

Study urges focus on 'middle-skill' jobs for economic growth

By Sandra Baltazar Martinez | The New Mexican

4/26/2010

Enrollment in certification programs at Santa Fe Community College has more than doubled in the past year. The weak economy and more interest in developing new skills has people returning to school — a step in the right direction, says a study due for release today.

The report by the Washington, D.C.-based National Skills Coalition, indicates New Mexico needs to create and fund more "middle-skill" programs in order to have a strong economic recovery.

Such workers — who need more than a high school diploma but not necessarily a college degree — could occupy the 40 percent of new job openings projected between 2006 and 2016, says the study, titled "New Mexico's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs, Meeting the Demands of a 21st Century Economy."

Since Santa Fe Community College began offering some of its newest certification courses, such as green-building systems, green-building construction and facilities technologies, enrollment went from 90 students last spring to nearly 200 this spring, said Randy Grissom, dean of Economic and Workforce Development and director of the Sustainable Technologies Center at SFCC.

The men and women who are returning to school for certification or associate programs are being challenged with additional math and computer skills that combine critical thinking, problem-solving and hands-on work, Grissom said.

For Sally Adams, president of Clear Channel Outdoor New Mexico in Albuquerque, training middle-skill workers is important to keep her outdoor advertising company afloat.

"We cannot deliver for our clients without a strong and reliable middle-skill sector," Adams said.

The people who work in her office require administrative, sales and construction skills. Pay for those positions range from \$10.50 per hour to more than \$75,000 per year.

Her company supports programs that teach middle skills because, she said, "We really need to keep people (in New Mexico). We want to fill our jobs with our people."

According to the study, between 2006 and 2016, about 133,000 more middle-skill job openings will be created in the following sectors: office and administrative support; sales; and construction. Job growth in mining, nursing, police and construction fields are also projected.

Zach Silk, National Skills Coalition western director based in Seattle, said the organization is conducting these studies in several states because it's a "national problem," and businesses are in need of workers.

"For this band of jobs, often (businesses) have a greater demand than they have supply, even in this difficult economy," Silk said.

New Mexico is the first Southwestern state to participate in this study. Other states that have participated include Maryland, Connecticut and Oregon. The report was funded by several institutions, including the Ford

and the W.K. Kellogg foundations.

New Mexico stood out to researchers because the state is already doing "a lot of innovative things," Silk said. "Some of the community colleges have strong green programs."

Silk also is running a Skills2Compete campaign, aimed at getting decision-makers to designate money — especially federal American Reinvestment and Recovery Act money — for these programs.

Lt. Gov. Diane Denish, who was among advisers for the study, said the report makes clear why New Mexico needs to align education with the needs of employers.

"Our state's community colleges have already been fertile ground for innovation and flexibility and this report lends strong support for continued investment in making our two-year institutions key to New Mexico's job-creation strategy," Denish said. "Great examples of this include Santa Fe Community College's sustainability center to train students for the green jobs of tomorrow as well as its partnerships to attract Capital High School students into the health care field."

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