Advanced Materials and Manufacturing in Wisconsin: The “I’s” have it.

We did it! On Oct. 18 our college successfully hosted the first workshop around developing a Center of Excellence in Advanced Manufacturing in Wisconsin.

Our goal? Determine the interest for developing this center. Assess industry needs. Gauge enthusiasm for this type of collaboration by public and private four-year universities, two-year and technical colleges. From our meetings around the state before the workshop we were pretty sure we were onto a big idea. The workshop, attended by close to 70 people from across many of the state’s universities and colleges plus leaders of some of Wisconsin’s 9,300 manufacturers, large and small, was an even greater success than we could have hoped.

Dr. Sheetal Handa, Associate Director of BP-International Centre for Advanced Materials, traveled almost 4,000 miles to give the keynote talk. Having gone through this same process in Europe to launch the BP Center less than five years ago, he was the ideal speaker. He set the tone for thinking big and boldly about this new venture. He spoke of trust and collaboration and the successes these can bring (and have brought to their initiative). Even in such a short time that the BP center has been operating. He also spoke of smart ways to share ideas so that everyone benefits.

Focus groups and breakout sessions followed. These allowed attendees to chew on big topics like the need for the center. Intelligent ways it will be different from other centers and institutes. IP. They identified challenges the center could face. And ways to address those challenges.

And while we’re still working on collecting and synthesizing the feedback from the workshop, we heard definitely heard a lot of ayes and “I’s” from the group.
Interest: The enthusiasm of the conversations, passion behind the questions and participation levels underscored the interest in a collaborative initiative like this. There really is nothing with this scope and breadth in the state.

Industry (and academia): The best part about the interest is that it was widespread—across industry—companies large and small—and across schools, colleges and universities. The proposed Center of Excellence in Advanced Materials & Manufacturing promises to harness this collaborative energy with the goal of driving innovation in Wisconsin. Not one company or one university, but the power of Wisconsin’s manufacturing strength coupled with the promise of putting some of the state’s over 400 researchers in materials science to work on helping them get better, faster and smarter.

Implementation: We heard a lot about growth, innovation in projects, sustainability—and the devil will be in the details here as we implement. We’re poised to do this wisely, with a steering committee from across the state and across institutions helping ask (and answer) the hard questions and lay the groundwork for how to approach the way to make the center operate most effectively. After that, our next steps will be to break into smaller group workshops around our research thrust areas, so we get it right and address here-and-now needs and help position Wisconsin for the future.

If you’ve been part of this exciting first step—I thank you for your energy and engagement. And if you’re interested in learning more—let me know. I’m happy to pick up the phone or make the trip to talk.

Learn more about the center at http://people.uwm.edu/amm/.

My best—

Nidal

Nidal Abu-Zahra, PhD,
Chair, UWM’s Materials Science and Engineering Department
nidal@uwm.edu