



## Broader Vision Needed for Critical 'Middle' Jobs

BY ROBERT PAXTON • MICH STARCEVICH • MIKE RALSTON | JANUARY 7, 2008

The national Skills2Compete campaign recently released a report refuting the popular notion of an American labor market comprised of very low-skilled and very highly skilled jobs, with a hollowing out of the middle.

As the presidential candidates continue their campaigns beyond Iowa, they should take note of this report, which has profound implications for economic growth in our state and innovation for our nation.

The report, America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs, finds that middle-skill jobs - those that require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree - continue to make up half of all jobs today. Analysis of Iowa's labor market shows similar results.

At the same time, Iowa employers in industries such as manufacturing, health care and construction struggle to find workers for good-paying middle-skill jobs with advancement opportunities. The situation could get worse if current trends persist. By 2012, the state could have in excess of 150,000 more jobs than workers.

This new report suggests that our state and national economic-development strategy must include investments in skills at all levels of the labor market - across a variety of occupations, firms and industries - for all workers, from incumbent to the un- and underemployed. We must ensure more Iowans can access four-year and advanced degrees. But we must also address the majority of jobs that sit in the "forgotten middle" of the skilled labor market that don't require a four-year degree.

Recently, Congress and the president authorized \$42 billion for the COMPETES Act, which will arm more American scientists, engineers and mathematicians with four-year and advanced degrees. America needed this legislation to foster innovation. But it addressed training for only a limited number of jobs.

In the meantime, training programs that prepare Iowa workers for middle-skill jobs that are equally crucial to innovation just took a \$245 million cut in funding, a reduction of almost 8 percent, at the hands of the current Congress. Moreover, our state has sustained an almost two-thirds cut in federal job-training funds since 1989.

The truth is, when Iowa's newly trained medical researchers find cures for illnesses, we will need an even larger number of laboratory techs, pharmacy techs and nurses to produce and administer those remedies. And when our newly trained environmental engineers develop means for constructing green buildings, we will need a larger number of welders, carpenters and duct workers trained to build those structures, or the wind turbines and solar panels to heat and cool them.

We hope that the presidential candidates will embrace a broader vision of innovation than the one currently coming out of Washington. One that addresses not just the important task of ensuring more people can access four-year degrees, but also other kinds of postsecondary education and training. One that supports the efforts of our own governor to invest in All-Iowa Opportunity Scholarships and address skill demands at all levels of the state labor market.

Sixty years ago, the GI Bill sent more than 2 million veterans to college and graduate programs, to become the professionals of the mid-20th century. But almost three times as many veterans used the GI Bill to enroll in vocational training, for good skilled jobs that would drive the engine of post-war industrial growth and bring countless American families into the new middle class.

The Skills2Compete campaign and its 135 endorsing businesses nationwide believe that all of America's workers should be able to access up to two years of postsecondary education, leading to a vocational credential, industry certification, or one's first two years of college.

It's time for this new, broader vision for opportunity and innovation.

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