

Workforce Management

More Training Urged to Fill 'Mid-Skill' Jobs

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Even in a knowledge economy, people still need plumbers, electricians, nurses and construction workers.

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“In all of the hubbub of talking about science and technology and high-end jobs, concern about the middle of the labor market has been lost,” says Harry Holzer, professor of public policy at Georgetown University and co-author of “America’s Forgotten Middle Skill Jobs.”

The report, which was released on November 12, was written for the [Workforce Alliance](#), a Washington organization that is using it to kick off its Skills2Compete campaign.

The effort is designed to focus presidential candidates and policy-makers on the fact that positions requiring significantly more than a high school education but less than a college degree will account for about 45 percent of all job openings until 2014.

“Demands for skilled labor in construction, health care, computer use, transportation” and other fields are projected to grow at above-average rates, according to the report. “Replacement [needs for retiring workers](#) will also be strong, generating even more job openings in the [middle than the top of the skills spectrum](#).”

But there won’t be enough qualified people to fill the positions.

“The slowdown in growth among workers with some college exceeds that among workers with a bachelor’s degree or more,” the report states.

The report does not discourage the goal of increasing the number of students who enter undergraduate and graduate programs. But that isn’t the best route for millions of young people and adults.

“We haven’t provided quality career options in a broad way,” says Robert Lerman, professor of economics at American University in Washington and co-author of the

report. “If you build a high-quality alternative to a straight four-year B.A. approach, people will come.”

One problem with the non-college track is that it often carries a stigma.

“A lot of what we used to call vocational education was not very good,” Holzer says.

But earning an associate’s degree at a community college can open the door to a [good job in health care, transportation or construction](#).

“Community and technical college credentials are very important in enabling people to earn a family-sustaining wage,” says Julian L. Alssid, executive director of [Workforce Strategy Center](#), one of 128 organizations endorsing the middle-skills campaign.

Businesses have an important role to play too, Lerman says. They can develop internship and career programs with local schools to expose students to various careers.

[Government can help build the bridge between business and education](#).

“It’s daunting for an individual employer to take on the whole school establishment,” Holzer says.

If new approaches aren’t taken, the economy will suffer, according to the report.

“Without initiatives that do better to link the emerging occupational requirements with the education and training obtained by current and future workers, employers will have to import workers ... and/or alter their production strategy in ways that eliminate potentially good jobs,” the report states.

—*Mark Schoeff Jr.*