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# Middle-Skills Shortage Found in South

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Associated Press

ASHEVILLE, N.C.—The South has a shortage of workers to fill middle-skills jobs such as medical technicians and computer-support workers, even as many four-year graduates struggle to repay student loans, according to a study released Sunday.

The report released by the National Skills Coalition during the Southern Governors Association meeting in Asheville shows that 51% of all jobs in the American South fall into the "middle-skills" category, requiring education and training beyond high school but less than a four-year degree.

Highly skilled jobs make up 29% of the job market; low-skill occupations make up 20%.

"What we are calling middle skills can actually be high-level skills, with some jobs paying \$50 an hour," North Carolina Gov. Beverly Perdue said. "That's why I prefer to call them career-skill sets."

In North Carolina, 51% of available jobs fall into the middle-skills category. The study says 43% of job seekers are able to meet those qualifications.

Panelist James Wiseman, of Toyota Motor Corp., said his company struggles to find qualified workers for jobs as electricians, maintenance, and tool and die technicians—jobs that often pay between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year.

The region's average among all jobs for annual full-time pay is \$38,900, according to the report.

Gov. Jay Nixon of Missouri decried the expense of higher education, saying it forces many students to take on large student loans. Mr. Nixon said many college graduates spend five to 10 years repaying loans, and as a result cannot buy cars, homes or consumer goods.

A report last fall indicated that student debt in America had reached \$850 billion, nearly \$25 billion more than the nation's consumer credit card debt load.

"It's hurting our economy," he said. "We've got to make sure that a student's graduation gift is not debt."

Several speakers at the governor's business session Sunday debated the value of job-specific training versus a more liberal approach to post-secondary education.

"There is something to be said for learning for learning's sake, without regard to how it relates specifically to a job," said Arkansas Gov. Mike Beebe. "We have heard that what companies want is not necessarily someone with a specific skill, but somebody who can think and change directions from job to job and year to year."

The study looked at 16 Southern states plus Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It shows that 52% of employers in 2011 reported difficulty filling specific jobs within their operations, compared with 14% just a year earlier. Middle-skill level occupations were named frequently among the top 10 hardest-to-fill jobs. Among those rising fastest were heating and air-conditioning technicians, dental hygienists, environmental engineering technicians, firefighters and medical technologists.

The study showed that highly educated job seekers in North Carolina outnumbered available job openings, while middle-skill job openings exceeded the number of qualified workers.

The study also indicates that the shortage will continue to rise unless efforts are made to promote more training and education programs at the two-year colleges and technical schools.

Ms. Perdue said North Carolina is working to identify business clusters where job demand is highest and partnering with public and private schools to train workers to gain those specific skills.

The report to the governors group noted that nearly two-thirds of the projected work force in 2025 are already working today, underlining a need to retrain adults long past high school age.

Sunday's sessions concluded the three-day Southern Governors Association meeting. Puerto Rico Gov. Luis G. Fortuno assumed chairmanship of the group from Ms. Perdue. Next year's meeting will take place in Puerto Rico.

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