

Just one word: Manufacturing

In the 1967 movie "The Graduate," Mr. McGuire gave new college grad Benjamin Braddock "just one word" of advice:

Plastics.

In a similar scene last week Bill Gates gave UW-Madison students his advice on the right future to pursue:

Software.

We have no reason to doubt Gates, perhaps the central figure in the computer revolution of the past 30 years. But before Wisconsin sends all its children to computer science school, we'd like to offer just one more word:

Manufacturing.

The day before Gates, the chairman and co-founder of Microsoft Corp., spoke at UW-Madison, a study showed that Wisconsin's manufacturing industries, so vital to the state's economy, desperately need the help of the best and brightest from the next generation.

Wisconsin needs more of its best and brightest to inject new ideas into its manufacturing industries.

The study, from the non-profit Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership, rated Wisconsin's manufacturing productivity at only 86 percent of the U.S. average.

That means when Wisconsin manufacturers try to compete in the global marketplace, they are at a disadvantage. It also means that when manufacturers want to locate their jobs where they can get the most production per employee, they'll bypass Wisconsin.

The study's results do not mean that Wisconsin employees are slackers. Rather, the best explanation is that Wisconsin is home to lots of smaller, older manufacturing companies that haven't kept up with the latest productivity-improving technologies.

In short, Wisconsin manufacturers could use some new ideas and new energy.

New direction is also important. The fastest manufacturing growth is in companies related to new technologies like biotechnology and medical equipment. Dane County is benefiting from that growth. But Wisconsin should not give up on older metal-bending industries, the foundation of the state's industrial economy. Those companies need to be refreshed. They need managers and employees who can apply new technologies to improve productivity and who can direct and conduct research into new products and methods. They even need software whizzes.

Some manufacturers may believe they cannot afford new technology and new ideas, but in fact what they can't afford is to remain mired in the status quo.

Which brings us back to Bill Gates, who stopped in Madison on a cross-country tour to promote the study of computer science, a discipline that has experienced declining college enrollments in recent years.

"This is a field where we need new thinkers," Gates said.

Wisconsin's next generation should understand that the same words apply to the state's manufacturing industries.