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Growth Opportunities

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Growth Opportunities

Mark Denzler '93 employs political skills to keep Illinois manufacturing strong.



“I’ve had a firsthand account of some of the biggest political stories in our state’s history,” says Mark Denzler, shown above. “For a political junkie, the chance to meet and talk to our national and state leaders is pretty special.”

As vice president and chief operating officer for the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association (IMA), Mark Denzler ’93 says, “My job is different every single day, and I like the challenges. One day I may be speaking to the governor or a legislator about a tax issue and the next day I am meeting with a company’s CEO to discuss a plan to add 100 jobs in the state.”

The IMA is the oldest and largest state manufacturing trade association in the United States. It represents nearly 4,000 companies and plants operating in Illinois, from the Fortune 100 businesses to small, family-owned shops. “In addition to lobbying for these companies, we offer informative seminars and training, continuing education courses and a number of affinity programs designed to help our companies grow and prosper,” says Mark, who is based in Springfield, Ill., where he lives with his wife Debbi.

Mark points out that manufacturing remains essential to the state’s economy. “Last year, Illinois manufacturing companies employed 575,000 workers who were paid an average of more than \$64,000 in annual wages and benefits,” he says.

“Manufacturing provides nearly 13 percent of the state’s gross domestic product, ranking it the largest sector of the state’s economy. Participation in the IMA is crucial to our success in maintaining a vibrant manufacturing economy in the state.”

Among the IMA’s current efforts is support of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a proposed multinational trade agreement. Citing a recent study by the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity showing that the TPP will help increase the state’s exports by nearly 4 percent annually, Mark told the *Chicago Tribune* in May that “trade is good for Illinois companies and exports that help create jobs in Illinois.”

Mark first honed his political skills at IWU, where he majored in political science, was active in the Student Senate and Theta Chi, and served as president of his senior class. “A liberal arts degree prepared me very well and helped me become a well-rounded person. It gave me basic knowledge and insights that allow me to communicate with a wide variety of people,” says Mark, who remains an active alumnus, serving as chair of his graduating class and recent 20-year reunion and returning to campus to give career advice to students.

After graduation, Mark worked briefly in Washington, D.C., on Capitol Hill for Congressman Tom Ewing (R-IL) “after which I returned to Illinois and worked as a legislative analyst in the Illinois General Assembly,

where I specialized in education and tax policy, including staffing Governor Edgar's Ikenberry Commission on school funding." That experience led to his first job for the IMA as its director of government affairs, followed by running the Illinois government affairs operation for State Farm Insurance for nearly four years. He returned to the IMA as vice president in 2006.

Along the way, Mark says, "I became good friends with then State Senator Barack Obama during his time in the state legislature, and he often played in a weekly poker game in my office. In similar fashion, I got to know former Governor Rod Blagojevich, who ascended to the state's top post before being impeached and ultimately convicted of public corruption. So I've had a firsthand account of some of the biggest political stories in our state's history. For a political junkie, the chance to meet and talk to our national and state leaders is pretty special."

Through both observation and participation, Mark has learned that politics is a "bloodsport," and he loves "the strategy that comes with the job. It entails critical thinking, strategy and collaboration. I'm very proud to work for the IMA, and support its mission of helping grow manufacturing in Illinois.

Those collaborations continue. Mark was recently re-appointed by Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner to serve on the Illinois Workers' Compensation Advisory Board. The board assists the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission in formulating policies, setting priorities and developing administrative goals. He's also served on civic and professional boards including the St. Jude Children's Hospital Midwest Affiliate, Lincoln Public Library Board, Lincoln Library Foundation and the National Public Affairs Steering Committee for the National Association of Manufacturers.

Mark knows that not everyone shares his passion for politics, but he says it's a mistake to just opt out of the process. "I would tell young people, not just political science majors, to get involved. I don't care whether it's volunteering for a presidential campaign or running for dog catcher. Opportunities abound, and you can't sit and complain about government if you don't vote and get involved in the process." —*Tim Obermiller*

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