

## High school graduates, gearing up for a bachelor's degree Reports urges skills training

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If you're a high school graduate gearing up for a bachelor's degree, you might want to think twice before leaving for college.

A report released last week by a Washington-based organization says California's economy stands to recover quicker if uneducated workers - both young and old - set their sites on attaining "middle skills" education.

That's because federal stimulus dollars are heavily targeting industries where you don't need a bachelor's or master's degree to get hired, according to the report published by The Workforce Alliance.

The argument: More jobs will be created and positions will open up faster if middle-skills training keeps up with the federal monies pouring into local communities for health care, transportation, infrastructure and a variety of other sectors.

More than 2.7million middle-skills jobs will have opened between 2006 and 2016, making up 43percent of California's total job openings between that period, the report says.

Middle skills workers are nurses, x-ray technicians, carpenters, electricians, heating and air conditioning techs, solar panel installers - the list goes on.

The state has poured millions over the last decade into county work-force training programs that subsidize the cost of one- and two-year community college and vocational school certificates for qualified residents, who in turn have utilized those skills to put bread on the table.

However, "more must be done," the report says.

Sandy Harmsen, director of the San Bernardino County Workforce Development Department, agrees, arguing that society has conditioned Californians into believing they can only earn decent wages by splurging on expensive four-year degrees.

It seems the Inland Empire economy's appetite for locally residing skilled workers has outweighed the training dollars available for quite some time and will continue doing so unless more funds are appropriated.

Still, Harmsen said, much is already being accomplished through the \$15.8million federal stimulus allocated to youth and adult training programs coordinated by the public-private partnership of which Harmsen is executive director, the San Bernardino County Workforce Investment Board.

Those funds doubled the board's annual budget to about \$32million this year.

"We've more than quadrupled the number of people put into training since last year," Harmsen said. "If we got another \$32million, that'd be great. We have the partnerships already formed, and we're perched and ready to compete for grants."

Paul Conaway, director of sales at the U.S. headquarters for Yipin Pigments in Rancho Cucamonga - a pigment supplier for manufacturers - said he foresees more middle-skill job openings over white-collar jobs in the near future.

But a university education shouldn't be forgotten, he said.

"One thing companies need to understand is that if they're looking for someone out of high school, they still need to stress to these students that a (four-year) college education is important," Conaway said.

The biggest issue companies like Yipin faces are high school applicants who "feel they're entitled to something because they have a high school degree," he said.

"I'd rather have someone we can train and teach," Conaway said. "I'm not saying there's no value in education, but for the kind of work we do, it's not necessary to have a degree."

Kevin Fleming says the report hits the nail on the head.

"People are overinflating the importance and future labor market demand of baccalaureate learners," said Fleming, director of the Center for Excellence at the San Bernardino Community College District, a labor market research division of the district. "We should be aligning them with an education after high school that aligns them in a career they'll be successful in."

A number of programs are already in place, but the state's budget problems have cut funding to most - if not all - of them.

"You get a successful program that's successful for two or three years, and then it goes away," Fleming said.

But are the jobs really there? Is there enough demand for these workers after they get educated?

"Almost in every industry, employers report to us that the skills aren't there," Fleming said. "There are a few (courses) in high schools, but they're sparse. Employers clamor for ... graduates who have skills.

"If you look at the supply and demand, we don't even have the capacity to saturate the need right now," he added. "For those looking for a job, or to prepare themselves in the next one to three years for work when the economy rebounds, the middle skills job is their best bet in the Inland Empire."

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