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## Create Jobs Now, but Build Skills for the Future

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In his economic speech last week at George Mason University, President-elect Barack Obama cautioned against any delays in his plan to jump-start the economy. "We could lose a generation of potential and promise, as more young Americans are forced to forgo dreams of college or the chance to train for the jobs of the future," he said. "And our nation could lose the competitive edge that has served as a foundation for our strength and standing in the world." But we are losing a generation of promise and our nation is losing its competitive edge, and neither is the result of our current economic crisis.

In today's global economy, the majority of new jobs - and the vast majority of well-paying jobs - require at least some college education. This doesn't bode well for the nearly half of American adults 25 or older who have no more than a high school education. Or the nearly seven thousand students who drop out of high school every day. For these dropouts and the 40 million American adults who are barely literate, prospects for a living wage were dim long before September 2008. Just getting people jobs building new roads isn't enough.

According to The Workforce Alliance, U.S. taxpayers spent slightly more than \$50 billion in 2006 on federal programs categorized as workforce development and job training. Even with these significant resources, the federal government has neglected to focus on getting workers the postsecondary training needed to succeed in the new economy. The result? The United States is facing a possible shortage of 14 million workers with college-level skills by 2020, according to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Without enough skilled workers, these jobs will disappear or be filled overseas.

While Obama's proposed stimulus package might, in the short term, prevent an economic meltdown, a return to economic prosperity will require helping workers acquire the skills needed to compete globally. Unless the stimulus can be leveraged to revitalize our outmoded education and workforce systems, the current downturn will likely accelerate the recent trend in which the only good jobs go to those who have training beyond high school.

For guidance on how to help the millions of Americans who need assistance to compete in today's knowledge economy, the new Administration might look to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Ten months ago, Governor Timothy M. Kaine brought together a task force of leaders from the Governor's office, key state agencies, and employers to create a 21st century framework to guide workforce development in the Commonwealth. Taking a hard look at their current systems, they discovered workforce programs oriented toward immediate job placement and narrow vocational skills, and educational programs disconnected from employers' needs. They realigned the systems to provide students and workers the educational foundation for careers (not only jobs) and lifelong career advancement -and sustain Virginia's economy into the future.

If there is a silver lining in the need to use taxpayer dollars today to kick-start the economy, it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to re-build our system to prepare people for the good jobs of tomorrow. If we do not act immediately to improve the skills of our workforce, much as Virginia is doing, we may end up with new roads, but they won't lead a prosperous future.

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