

Oregon's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Meeting the demands of a 21st Century Economy

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The report, written for Skills2Compete by the Workforce Alliance, highlights the need for "middle-skill" job training--jobs that require more than a high school degree but less than a four-year degree. Middle-skill jobs make up the most significant segment of the labor market. The demand for such jobs is expected to increase in the next decade with more than 340,000 middle-skill job openings. Over the same time period, the report finds that the number of Oregonians trained at the middle-skill level is projected to decline, worsening the state's middle-skill gap. Health care, "green" jobs, and manufacturing are high-growth sectors that will require skilled workers in the upcoming decade.

According to the report, in 2007 only 29 percent of Oregonians were employed in jobs that required four or more years of college. Another 19 percent worked in jobs that required only a high school education or less. The majority — 52 percent — held middle-skill jobs. What's more, nearly half of all job openings until the middle of the next decade will be in middle-skill fields.

The report counters the notion that a four-year degree is the only pathway to in-demand jobs. Arguing that the best way to meet the demand for middle-skill jobs in Oregon is to guarantee access to at least two years of education or training past high school, the report underscores the importance of maintaining a strong system of community colleges, apprenticeship programs and other forms of training. Such a system keeps open many Oregonians' pathway to the middle class, and supplies Oregon employers with the workers they need.

The report surveyed current and projected demand in 30 middle-skill occupations, and found that employment in all of them is expected to grow. Oregon is not preparing its labor force to fill these jobs. At both the high end and the low end of the skills scale, the supply of workers exceeded the demand in 2004. The number of people with training needed to fill available middle-skill positions, however, fell 5 percent short of the demand. The gap is expected to grow, creating severe labor shortages. To offset educational, retirement and immigration trends, Oregon must align its workforce and education resources to better meet the state's labor market demand.

The report reveals that 286,000 Oregonians aged 18-64 do not possess a high school diploma or GED, indicating a deeper problem: a lack of basic skill attainment levels, especially in literacy, needed to grow the middle-skill workforce.

To help close the gap, the report mentions several ways education for middle-skill jobs can be attained including apprenticeships, community colleges, occupational certificates and community based training organizations. Expanded access to these programs will help reverse the growing middle-skill gap.