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EDITORIAL: Where the jobs are Not every good job requires a four-year degree

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There's an old joke about a lawyer who complained about the bill he received from a plumber. "I went to three years of law school, and I can't charge these rates," he fumed. "Neither could I back when I was a lawyer," said the plumber.

Humor depends on a kernel of truth, and the truth is that plumbers can make pretty good money. So can electricians, machinists, utility linemen, police officers and people in other skilled trades — and they don't need four years of college. Oregonians should not neglect what Skills2Compete-Oregon calls the state's "forgotten middle-skill jobs," because that's where most jobs are now and will be in the future.

Skills2Compete-Oregon is the state chapter of a national foundation-funded campaign to promote training in middle-skill jobs. It commissioned a report by the Workforce Alliance, a coalition of community colleges, unions, businesses and other groups concerned with worker training. The report underscores the importance of maintaining a strong system of community colleges, apprenticeship programs and other forms of training. Such a system keeps open many Oregonians' pathway to the middle class, and supplies Oregon employers with the workers they need.

According to the report, in 2007 only 29 percent of Oregonians were employed in jobs that required four or more years of college. Another 19 percent worked in jobs that required only a high school education or less. The majority — 52 percent — held middle-skill jobs. What's more, nearly half of all job openings until the middle of the next decade will be in middle-skill fields.

The report surveyed current and projected demand in 30 middle-skill occupations, and found that employment in all of them is expected to grow. The median income — half earn more, half earn less — of electricians was \$56,800 in 2006, and Oregon will need 12 percent more of them by 2016. Radiology technicians' median income was \$53,500, and the number of jobs in that field will grow by 28 percent. Firefighters' median pay was \$46,400, and their number will grow by 12 percent. Paralegals had a median salary of \$39,400 in 2006, and over a 10-year period the number of jobs is projected to grow by 15 percent.

Oregon is not preparing its labor force to fill these jobs. At both the high end and the low end of the skills scale, the supply of workers exceeded the demand in 2004. The number of people with training needed to fill available middle-skill positions, however, fell 5 percent short of the demand. The gap is expected to grow, creating severe labor shortages. Some employers, particularly in health care fields, are starting in-house training programs to grow their own work forces.

Oregon needs a first-rate system of higher education — the state's future depends on it. But it also needs a comprehensive system of training programs, both for high-school graduates and for older workers seeking to upgrade their skills. That's where the jobs are — including many with pay that a lawyer would envy.