

DeRionne Pollard: College is key for an innovation economy

Maryland needs college-educated workers. Simply put, a high school diploma will not guarantee a good job in today's innovation economy — and it won't get our state economy back on track. The Lumina Foundation issued a report entitled "A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education," citing research that shows a much larger proportion of jobs in the U.S. will require higher education.

Montgomery College and our fellow community colleges across the state are here to provide the skills training. We're here to provide the two-year degree. And we're here to provide a high quality, lower-cost entry point to the four-year degree.

Arriving here from California eight months ago, I learned quickly that my new state faces a challenge playing out across the country: there are job openings that don't have enough qualified candidates. According to the National Skills Coalition, 48 percent of all jobs in Maryland are classified as middle-skill, but only 37 percent of Maryland's workers have the education and training required to fill these positions. The coalition also projects that more than 434,000 "middle-skill" job openings — those that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree — are projected for the state by 2016. Our challenge is to prepare qualified workers to fill those jobs — jobs like nurses and laboratory technicians.

In the last year, 63 percent of Maryland's new, licensed nurses came from community colleges. That's right — two-thirds of our state's new nurses got their start at community colleges. As for high skill jobs, Montgomery College's engineering transfer program enrolled more than 1,100 students last year — many of whom go on to four-year programs at institutions like the University of Maryland and become our state's future engineers.

Yet our work is far from done — and there is room for improvement. President Obama has challenged community colleges to produce an additional 5 million graduates in the next 10 years. Gov. Martin O'Malley has established a goal of 55 percent of Marylanders with a degree by the year 2020. Maryland's community colleges have stepped up to the task, pledging to increase the number of degrees awarded by 66 percent over the next 15 years.

The benefits of a degree are immeasurable. The most reliable way for a family to break the cycle of poverty is for one family member to get a college degree. Studies show that going to college has both personal and public benefits, including higher salaries, improved health, increased volunteerism, and reduced reliance on welfare and other social support programs. In fact, students who earn an associate's degree from Montgomery College, when compared to those workers with only their high school diplomas, earn \$593,000 more in salary over a lifetime.

Increasing the number of graduates and preparing the future workforce are no small challenges, particularly in difficult economic times. But we must do it because — by offering affordable, quality education close to home in areas with real job growth — we can truly be transformative for our students, our community, our county and our state.

The writer is president of Montgomery College.