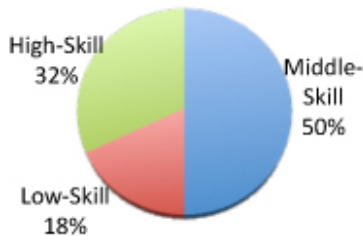
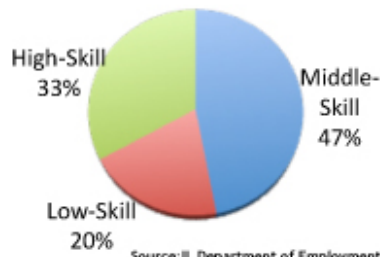


Demand for middle-skill workers in Illinois

IL jobs by skill level, 2008



IL jobs by skill level, 2018



Source: IL Department of Employment Security

Katie Spencer/Medill

The Illinois Department of Labor Security says that middle-skill jobs, which require more than a high school diploma but less a four-year degree, will continue to make up the largest portion of jobs in the state.

Community colleges work to fill huge demand for 'middle-skill' workers

by KATIE SPENCER

March 02, 2011

Like many high school graduates, Amber Arciniega couldn't wait to get out of her hometown and jump full force into college life. She moved from rural Indiana in 2008 and started school at Loyola University Chicago.

That lasted about four weeks.

"I just didn't want to be there," said Arciniega, now 20 years old. "I hated sitting behind the desk. It wasn't for me.

So she dropped out of school and enrolled a year later in a Deere & Co.-sponsored training program at Indiana's Vincennes University.

The program, supported by \$2.3 million in equipment donations from Deere, trains students in equipment repair. A specific dealership must sponsor each student, ensuring a paid summer internship during the training program.

Arciniega will graduate in April and already has a job lined up at a Deere dealership in Plymouth, Ind.

"I've learned a lot and I've got a job waiting for me that's way better than what I had before," Arciniega said. "I'm really proud of that because when I first walked in and asked the dealer to sponsor me, they kind of tried to talk me out of it because I was a girl."

Arthur Haase, dean of technology at Vincennes University, said 100 percent of the roughly 3,500 students who graduate from the training program each year go directly into the service department of a dealer.

"Most people when they think of something like this think of kids turning wrenches," Haase said. "Today it's about extremely technical component analysis. Somebody needs to be able to understand all of that and that's what John Deere is investing in through this program—highly trained individuals."

Students can diagnose specific tractor malfunctions by plugging laptops into the equipment and pinpointing problem areas, according to Haase.

More community colleges are working to implement programs to train students like Arciniega for highly skilled jobs where openings persist despite a depressed labor market and prolonged economic slump.

In October President Obama announced a new initiative called Skills for America's Future, aimed at encouraging public-private partnerships to create more retraining programs at community colleges. The Aspen Institute, a Washington-based think tank, runs the program.

"The program looks to increase the number of employers who have partnerships with community colleges so that those partnerships will better align curriculum with skills needed by employers in that community," said Karen Elzey, who runs the program for the Aspen Institute.

Utility provider PG&E Corp., fast-food giant McDonald's Corp., diversified manufacturer United Technologies Corp. and consulting group Accenture PLC have said they will partner with community colleges to help design industry-specific training programs. Last month, retailer Gap Inc. unveiled a training program at seven community colleges across the U.S. as part of the initiative.

“We are going to need people all along the continuum of education, but there is definitely a big role for those jobs that require a two-year or certificate degree,” Elzey said.

Middle-skill jobs, which require more than a high school education but less than a four-year degree, make up the largest segment of the U.S. workforce, according to the National Skills Coalition, a organization of employers, unions, education providers and public officials.

In Illinois, the group projects more than 1 million middle-skill job openings by 2016, representing the state’s largest portion of jobs in the skilled labor market.

In order to fill the labor gap and help encourage U.S. industrial growth and competitiveness, industry insiders say high school career counselors need to do a better job of highlighting job opportunities that do not require a traditional four-year education.

“Not everybody is cut out to do a four-year program,” said Bryan Knaack,

director of business development at Tooling University LLC, an online manufacturing training provider owned by the Society of Manufacturing Engineers. “A lot of guidance counselors in certain markets aren’t steering their students into certificate programs, even though the need is definitely there in the region.”

The network of community colleges that comprises the City Colleges of Chicago is focused on filling the labor gap for skilled workers.

Chris Wilkerson, vice president of the Workforce Institute of the City Colleges of Chicago, said healthcare and manufacturing repair jobs continue to grow.

“I feel very confident as we speak with our business partners that people with two-year and certificate degree skills will fill jobs within their organizations,” Wilkerson said, adding that employers are looking to train existing workers as well as bring in new graduates.

Craig Hansen, who manages educational partnerships for Deere, said the company is in “dire straights” when it comes to filling positions: “Our technicians are aging and it’s hard to find young people who are interested in our programs.”

Hansen said Deere, which has 17 training programs in schools across the U.S., partnered recently with the American School Counselor Association and has seen a shift in student interest.

“During the last year or two, it has seemed that things are coming back our way,” Hansen said. “But we’re competing with about 10 or 20 years of counselors’ pushing folks the other way.”

Vincennes’ Haase said he recently received a request from a worldwide company for more than 20 graduates of the school’s manufacturing and electronics programs. He said that type of job would pay between \$45,000 to \$55,000.

“I can tell you we won’t even be close to having enough graduates because there’s going to be multiple corporations like that and we can’t respond with enough people,” Haase said.

The biotechnology program at St. Louis Community College trains students for jobs with companies such as Pfizer Inc. and Monsanto Co. Richard Norris, the director of the Center for Plant and Life Sciences, said the program has a 90 percent career placement rate for students who have completed the core courses.

“These are the kinds of jobs that as a company expands, the demand for workers with these skills is going to expand,” Norris said.

Enrollment in the program has increased 90 percent in the past five years, according to Norris.

David Busby, 54 years old, lost his job at an automobile supply company in St. Louis before starting in the school’s biotechnology program.

“I just kept seeing all these job openings come up for biotechnicians,” Busby said. “I didn’t even know what biotechnology was—I had to Google it. I found out that companies were hiring technicians and that’s how I ended up here.”

Busby isn’t positive where he’ll be working after he graduates this summer, but he’s certain he will land a stable job. He thinks more people may enter two-year programs in the coming years as demand for skilled workers picks up.

“I think if more people looked at going back to school from the standpoint of learning a new skill and also if they looked at where the jobs are, they would do what I’m doing too,” Busby said.



Katie Spencer/MEDILL

The City Colleges of Chicago, like Truman College pictured here, work to prepare students for middle-skill jobs.