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## Arkansas now has a pathway to a global workforce

**BY MIKE LEACH AND JULIAN L. ALSSID**

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LITTLE ROCK — As the presidential campaign heats up and the economy stalls, there is a critical issue the candidates have yet to fully address—what will they do to ensure that America's workers have the skills to compete in the global economy?

The situation is alarming. By 2014, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the number of jobs requiring some form of post-secondary training or education will grow 60 percent faster than the job market as a whole. Yet 43 percent of adults between ages of 25 and 64 have no more than a high school diploma.

In Arkansas, there is an especially sharp need to increase educational attainment. Only 27 percent of college-age adults are enrolled in college, compared to 40 percent nationally; and overall, only 17 percent of Arkansans have a bachelor's degree versus 36 percent nationally. These figures may be one reason Arkansas ranks 49th in per capita income among the 50 states.

Yet thanks to leadership shown in Arkansas, a course for change has been set.

Arkansas is one of only six states nationwide that have adopted career pathways as a framework to move workers into careers—not just jobs—that pay family-supporting wages. Career pathways are a series of connected education and training programs and support services that enable people to secure employment within a specific industry or occupational sector, and to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment and in that sector.

Many training programs are out of sync with the job demands of today's knowledge economy; preparing graduates for occupations with little advancement potential and failing to support the lifelong pursuit of education.

In 2005 under Gov. Mike Huckabee and the state legislature, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education brought together community college presidents and a myriad of independent public and private agencies to develop a strategy to align programs under a single umbrella to advance the goal of educating and training Arkansas' lowskill and low-income adults.

Using federal welfare funds, Arkansas set out to support efforts at 11 of its two-year colleges to develop curriculums and build support systems that assist adults from no-wage or low-wage situations to embark on career paths. The initiative enrolled approximately 2,000 people during its first year, fiscal year 2007. Based on this initial success, Gov. Mike Beebe and the state legislature expanded it to include 25 sites. In fiscal year 2008, 5601 people have been enrolled.

In one example, Southeast Arkansas College working with Southern Good Faith Fund set out to structure career pathways for the large, low-income Temporary Assistance to Needy Families-eligible population within the county's six-county service area. (TANF is the federal government's welfare program.) Last year, 430 students were enrolled and being prepared for careers in fields with hiring demand including high-tech manufacturing, government, early childhood development, and healthcare.

Policymakers and educators in Arkansas also realized that barriers such as lack of transportation and child care can often turn the best intentioned student into a dropout. In fact, it is estimated that around one-third of students who enter a community college will ever graduate with an associate's degree.

Arkansas success demonstrates that with sustained leadership from the top, moving workers into careers is achievable. To replicate Arkansas' success on a national level is going to take a massive reform of current job training programs. We must demand such leadership and vision from our presidential candidates.

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