

Study: We got skills, just not enough of the right ones

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BusinessRockford.com

Oct 31, 2009 @ 03:25 PM

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ROCKFORD — The state's pool of workers with the skills to take jobs in emerging fields is shrinking, which could cause an economic crisis as Illinois competes for new companies.

So-called "middle skill" jobs — those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree — will comprise 45 percent of the state's job openings through 2016, according to a study by The Workforce Alliance and Skills2Compete campaign. But through 2020, the proportion of the state's low-skill workers will rise while the percentages of middle- and high-skilled workers will decline.

That skills gap will cause a problem when the job market rebounds and companies begin to hire again, said Andrea Ray, regional field director for The Workforce Alliance.

"These jobs are very much there, (but) the state is not meeting the demand," she said. "As Illinois moves from the recession into recovery, employers will start hiring, and these skill shortages will come back."

The increase in low-skilled workers is a reversal of a 15-year statewide trend of increased educational attainment. Between 1990 and 2005, Illinois saw an increase in residents with educational attainment at the middle- and high-skill levels, and a decrease in residents with low education levels.

Ray pointed to two factors behind the predicted change: a perception that a four-year college degree is the only path to a well-paying job and the increased number of people who are in the work force and will still be there in 2020.

"These working adults in the labor market, who will be well past high school age, will likely not be able to drop out of the labor force and go back to school because of family commitments," she said. "We're not creating enough opportunities as a state to give them more education and training options."

Local economic development officials have long bemoaned the Rock River Valley's low educational attainment rates as a detriment to attracting new businesses. In 2008, 48.2 percent of residents in Boone and Winnebago counties had at least some college education, compared with a 56.5 percent national average, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

Although efforts are under way in the community to encourage post-high school education, including the Academic Career Education high school, more effort needs to be made to increase opportunities for those in the work force, according to the study.

Rock Valley College is pursuing options for working adults who need education.

Greg Wear, associate vice president of academic affairs, said staffers are studying new course loads to make it

easier for working adults to get certifications or degrees.

"The biggest cost for many students is physically getting to campus, either by driving or taking the bus," he said. "We're trying to adjust our courses so, instead of coming to campus three times a week for a class, they can come two or even one day."

Wear said they're also examining earlier start times for classes and have started offering full degree programs at RVC's Stenstrom Center on Samuelson Road to serve students who live farther south. The college also will hire an adult recruiter to help underemployed and unemployed residents enroll in training programs.

Diane Nyhammer, vice president for academic affairs, said college officials are in frequent communication with area business leaders and are doing an enrollment study to make sure school offerings are matching up with employers' present and future needs.

"We're using that to guide our curriculum," she said. "We're trying to be proactive in designing our curriculum so we can properly train our work force."

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