

Chicago's Plan to Match Education With Jobs

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By [RAHM EMANUEL](#) | OPINION | DECEMBER 19, 2011

The Chicago area has near 10% unemployment, but more than 100,000 unfilled jobs. Like the rest of the country, Chicago suffers from a skills gap that undermines our economic competitiveness and threatens our future prosperity.

Despite stubborn unemployment, we have companies offering well-paying jobs that have to go begging for skilled applicants. This is because our community college system, which was a worker's ticket into employment and the middle class during the postwar boom, has failed to keep pace with today's competitive jobs market. Consequently, in a 21st-century economy, our workers still have 20th-century skills.

For example, AAR Corp., an aviation-parts manufacturer in the Chicago area, has 600 job openings for welders and mechanics but can't find skilled workers to fill them. As mayor of one of America's largest cities, I find it unacceptable that at a time of high unemployment, more than 80% of manufacturers say they can't find skilled workers to hire.

This situation will only get worse. In the next 10 years, the Chicago area will need 9,000 additional computer-science workers, 20,000 new transportation workers and 43,000 new health-care workers, including 15,000 nurses.

In order to fill these jobs, we need to modernize our community colleges so that Americans no longer regard community colleges as a last ditch effort for a remedial education, but as their first choice for high-skill job training.

Right now, too many of our community colleges lack credibility in the eyes of CEOs and job seekers. Recently I met a young student at a public-transit stop who was commuting from Harold Washington Community College, where he goes to school, to his night job at a department-store warehouse. Riding from downtown to the Southside, studying along the way, that student, like millions of Americans, is doing his part to ensure he has a shot at a good job. But those of us in government have not been doing our part to meet him halfway. We need to guarantee that the diploma he earns has economic value. I want that student to worry only about doing well in his classes, not about whether the skills he gains in those classes will earn him a job.

So, last week I announced a series of partnerships between our community colleges and our top employers that will draw on their expertise to develop curricula and set industry standards for job training in high-growth sectors like health care, high-tech manufacturing, information technology and professional services.

This program, "Colleges to Careers," will team AAR Corp. with Chicago's Olive-Harvey College to design a curriculum for avionics and mechanics careers. It will partner companies like Allscripts and Northwestern Memorial Hospital with Malcolm X College to design job training in health-care information technology and nursing.

These partnerships will align workers' training with the expectations of employers so that community college students will not have to worry about whether they have the right skills for their chosen field. They will have the confidence of knowing that the company they want to work for has helped design their curriculum specifically so that they can be hired and be successful. Employers won't need to search for the skilled workers they need to invest and expand. They will have confidence in their future work force because they were a partner in shaping it.

Chicago already enjoys a dynamic work force, not only because we have some of the world's best universities, but also because we're a magnet for the brightest students from across the Big Ten states. By modernizing our community college system, we are matching that dynamism at every level of the jobs market. Whatever skill level employers need, from the boardroom to the shop floor, they can have confidence that Chicago's work force has the skill and depth they need to start a business and expand.

AAR Corp. will have a pipeline of trained workers to fill those 600 open jobs. Allscripts will have a reliable talent pool to fill the 300 jobs it is adding in Chicago. Northwestern Memorial Hospital and Rush University Medical Center will have the specialists they need for their large expansion projects.

I hope that cities across the country will follow Chicago's model. If we revive and modernize our training programs to match the needs of our high-growth industries, our community college system can catapult millions of people into employment and into the middle class, as it has done for generations of Americans.

Mr. Emanuel is mayor of Chicago and a former White House chief of staff.