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Solution for employment woes

INCREASING WORKERS' SKILLS SHOULD BE CAMPAIGN ISSUE

By Julian L. Alssid and Steve St. Angelo

As the presidential primary campaign ends and we find ourselves in a potential recession with many Americans losing their jobs, there is a central issue each candidate should consider: If elected president, what would he do to ensure that America's workers have the proper skills to compete in a global economy?

The situation is alarming. By the year 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 Kentucky, 20 percent of residents age 25 and older do not have a high school degree, and the state ranks 47th in the nation in the percentage of residents holding a bachelor's degree.

But thanks to a systemic change to its work-force development policy, efforts are under way in Kentucky to improve these statistics.

Kentucky has adopted a career-pathways framework to integrate education, work-force development and economic development systems in the state. Kentucky is one of only six states that have adopted this approach.

Career pathways benefit students and employers alike. Students are offered a course of study that will lead to jobs paying family-supporting wages, while employers are assured that a steady stream of workers with advanced skills will be available to move Kentucky's economy forward.

The Kentucky Community and Technical College System is the catalyst behind implementing career pathways in community colleges across the state. In 2003, KCTCS brought together businesses, educators and policy-makers to target where high-skill jobs were going unfilled and determine what skills potential workers would need to fill those jobs.

KCTCS initially identified three industry sectors: construction, health science and manufacturing. Once the sectors were identified, community colleges around the state engaged local employers in those industries to design courses of study -- or career pathways -- around the needs of these sectors. Today, 22 career pathways are helping Kentuckians earn post-secondary skills to succeed in fields ranging from allied health to transportation to advanced manufacturing.

One example of this effort focuses on Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky. As one of Kentucky's leading employers, Toyota engaged with KCTCS to work on solutions to the state's education crisis by working with Scott County schools, KCTCS and the University of Kentucky Center for Manufacturing to address the skills gap and ensure that there are enough qualified workers to meet Toyota's future advanced-manufacturing needs and keep these jobs in Kentucky.

Creative programming to attract more young people to advanced manufacturing education and careers such as the efforts being conducted by Toyota in the Georgetown area are successful on a small scale. However, to truly address the problem statewide requires a major public investment to fund the right equipment and teachers to provide relevant and effective education and training.

Fortunately, Kentucky is making the right investments.

Over the past three years, more than 5,000 students have participated or were participating in career-pathways courses, and more than 1,741 associates degrees, diplomas or certificates have been awarded. Also encouraging are findings that show students enrolled in career pathways had a retention rate of 71 percent, compared to the overall rate of 46 percent of the general community college student population.

The bottom line? We need all 50 states to replicate Kentucky's success. And for this to happen, we need a president who recognizes this issue and challenges our work force to compete in the global economy.

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