BISMARCK – Providing students with quality science, technology, engineering and math education is “critically important” to the long-term future of North Dakota, the president of Valley City State University said Monday.

President Steve Shirley said it’s important for K-12 and higher education officials to work together and discuss topics like STEM, as the courses are commonly referred.

Energy, agriculture, engineering and health care are all sectors that need a work force trained in these course areas, Shirley said.

“Clearly as a nation, we have fallen behind,” he said.

About 50 educators met in Bismarck to discuss moving STEM education forward in the state and to hear from Jan Morrison, executive director of the Ohio-based Teaching Institute for Excellence in STEM.

Morrison discussed creating relationships with STEM-related companies, institutions and universities that can provide students and instructors with real-world projects and internships.

“Education cannot go it alone,” she said. “What we really need is a partner that takes on the education of the (students) the way the institutions have.”

North Dakota made a great step with the Great Plains STEM Education Center at Valley City State University, Morrison said. Now, the state needs to continue that advancement.

Morrison said there are challenges with changing the culture so parents, teachers and students aren’t afraid of STEM classes. They need to be shown the value, she said.

Bob Marthaller, assistant superintendent of the state Department of Public Instruction, said the state is “excited about the opportunity to promote STEM initiatives.” But the state is still getting a handle on what STEM means and where to go with it.

The next step is likely to create a group to study the issue, he said.

Sen. Larry Robinson, D-Valley City, said STEM is about being competitive in the global marketplace and realizing the need to do better.

“It’s not going to happen overnight, but it’s time that we get going,” he said.

Teri Finneman is a multimedia reporter for Forum Communications Co.