

Kari Decker and Van Ton-Quinlivan: Employers lack skilled workers for middle-skill jobs

Good-paying jobs that don't require a bachelor's degree are surging

California community colleges are positioned to close skills gap, but they need improvement

By Kari Decker and Van Ton-Quinlivan

Economies worldwide face a vexing conundrum that threatens their ability to thrive: Employers have increasing volumes of work to be done, but not enough skilled workers to do it. This is particularly true for many California employers seeking workers with middle-skills, defined as more education than a high school diploma and less than a bachelor's degree.

In Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay area alone, there will be 24,000 good-paying, middle-skill health care jobs available over the next four years, according to a recent JPMorgan Chase report. By 2025, the state's estimated 1.9 million job openings, or 30 percent of the pool, will require middle skills attainable through career-technical education – associate degrees, certificates or industry-valued credentials.

This skills gap is troublesome on numerous levels. If employers cannot find skilled workers, their output – and ability to stay in business – is diminished. If communities can't deliver the manpower to help companies produce, they will lose employers. If workers can't get jobs with livable wages, their abilities to care for their families and contribute to society are limited.

California's skills gap is a no-win.

Most California communities have the components to combat this. California has a strong community college system with 113 schools to train workers. Yet, it needs improvement to help close the career-technical education skills gap.

We serve on the California Community Colleges Task Force on Workforce, Job Creation and a Strong Economy. Commissioned by the Board of Governors, this group of leaders was tasked with making recommendations to help ensure a workforce with relevant skills and quality credentials that meet employer needs.

Through a series of public town halls and extensive research we developed 25 recommendations focusing on seven broad areas:

- Removing barriers to education completion with improved career exploration and planning, work-based learning and other support.
- Putting industry at the forefront of career pathway development with clear, defined sequences for learning industry-valued skills.
- Continuous program improvement based on robust metrics and outcome data.
- Streamlining the curriculum-approval process. Currently, it takes too long, leaving students without timely skills employers require.
- Increasing the pool of qualified CTE faculty. Currently, it's difficult to attract quality faculty because of education requirements and salary differentials.
- Regional coordination to pool resources and efforts for CTE and responding to industry needs.
- Establishing a dedicated and sustainable funding source for CTE programs. Currently, CTE courses are funded at the same level as general education courses. Yet, they have higher startup and operating costs. Funding gaps are closed with grants, but those are not long-term solutions.

We believe the task force's recommendations will promote reform within the California Community College system and deliver new strength and support to

California's workers, employers and the state's economy. We encourage readers to learn more and share support with elected officials prior to the Board of Governors' vote on Monday.

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