

Middle-Skill Credentials and Immigrant Workers: Massachusetts' Untapped Assets

A FACT SHEET

The Massachusetts Economy Has Robust Demand for Middle-Skill Workers. Nearly half of all jobs in Massachusetts (46 percent) are middle-skill occupations that require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. Yet only 35 percent of Massachusetts workers have been educated to the middle-skill level.¹

Middle-skill positions include jobs as varied as operations managers, web developers, and nursing assistants.² Individuals prepare for these occupations through a variety of pathways, including career and technical education programs; apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities; community colleges; and nonprofit or other private job training providers.

Demand for workers with middle-skill credentials is anticipated to remain strong in Massachusetts, with 41 percent of new job openings between 2014-2024 expected to be at the middle-skill level.³

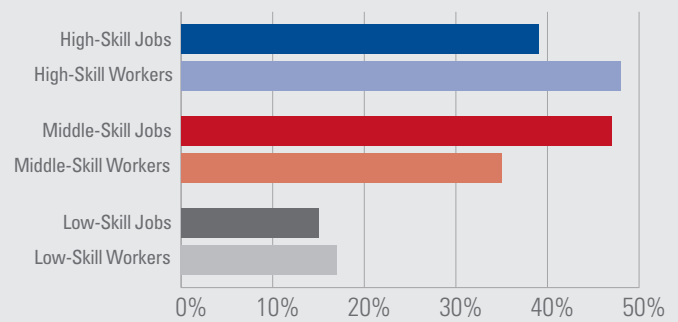
The data is clear that investing in skill building can ensure Massachusetts' ability to meet that demand. Such an investment makes economic sense: A report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) calculates that each year of postsecondary education leads to an increased per capita output of between 4 and 7 percent.⁴

Massachusetts has established an ambitious goal for postsecondary attainment: By 2020, the Commonwealth aims to increase the percentage of state residents ages twenty-five to thirty-four years old with a college degree to 60 percent.⁵ This clear, rigorous postsecondary attainment goal will help focus state policy and spending decisions on middle-skill opportunities and ensure a strong return on investment.

Immigrants Are Part of Massachusetts' Middle-Skill Solution

Massachusetts is home to approximately 1.1 million immigrants, who comprise approximately 17 percent of the Commonwealth's population.⁶ Foreign-born Bay Staters are much more likely to be of working age; almost 79 percent are between the ages of eighteen to sixty-four, compared to just 61 percent of native-born state residents. In addition, Massachusetts immigrants have a slightly higher labor-force participation rate, at 69.4 percent compared to 66.8 percent of native-born adults.

Massachusetts Jobs and Workers by Skill Level



Source: NSC analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by State, May 2015 and American Community Survey data, 2015.

As a result, immigrants play an essential role in the Massachusetts labor market. Their impact is expected to continue growing; already, the share of immigrants in the state's population has increased by 74 percent from 10 percent in 1990 to 17 percent today.⁷

However, immigrant workers also have lower educational attainment, on average, than native-born workers. In order for Massachusetts to capitalize on the full talents and abilities of immigrant residents, the state will need to facilitate their skill building.

Immigrants Could Contribute More if Massachusetts Invested in Their Skills

While almost two in five adult immigrants in Massachusetts hold a bachelor's degree or higher, many Bay State immigrants have lower levels of formal education. In particular, 24 percent have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 22 percent have not finished high school.⁸

In addition, while a robust number of Massachusetts immigrants are fluent in English, others are still building their English language

skills. Overall, approximately 439,000 working-age Massachusetts residents have limited English proficiency.⁹

As the OECD analysis demonstrates, investments in Bay State residents' skills can have a catalytic effect on individual and statewide economic strength.

Key Policy Levers Can Help Massachusetts Boost Middle-Skill Attainment for Immigrants

There are a number of federal and state policies that can foster effective skill-building in Massachusetts. On the federal side, these policies, if implemented effectively at the state level, can boost middle-skill credential attainment. They include:

- **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**, reauthorized by Congress in 2014, which represents a powerful federal investment in workforce development and adult education. Massachusetts is currently in the process of implementing WIOA. WIOA offers important opportunities for states to better align federal skill-building programs to better serve workers and businesses, including those programs outlined below.
- **The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act**, which provides key support for both secondary and postsecondary CTE programs.
- **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training program**, which helps individuals who are receiving food stamps to find employment and move off of public assistance. In 2016, Massachusetts was one of ten states selected to receive technical assistance via the federal SNAP to Skills program.¹⁰

At the state level, there are a range of innovative policies that can help close Massachusetts' middle-skill gap, and achieve the post-secondary outcomes that are needed to foster economic security for the state's workforce and drive economic growth. These policies fall into four major categories:

- **Skills Equity:** Policies that increase the number and diversity of individuals (including immigrants) who are on learning pathways toward skilled careers.

- **Industry Engagement:** Policies that ensure local businesses, including small and medium-sized companies, are partners in a community's workforce training and education strategies.
- **Accountability:** Policies that ensure everyone has actionable data to assess and improve the effectiveness of education and workforce programs.
- **Job-Driven Investments:** Policies that re-align a state's investment priorities with the career aspirations of its people and the workforce needs of its economy.

These policies can be adopted through legislation, executive orders, or other administrative actions, such as state grant programs or agency directives or guidance. To support states in establishing or strengthening such policies, National Skills Coalition has published toolkits that provide examples of existing state policies in these areas, and model language for enacting new policies. Toolkits are available at: www.nationalskillscoalition.org/state-policy

Essential Partners for Closing Massachusetts' Middle-Skills Gap

Massachusetts has a wealth of valuable partners that can be tapped to support middle-skill credential attainment efforts. In addition to the state's higher education system (both four-year universities and community colleges), potential partners include businesses, chambers of commerce, and industry associations; career and technical education programs; nonprofit community-based organizations; private education and training providers; workforce, adult education, and immigrant advocates; and influential civic and political leaders. Finally, entities such as the Boston Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement, Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition, and the public-private partnership English for New Bostonians are already playing significant roles in the area of immigrant upskilling.

To learn more about state policies that can increase middle-skill credential attainment for immigrant and native-born workers in Massachusetts, contact Amanda Bergson-Shilcock at amandabs@nationalskillscoalition.org.

ENDNOTES

1 Source: NSC analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by State, May 2015, and American Community Survey data, 2015.

2 *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Massachusetts Combined State Plan, 2016-2020*. Viewable at: <http://www.mass.gov/massworkforce/state-plan/wioa-2020/ma-wioa-state-plan-final-4-7-16.pdf>

3 Source: NSC analysis of long-term labor projections from state labor/employment agency.

4 *The Well-Being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*. (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001). Viewable at: www.oecd.org/site/worldforum/33703702.pdf

5 *The Vision Project* (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education [2012]) Viewable at: <http://www.mass.edu/visionproject/vision.asp>

6 All data in this paragraph is drawn from the Migration Policy Institute analysis of 2015 US Census/American Community Survey data.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.* Also note: While it can be assumed that many of these individuals are immigrants, Massachusetts is also home to a robust population of residents who hail from the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, and individuals who grew up on the Island may speak Spanish as their primary language.

10 Learn more: www.nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/10-states-to-participate-in-snap-to-skills-technical-assistance-project