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As job market advances, so can American workers

The US has enough work to go around. It just doesn't have a workforce trained to do it.

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Workers who lose their jobs to globalization can get government services and benefits, thanks to the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act (TAAA) passed 33 years ago.

The law is more important today than ever, as millions of jobs continue to move offshore. So when legislators debate reauthorizing it this month, they should not only renew the program but also drastically revamp the way the nation helps American workers.

The economy has changed drastically since the TAAA came into being in 1974. Advances in technology have created jobs that demand skills beyond what was expected of the average worker three decades ago. Yet during the same time period, America's share of the world's college students has fallen from 30 percent to 14 percent, and it continues to fall.

As of 2006, nearly half of adults over the age of 25 – approximately 90 million Americans – had no more than a high-school diploma or GED. Yet 65 percent of the country's fastest growing occupations require postsecondary education.

In short, it's not that the US doesn't have enough jobs to go around. It's that it doesn't have a workforce trained to fill them.

The US could close this gap if the nation made a commitment to help workers obtain two key credentials: postsecondary education and technical aptitude.

Based on my collaborations with dozens of states and localities over the past 10 years, I have identified seven steps needed to bring workers out of low-wage jobs and meet the needs of businesses and local and regional economies:

Promote access: Millions of workers are eligible for financial aid and assistance programs but don't know it. They can be connected to advanced training if they are alerted to programs such as the Temporary Aid to Needy Families, Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and Trade Adjustment Assistance. Georgia uses these funds to provide "Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally" (HOPE) grants to any state resident without a bachelor's degree.

Support students: 46 percent of students who begin their postsecondary studies at community colleges never complete a degree, according to social-policy research organization MDRC. There needs to be a focus on student retention and completion. Ohio and North Carolina are two states that have begun to reward colleges for graduating targeted populations.

Improve transitions: To help workers continually advance, the US needs to improve transitions at every level. To do this, the country needs to collect data and set goals on student transitions. Kentucky improved adult learners' transition to postsecondary education as part of its comprehensive reform of adult education in 2000. Kentucky Adult Education conducted extensive pilots, outreach, and awareness and formed partnerships to make students aware of how to make the transition to a postsecondary program. The rate of GED graduates enrolling in postsecondary education within two years rose from 12 percent in 1998 to 19 percent in 2002.

Involve employers: Employers rank a qualified workforce at the top of their list when choosing business locations. Many states now use several funding sources, including economic development funds, to connect employers in key industries with postsecondary education and job-training services. Together they identify occupations in which there are critical shortages and pull together services to fill them.

Build capacity through innovation: Existing dollars are scarce, but some states are proving that by leveraging funding in creative ways, students can earn much-needed credentials. Colleges in Ohio receive more funds for educating nursing and engineering students than for general education students. Oregon uses WIA funding to support programs that help students earn credentials.

Measure results: By using more effective data, the US can track what's working and what needs improvement. The leader in this area is Florida, which has built a data warehouse that includes data on K-12, college, university, and career and technical students, as well as those in private colleges and vocational trade schools.

Lead from the top: States that successfully used public resources to train knowledge workers all shared one key ingredient – committed leadership. Without support from the top, it is very difficult for people on the ground to truly collaborate with one another or with employers.

Half a dozen states are way ahead of the federal government in creating knowledge workers to fuel their economies. Congress, with the reauthorization of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act, has an opportunity to realign federal programs to help all states and localities meet the needs of both workers and businesses. It is time to acknowledge that what worked in 1974 is not going to meet the needs of workers in 2007.

• *Julian L. Alssid is the founder and executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center, a nonprofit organization that seeks to strengthen the nation's economy by producing a prosperous and globally competitive workforce.*

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