Gathering Targets Region's Workforce Development

By Bill Dries

When state officials gather at The University of Memphis University Center Wednesday, Sept. 4, to talk about workforce training, it won't be with a check in hand to lead the effort.

State Senate Republican Leader [Mark Norris](#) of Collierville, who organized the 8:30 a.m. to noon session, wants state labor commissioner Burns Phillips and others from Nashville to listen to details of the training programs local business and higher education leaders have cobbled together over the last three years.



The goal of the Conversation About Work gathering is to begin to put that response on a more permanent footing, with the hope that such a response will be another incentive for businesses looking to relocate or expand in the Memphis area.

"It is sort of all getting on the same wavelength so we can say what, if anything, can we do to help," Norris said.

So Phillips and other state leaders will hear about programs like the Assisi Foundation of Memphis' use of the Bridges Out of Poverty concept. It is a comprehensive approach to poverty that has the ambitious goal of changing the circumstances and conditions of poverty.

They will also hear about specific training programs at Southwest Tennessee Community College that were the immediate response to the first pool of job applicants at Blues City Brewing and Electrolux.

Executives at both plants said the pool yielded too few qualified and trainable workers. That set in motion the local effort to find workers in Memphis who could be trained or had manufacturing experience who would also be better suited.

The effort put employers in the classrooms to not only teach but also to get a look at prospective employees to see directly a more specific pool of job seekers.

The University of Memphis is also involved, with interim president [Brad Martin](#) setting a goal of 10-year workforce development plans with the top 30 employers in the region.

Martin's vision is workforce development that leads to bachelor's and master's degrees as well as certificates of training and associate degrees.

The goal underlies the drive to make such training more comprehensive than a specific skill for a specific job.

For Norris, the Wednesday session had its origins in an exchange he saw a year ago in Memphis during a roundtable with business and higher education leaders chaired by Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam.

Among the business leaders was [Larry Gibson](#), plant manager at the Unilever facility in Covington, Tenn.

"We are really desperate for technical skills – people who understand human-machine interface and how to run an automatic packaging line," Gibson said. "There's something that goes back to the fundamentals of education. You have to know how to do math. It's not like technology is leaping forward. It's creeping forward."

Gibson's point was confirmed in a more recent Greater Memphis Chamber-Workforce Investment Network survey of manufacturers in the region, many of whom said they were unaware of workforce training programs offered by higher education institutions.

Gibson's comments drew an immediate response from Southwest Tennessee Community College leaders at the same session and led to a training program specifically for Unilever.

At the same session, other business leaders told Haslam they are looking more for critical thinking skills and adaptability in the workforces they will employ in the future than the ability to perform a specific task.