

Educating 'Middle-Skill' Workers

February 27, 2009

WASHINGTON – To the chagrin of many in technical education, the bachelor's degree still hogs the spotlight in the minds of most students. Now, days after President Obama challenged the government to assist everyone in attending at least one year of college, many scholars and business leaders are hoping to make a strong public case for the value of the associate degree and work skills credentials.

The Brookings Institution on Thursday held a panel discussion to coincide with the release of a policy brief from its Center on Children and Families on "The Future of Middle-Skill Jobs" – or those that do not require a bachelor's degree, but do require some education or training following high school. Many in attendance bemoaned the promulgation of the "hourglass economy" image, which argues that there is a growing gap between highly skilled workers and unskilled workers. All the scholars present seemed to agree not only that there remain a large number of jobs for those in the middle of this spectrum, but also that this group is likely to balloon in the near future.

"There is an employment paradox in this country," said Ellen Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation, a Midwestern public policy organization focusing on economic development. "Even in the midst of massive layoffs, employers cannot find enough skilled workers."

Projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that, during the next decade, 45 percent of job openings will be in "middle-skill" positions. These jobs encompass a wide swath of professions from construction supervisors and machinists to dental hygienists and paralegals. Still, those on the Brookings panel expressed concern that projections for the public attainment of skills necessary for these jobs does not appear to meet the high demand.

"If we emerge from this recession without a skilled workforce, then this recovery will be a jobless one," said John Engler, president of the National Association of Manufacturers and former governor of Michigan.

Though there is still growth among both those workers with "some college" and those with a bachelor's degree or higher, the growth is slowing more among those with "some college" – in other words, those qualified for "middle skill" jobs.

Harry Holzer, co-author of the Brookings policy brief and professor at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute, said education and training have lagged behind the labor supply for these jobs because there are not enough post-high school training options available for both traditional-age students and adults. It is also a detriment to the workforce, he said, that most workers do not know the financial benefits of earning an associate degree versus just holding a

high school diploma in the way that they know the financial benefit of earning a bachelor's degree.

The brief notes that, in 2006, the average worker with an associate degree earned almost 33 percent more than one with only a high school diploma. The average worker with a bachelor's degree earned about 62 percent more. Still, at least data on those with associate degrees exists. Others on the panel noted that, as there are numerous skills credentials and the government does not track the students who earn these, there is no way to show students and their families the financial value of earning one.

"There's an image problem with some of these [middle-skill jobs and programs]," said Engler, noting that they should be not just be marketed as destinations for students but also as stepping stones for more skilled jobs. "At graduation, you don't hear schools say, 'Here's how many of our graduates are entering the workforce.'"

The Brookings' policy brief contains a number of policy suggestions. It suggests that more high schools open "career academies" or articulate "career pathways" for students to follow training routes (including postsecondary education) for good jobs.

Holzer argued that "high quality" career and technical education does not trap low-income or unskilled students in certain careers and opportunities. This argument, he said, could be made of traditional vocational education. He noted that solid career and technical education, both at high school and at community college, does not just prepare students for a singular job but provides them with skills for a wide-range of fields.

"We need something to get rid of that wasted senior year," said Engler, arguing that these high school students should already be making progress toward either college or some work skills credential. "Kids who leave high school should be ready for college without remediation and those who don't go to college need to have industry certified skills."

For adults, the policy brief suggests that community and technical colleges should be more employer-oriented in their course and certificate offerings. Such "career ladders," as the brief calls them, would provide displaced workers with skills that will qualify them immediately for specific openings in other growing industries. Engler said colleges and programs that are "trainer-driven" often do students a disservice by providing them with skills that are not of value after having completed a certification. More involvement from local industry in this education process, he said, will streamline the path to employment for these students and guarantee the relevance of skills earned.

To fund these and other education projects for middle-skill jobs, the Brookings' policy brief suggests that the government expand the acceptable use of Pell Grants to include "shorter term training programs" and to fund "classroom instruction used in registered apprenticeship programs." It also suggests changing the way in which occupational training counts towards work requirements for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families grants.

"We need to take what works and do it everywhere," said Engler.

— David Moltz

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