

Superior TELEGRAM

New report says technical colleges play vital role in state's economy

Dec. 2--Wisconsin's technical colleges will play a vital role to ensure employers have the skilled workers they need in the coming years, according to a new national report.

Demand in Wisconsin for highly skilled technical and trade workers will spike as baby boomers retire and the number of high school graduates declines, trends obscured by the current recession.

Part of the national Skills2Compete campaign, The Alliance Workforce report says jobs require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree now represent about 54 percent of current jobs in Wisconsin, a proportion not expected to change significantly over the next decade.

"WITC enthusiastically supports the national Skills2Compete campaign because it provides a blueprint to grow our nation's economy by recognizing the important role education plays in preparing tomorrow's workforce," says Bob Meyer, president of WITC. "Innovation continues to drive our nation's success in a global economy and a well prepared, technically savvy workforce is key contributor to our current and future success.

As the shelf life of knowledge and technology becomes shorter, two-year degree programs and lifelong learning options have stepped into the spotlight as essential strategies."

Certain jobs are projected to see particularly high demand in the coming decade. For example, according to Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development, between 2006 and 2016 the number of jobs for industrial and commercial electronic equipment repair and installation technicians will grow by 9 percent.

Auto service technicians and mechanics jobs will increase by 9 percent. What's more, as federal economic recovery funds are invested, a large share of the jobs that these funds create will be jobs in building and repairing roads, manufacturing renewable energy products and caring for the aging population. Wisconsin's technical colleges are the premier provider of the education and training needed to obtain these jobs.

"On the face of it, it's a no brainer that successful companies are using the latest and greatest technology every way they can to thrive and grow in our global economy," said Dan Conroy, operations manager for the Nexen Group, a Minnesota-based manufacturing company with a facility in Webster, Wis. "That means the only kind of employees they can afford to hire are those who have the latest technical skills and knowledge. The real story is that receiving a technical college degree transforms people's lives. They are sought after by the best employers, they receive excellent pay and benefits; they get to do challenging, fun and rewarding work.

They have more control over their own destiny. That's good for them, good for their employer, and good for the community."

Although the recession has resulted in a high unemployment rate in Wisconsin, a significant mismatch currently exists between worker skills and employer needs.

"Employers are turning in large numbers to technical colleges, like WITC, to meet their workforce needs," Meyer said. "Skills2Compete seeks to assure that these vital workforce needs are met, both now and in the future. It is an effort that is economic development in its purest form. WITC graduates are able to quickly launch or redirect their careers and consequently enjoy average starting salaries that approach or exceed the mean salary for each of the 11 counties that WITC serves."

To highlight the importance of education and training beyond high school, the Wisconsin Technical College System endorses the vision offered by Skills2Compete: Every Wisconsinite should have access to education or training past high school.

The report and additional information about labor market projections can be found at www.skills2compete.org/Wisconsin

"Like it or not the world is changing," Conroy ways. "It has gone global, high tech, and rapidly changing. This brings exciting opportunities or bitter disappointments. The only way to get on that up escalator is to get the technical training employers are demanding. Thinking you can wish it away is like thinking 8 Track tapes will make a comeback."

WITC is a member of Wisconsin Technical College System. For more information, call (800) 243-9482 or visit www.witc.edu .

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