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How I See It

Mass. needs to expand support of 'middle-skill' jobs



Loh-Sze Leung, director of SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce

By Loh-Sze Leung, director of SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce

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Massachusetts' innovation-driven economy, backed by a history of manufacturing and recent growth in the health care, education and professional services sectors, has positioned us to thrive in the 21st century. However, a gap in work force skills and the commonwealth's training and education policies threaten to undermine our state's sustained economic recovery.

According to a recent report, middle-skill jobs represent the largest share of jobs in Massachusetts — some 44 percent — and a substantial share of future openings. Middle-skill jobs are those that require more than a high school diploma but not a four-year degree. However, only 32 percent of our work force likely has the skills to fill these jobs. Over 400,000 Massachusetts adults ages 18-64 do not have a high school diploma, and 150,000 speak little or no English.

As the country and Massachusetts recover from the economic downturn, new jobs will require middle-skill credentials.

Massachusetts' investment in public higher education is woefully inadequate. But it's not just about spending. Our educational pathways need to be better aligned; more than 60 percent of all community college enrollees are placed into remedial education. Fewer than 16 percent of community college enrollees complete an associate's degree in three years. In addition, we need to do a better job of connecting our education and training to labor market demand.

Employers were having a difficult time filling middle-skill jobs before the recession. If we cannot prepare our labor force for these jobs now, we risk slowing our recovery or losing jobs to states that can deliver a more educated workforce. What are the middle-skill jobs we risk losing? They are good jobs in manufacturing, green technologies, pharmaceutical production, computer support, professional services, engineering, and allied health, among other fields.

Policy-makers around the country have become increasingly concerned

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Some local companies are saying, "Hey, the sky is NOT falling," post-federal stem cell research funding ruling. First of all, many companies don't get federal funding and won't be affected. Secondly, alternatives to embryonic stem cell research may get an added boost. Marlborough-based Advanced Cell Technology Inc. took the ruling as a good opportunity for spin. The company issued a pre...

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about U.S. competitiveness, and a broad consensus has developed about the need for a strong science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) work force to support innovation industries. Business leaders have called for an increase in the number of students receiving bachelor or advanced degrees in these fields. We need to increase the number of students who receive associate's degrees in these fields as well.

Despite steady job growth in the STEM and health services sectors, a 2009 report noted that degrees conferred in these fields in our state have decreased while degrees in low-demand industries have grown. The Department of Higher Education's STEM Pipeline Fund addresses this gap at the preK-16 level, but we need a similar program that provides STEM-related skills training to our existing workforce so we can quickly meet demands for skilled workers.

Massachusetts needs to create more pathways to middle-skill credentials. Not only does this mean investments in basic skills and post-secondary training, but we also need to help students get through pre-college work. This means educational models that include evening, weekend and part-time courses with stackable credentials, increased financial aid and support for part-time students, and tracking and reporting college completion and credential attainment rates.

Training more middle-skill workers is a cost-effective, attainable goal, and the states that accomplish this first will jump-start their economies.

Guaranteeing up to two years of postsecondary education and training for all workers will benefit the individuals who receive training and strengthen the health of our economy. Businesses, labor, educators, community-based organizations, and policy-makers must work together to ensure that Massachusetts has the middle-skill work force needed to thrive.

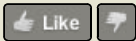
Loh-Sze Leung is director of SkillWorks, a sponsor of the recently released "Massachusetts' Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs" report.



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