

Narrow the skills gap: Community colleges are critical in training the work force we need

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Federal economists estimate that 2 million jobs go unfilled today as a result of training, skills and education gaps. The same is true in Pennsylvania.

In a report submitted last year by the Governor's Manufacturing Advisory Council it was noted that the number of new workers entering manufacturing, coupled with the manufacturing sector's growth, has left a staggering gap of available skilled workers.

Simply put, every decent-paying job today takes more skill and more education, but too many Americans aren't ready.

Gone are the days when all that was required of a worker to succeed was to get his or her foot in the door and work hard. Today, while hard work is still important, postsecondary education is required and frequent retraining is necessary to staying current in one's field. In fact, it's estimated that 1.5 million job vacancies in the country consist of jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree.

For 50 years, the state's 14 community colleges have served this exact niche. As open-access institutions, community colleges are the only avenue to education and training for many. Given the appropriate resources, these institutions can be the solution to Pennsylvania's skills gap.

Here in Western Pennsylvania, our four community colleges in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Westmoreland counties have found success through geo-targeted training programs geared to the residents and employers of the region.

For example, Butler County Community College, Community College of Allegheny County, Community College of Beaver County and Westmoreland County Community College have joined forces with natural gas drilling companies under the ShaleNET initiative to conduct training for six entry-level, family-sustaining positions identified as priority occupations by the state's Department of Labor and Industry. Over the last two years alone, 2,481 people have completed training by ShaleNET educational partners, and 1,653 have secured Marcellus Shale industry-related jobs in Pennsylvania.

In addition, each of these colleges has dedicated JobTrakPA training programs, a state-wide community college initiative designed to expeditiously train unemployed workers for regionally based, in-demand jobs. Many of these programs focus on advanced manufacturing, mechatronics and energy-related careers. Furthermore, our four community colleges each train thousands of students every day through work force training programs for careers in health care, business and industry, public safety and the trades, just to name a few.

But the colleges are keenly aware that filling the skills gap is an ongoing -- and growing -- challenge. State budget constraints have compounded this challenge and are restricting what the colleges are able to provide. After years of being severely underfunded by the state, community colleges are struggling to meet the growing demand of students and employers turning to these institutions for education and training. In addition, countless veterans return from overseas and look to community colleges for retraining and re-employment.

Nevertheless, Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges stand poised to help repair the skills gap. These institutions are willing partners in the task of educating a 21st-century work force and in making significant contributions to the state's economic recovery. We are already engaged in this enterprise across the commonwealth and, given the appropriate resources, will gladly expand our efforts. Community colleges can have a significant impact in lessening the skills gap and getting Pennsylvanians back to work, but we need the state to be our partner.

Maintaining access and affordability to these institutions, and ensuring they have the resources to train students for 21st-century jobs should not be sacrificed in the governor's 2013-14 state budget.

As the governor finalizes his proposed budget, we ask him to consider what's at stake. The future competitiveness of our state and the ability for our businesses to thrive and our students to become valuable workers hinge on equipping community colleges with adequate resources. In the midst of a damaging skills gap, strategic investment in Pennsylvania's community colleges is more important than ever.