With a wave of retirements looming in the next decade, many in the petrochemical and refinery sectors are looking to a 40-year industry veteran to prepare the next generation of highly qualified workers.



And Jim Griffin knows these industries better than just about anyone.

Currently leading petrochemical training at San Jacinto College near the same Houston facilities where he long served as a plant manager and safety engineer, Griffin’s experience working at companies such as BFGoodrich Chemical and Mitsubishi Chemical provides a critical perspective to help give students the training and insight they will need to quickly fill a large workforce gap. “I think I might have one of the coolest, more interesting jobs,” Griffin said, noting proximity to the 132 plants “right in our backyard.”

Griffin's deep history with the industry has helped form the partnerships with more than 20 industry heavy hitters — including naming-rights partner LyondellBasell, Dow Chemical and INEOS — to open the state-of-the-art $60 million, 151,000-square-foot LyondellBasell Center for Petrochemical, Energy, & Technology (CPET) that will train and educate the future workforce.

“He’s brought this bridging of gaps between education and workforce and [is] able to listen to what industry needs and then be able to work with our educational leaders to implement that,” San Jacinto College Chancellor Dr. Brenda Hellyer said.

“Both sides claim Jim as one of their own,” said Craig Beskid, executive director of the East Harris County Manufacturers Association (EHCMA). “Jim is a great person of vision that knows what is needed.”

And that vision couldn’t come at a better time.

Nearly 76 million Baby Boomers, who typically make up about a quarter of manufacturing jobs, are expected to retire over the next few years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's coupled with the reality that the generations that follow sometimes are not well aware that these opportunities exist.

"As plant manager, your biggest asset is the people, without question," Griffin said. "We've got an aging workforce. The Boomers are retiring. There's a big gap there and we didn't do a lot of hiring in the late '90s."

There is certainly plenty to attract the next generation to the petrochemical and refining sectors, where jobs are both in high demand and pay high salaries. In the Houston area, process technicians working in the oil, gas, petrochemical and chemical industries earn around $70,000 a year on average. This doesn't include overtime, and seniority can raise that amount into the six figures. Indeed, San Jacinto's Process Technology program has a hiring rate of 92 percent and an average graduating salary of $60,000.

For Griffin, the challenge has been shaping a program where students not only realize the career opportunities, but also have an early immersion into an industry where it is essential to operate not only efficiently but safely. "What we're trying to do here is give these students real hands-on experience, so they really understand the industry," he said.

Under his leadership, San Jacinto has arranged on-site facility tours, integrated real-life simulations into the classroom curriculum, and opened doors for the school's professors to complete externships with industry partners. This has been further enhanced by CPET's September opening.

"Jim was a real early advocate [that] this needs to look like what we're really doing inside these facilities," EHCMA's Beskid said. That includes the building of an outdoor glycol unit and a control room that are "reflective of how things go in the actual real world," he said.

"Those are aspects that I don't think any other program in the country will have to this degree," Chancellor Hellyer said.

Griffin's partnerships and collaboration with organizations like EHCMA have been instrumental in the opening of the new center and elevated a San Jacinto program already regarded as one of the best in the industry. "We feel truly world-class," Griffin said. And that has continued to attract a steady flow of students, with enrollment projected to grow by more than 50 percent by 2025.

"They want to work. They want a career," Griffin said. "They want a place they can call home, and this industry does that."

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