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## Shortage of 'middle-skill' workers is looming

By Darlene G. Miller  
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Over the past 12 months, the American economy has shed more than 2.6 million jobs. However, amid all the economic doom and gloom, the U.S. Department of Labor estimates that in just four years there will be a shortage of more than 10 million skilled workers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of jobs requiring some form of post-secondary education will grow 60 percent faster than the job market as a whole. Currently, however, the vast majority of the unemployed or underemployed do not possess the skills necessary to rebuild the U.S. economy.

In November 2007, a national non-partisan campaign sponsored by The Workforce Alliance and endorsed by business partners like the National Association of Manufacturers, issued a report, "America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs." Authored by economists Harry Holzer and Robert Lerman, the report argues that middle-skill jobs – those that require more than high school but less than a four-year degree – continue to make up nearly half of all jobs today. In New Hampshire, 51 percent of all jobs are classified as "middle-skilled," yet only 43 percent of the current workforce possesses those skills.

Middle-skill jobs include construction workers, welders, HVAC technicians, medical assistants, nurses, firefighter/EMTs, childcare workers, electricians and other positions that are crucial to New Hampshire's infrastructure and health.

According to the national Skills2Compete Campaign, the pathway to 45 percent of America's good jobs is a certificate or associate degree earned at a community or technical college.

Yet most policymakers and politicians at state and national levels continue to overlook these jobs, and the investments in workforce education and training required to fill them in the coming decade. Because too many policymakers see "going to college" as enrolling in a four-year college and graduating four years later, America's workforce education priority is targeted toward filling the one in four American jobs that require a bachelor or advanced degree. However, not every high school graduate wants to go to a four-year college, nor does every rewarding career require a four-year degree. In fact, labor market demand for employees with associate degrees is outpacing demand for all other educational levels.

The reality is the United States lacks a national workforce development policy and education policies to pull our nation out of this economic crisis. We need more comprehensive policies and investments in programs that can grow a vibrant labor force, and prepare our citizens for family wage, middle-skill jobs.

In New Hampshire, Governor Lynch and the Legislature have created the Job Training Grant, which funds 50 percent of the cost of employee training to help New Hampshire companies upgrade the skills of their workforce. Under the grant, New Hampshire's community colleges are the "trainers of first resort."

President-elect Obama has proposed a new American Opportunity Tax Credit to ensure that the first \$4,000 of a college education is free for most Americans, which will go a long way toward helping community college be affordable for more New Hampshire residents.

With programs like these, community colleges are poised to lead us into the future and help more individuals achieve the American dream. Greater public investments in education and training for middle-skill jobs will generate important returns for the U.S. economy.

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