The Russell Chair in Manufacturing Excellence was founded to enhance the quality of manufacturing education, support the existing manufacturing base, and attract new manufacturing activity to the middle Tennessee region. Marvin Runyon is uniquely qualified to help MTSU meet this mission as chairholder. In a real sense, he is responsible for the significant automotive presence in middle Tennessee today. In 1980, Runyon was employed by Nissan Motor Company to lead Nissan North American Smyrna operations. He was responsible for selecting Smyrna as the site for the Nissan assembly plant that drew many automotive suppliers to the region. He assumed the Nissan top executive post after a distinguished career at Ford Motor Company, where he rose to be vice president of body and assembly operations. Runyon built the Nissan assembly plant in Smyrna and developed a profitable, efficient manufacturing operation that was the envy of many in the automotive industry.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan asked Runyon to chair the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which was struggling with annual double-digit rate increases and an expanding bureaucracy. Under Runyon’s leadership TVA held rates fixed for five years and streamlined the administrative structure. Then, in 1992, President George Bush nominated Runyon to head the U.S. Postal Service. As he had done at Nissan and TVA, the new postmaster general with his experience at Ford, Nissan, TVA, and the U.S. Postal Service, Marvin Runyon is uniquely qualified to hold this chair.
made the postal service efficient and “profitable.” A clear conclusion is that Marvin Runyon is a terrific manager, capable of understanding very complex systems and implementing plans to make them more efficient.

Runyon brings these considerable and varied experiences from Ford, Nissan, TVA, and the Postal Service to his work as chairholder of the Russell Chair. He also continues to consult internationally and serves on numerous boards across the country. Runyon shares his vast experience with faculty and students each semester as he lectures on a variety of topics to classes across campus. He is also involved with faculty in the Engineering Technology Department as they review their mission and sharpen their focus for the future.

Runyon holds a steadfast position on the relationship between productivity and quality and teaches that they go hand-in-hand. He is also committed to the importance of customer service and a competitive spirit in the workplace. He tells a great story about when he first went to work for Ford in Atlanta as a newly minted engineer. Ford put him to work on the line installing heavy truck tires on the rims. It was a challenge the first day to lift the tire onto the lug bolts. The second day he came to work with a small plywood ramp and a two-by-four-foot lever, which made the job easy. He believes in employees having the freedom to use their ingenuity to improve the process and in a system that rewards such ingenuity.

Marvin Runyon brings national exposure to the Russell Chair in Manufacturing Excellence and is helping others recognize the potential for partnerships that MTSU offers. He is using his industry experience to help MTSU develop a relationship with the automotive industry in the south. His insight into manufacturing issues is helping MTSU develop strategies and programs to help address the challenges that face the manufacturing industry. One specific challenge is refocusing executive leadership in the automotive supplier industry on lean manufacturing concepts. Runyon is working to develop a regional conference on executive leadership issues relating to lean manufacturing. He is uniquely qualified for the task.

Thomas J. Cheatham is dean of the MTSU’s College of Basic and Applied Sciences.

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