Half of grads in APSU program not hired by Hemlock

The Associated Press

Fewer than half the graduates from an Austin Peay State University program designed to prepare workers for the Hemlock Semiconductor facility have been hired by the company.

The two-year chemical engineering degree program was developed after Hemlock announced plans to build a $1.2 billion manufacturing plant in Montgomery County. The university has received a $6.4 million state grant to get area workers ready and built the Hemlock Semiconductor Building, which houses the associate degree program and laboratory.

The plant, which would produce polycrystalline silicon for solar cells and semiconductor chips, projected to begin operations in 2012 and with a work force of 500-800 people, primarily of highly skilled jobs needing specialized training.

WSMV-TV obtained figures from the university showing that of 84 students who have graduated the program, Austin Peay estimates only 35 have been hired by Hemlock (http://bit.ly/yKrDMq). The university said it relies on students to self-report when they get hired, so the numbers are an estimate.

Officials with Michigan-based Hemlock Semiconductor Corp. declined an on-camera interview with the television station. But the company said in a statement that like any other college degree program, "employment after graduation is never guaranteed.

"Among the chemical process operators initially hired, a significant number of graduates from Austin Peay State University's chemical engineering technology program were selected based on their exhibited skills and knowledge of the industry," the company said.

APSU's president, Tim Hall, said the school never thought Hemlock would be the only employer for the new graduates and said 10 graduates have gotten jobs at other companies.

"Oh, I think it's a spectacular result," he said. "The first thing to think about is universities are here for the long haul."

Hemlock Semiconductor Group also gave the university a $2 million gift for the purchase of laboratory equipment for the building, which has rooftop solar panels. Hall said the new building is used by other departments as well.

"We use every inch of space we can," Hall said.

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