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Sections»

Archive

Resource Guide»

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## Opinion

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### *Business Needs Partnership with Education*

A more comprehensive partnership between business and education could benefit both our student population and the economy. The need for expanded educational options, with more focus on career preparation, has been suggested in several recent studies and articles, and is becoming part of the national conversation. And a new statewide vision can help us set that course.

We've read of states and cities with high unemployment where jobs are still unfilled due to a lack of potential employees with the necessary skill set. And according to a recent report, the National Skills Coalition has found that, by 2016, 38% of all job openings will require more than a high-school education.

Additionally, a new study conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education notes that, of the 47 million American jobs expected to be created by 2018, only one-third will require a bachelor's degree. One solution, the report suggests, is to place stronger emphasis on career-focused education. The report also urges employers to expand opportunities for work-based learning by high-school students.

Over the past century, America moved ahead because of the widespread education of its workers. Now, that once-accepted education level has become inadequate, because many jobs previously available for a high-school graduate no longer exist, or at least not in this country.

With lower-skilled and lower-cost jobs moving abroad, could technically advanced products and processes lead to jobs that would be created and retained at home? Do the appropriate academic programs now exist, or can they be established in response to this need? Might the high-school dropout rate decrease if students could see a clear path through education to a useful and satisfying career?

One clear way to answer these questions in the affirmative is to strengthen partnerships — among educational institutions at different levels, and between education and business.

A pathway to progress in American education and jobs is being promoted by Richard Freeland, Massachusetts commissioner of Higher Education, in the Vision Project. This initiative asserts that Massachusetts will be a national leader, and will assess and report on five goals for our 29 public higher-education institutions. These goals include sending more Bay State high-school graduates to college, graduating them from college at a higher rate, measuring their academic achievement, aligning programs with the workforce needs of the state, and closing achievement gaps among different student population groups.

At Springfield Technical Community College, we have been working on these issues for some time, through a variety of means that include:

- Encouraging higher college-enrollment rates through outreach efforts to area high schools, and through scholarship and financial-aid support;
- Focusing on increasing student success through Achieving the Dream initiatives (STCC is the only Western Mass. college selected by the Lumina Foundation for this national, multi-year, grant-funded effort);
- Making sure our career programs lead to jobs in area businesses and organizations;
- Measuring student academic achievements, and comparing the results nationally; and
- Working to close the achievement gap among our varied student populations through focused advising and assistance toward student success.

One goal in the Vision Project — producing graduates that possess the skill sets demanded by business and industry — is the most relevant for this forum. Are we educating appropriately trained graduates for current and

future jobs here in Western Mass.?

We believe so, partly because STCC career programs are advised by professionals in those specific industries. We are very grateful to the many businesses, banks, and foundations that have generously contributed toward these academic programs.

A few years ago, we conducted a series of studies in local industries from health care to financial services to manufacturing, and heard that we are, indeed, producing graduates with the requisite skills and knowledge. We welcome a continued, ongoing discussion with industry leaders. What can we do better? Are there new academic areas that we should explore to assure a solid economic future not only for our graduates, but also for the potential employees needed to allow our regional industry to grow? We look toward an expanded, strengthened partnership between education and business to invigorate the economic vitality of our region.

Ira Rubenzahl is president of Springfield Technical Community College.

