



Ohio must invest in adult learners and the institutions that serve them

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During this difficult state budget season, the recently released Fordham Institute report, "Losing Ohio's Future," which found that three of five Ohio college students plan to leave the state after graduation, has generated discussion about the state's return on investment from higher education funding. It also made clear that we need to rethink our image of "college student." A common assumption is that college students are 18- to 22-year-olds pursuing a four-year degree, and 89 percent of those surveyed for the study fit that profile. The reality is quite different.

In Ohio, more than 50 percent of all undergraduate public college students attend two-year campuses -- community colleges, technical colleges and university regional campuses -- and nearly all of these students stay in Ohio. The Ohio Board of Regents In-State Retention Analysis (March 2009) found that 87 percent of those with an associate degree were employed in Ohio six months following graduation.

It is no coincidence that these high-retention institutions are attended by older students. In 2007, nearly half (45 percent) of the students at Ohio's two-year campuses were over 24. These older students want to gain additional skills and credentials to improve their job prospects and earning power. As the enrollment at these institutions swells during the current recession, more adult students are displaced workers who must retrain to re-enter the work force.

Surprisingly, even now, employers are having difficulty filling job openings that require specific technical skills. The mismatch is particularly acute for "middle skill jobs," those that require more than a high-school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. The state projects that there will be 841,570 middle-skill job openings by 2016. A trained middle-skill work force will be critical to Ohio's economic recovery and growth, and this training must happen now.

The Fordham Institute notes that more must be done to develop and retain Ohio's human capital, and that Ohio needs its best and brightest to stay in the state. A cost-effective way to achieve these goals is to invest in adult learners and the institutions and programs that serve them. If working adults don't have the skills required for family-supporting jobs, their children will suffer, and dependence on expensive safety-net programs will grow.

Ohio must:

- Adequately fund adult education programs and financial aid for needy students.
- Continue funding the Ohio Skills Bank and employer training programs, which link training to in-demand occupations.
- Follow the lead of other states and enact policies requiring that federal Workforce Investment Funds be used primarily for training activities and supportive services that enable adults to participate in education and training programs.

These actions will help to ensure that Ohio develops and retains the skilled work force needed to move its economy forward.