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New report cites gap in number of workers for many high-demand jobs in state

OLYMPIA – Unless Washington directs more higher education resources to training workers in high-demand fields, it will experience a continuing gap between the number of workers it educates and the number needed by employers, a new report by three state-level higher education agencies concludes.

The report, titled “A Skilled and Educated Workforce,” identifies several employment categories in which demand for workers is expected to outstrip the state’s ability to supply those workers through at least 2019. These include computer science, engineering, software engineering and architecture at the bachelor’s degree level, and manufacturing and various installation, maintenance, and repair fields at the associate degree and certificate levels. Demand also is projected to be strong in the health professions at all education levels, and in computer science for those with graduate degrees.

The report emphasizes the state will fail to meet projected demand in these fields if the level of degree production it has been achieving is not increased significantly this decade. In recent years, many employers have turned to qualified candidates from other states and countries to fill these gaps created by comparatively low levels of in-state degree and certificate production.

The report is the third in a series of biennial reports required by state law to assess forecasted net job openings at each level of higher education and the credentialed workers needed to match the forecast of net job openings. It was produced by the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB), the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) and the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board).

The full report is available at
www.hecb.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SkilledEducatedWorkforce2011.pdf

“Washington is home to many businesses that simply couldn’t function without workers who have attained education beyond high school, yet our state ranks low in terms of college degree production as a share of the population,” said Don Bennett, HECB executive director. “This

report again demonstrates the importance of educating and training the maximum number of Washington citizens for jobs in today's economy."

"There should be no debate about the value of postsecondary education to our economy. But we all need to better understand where we are missing the mark for the types of graduates our employers require. Our reports show where we need to direct our limited resources to meet employer demand," said Eleni Papadakis, Workforce Board executive director.

According to the Skilled and Educated Workforce report, "mid-level" workers who complete a one- to two-year college degree or a vocational program can expect to find the greatest demand in manufacturing and various installation, maintenance and repair occupations. For the period between 2014 and 2019, the report projects a shortfall of about 1,100 trained manufacturing workers annually, and an almost 1,800 annual shortfall in workers trained in various installation, maintenance, and repair occupations.

Charlie Earl, executive director of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, said the state's two-year colleges are essential to closing the mid-level gap.

"Community and technical colleges forge powerful partnerships with employers so students get jobs in high-demand fields and businesses get the talent they need right here in Washington," said Earl. "This analysis is a great homing device to make sure our training and resources are targeted exactly where students and employers need them."

At the bachelor's level, the report projects 2,863 jobs will be available in computer science, engineering, software engineering, and architecture between 2014 and 2019. In 2010, the state produced 1,665 degrees in these fields. If the rate of degree production is not increased, the gap will total 1,171 jobs per year.

Among occupations requiring a graduate degree, the strongest demand is expected to be in the health professions and computer science.

The report also concludes that the average annual demand for educators at the bachelor's level and above in Washington will exceed the number produced in 2010, but cautions that for several reasons the educator employment issue is complex and needs further study.

The report does sound a note of optimism, however, noting that when state institutions focus on a priority, much can be done to reduce the supply/demand gap. For example, in recent years the number of nursing graduates at the associate and bachelor's level has increased more than 68 percent as institutions throughout the state have focused on expanding nursing education programs.

"This was possible because state agencies, public and private institutions, labor and the industry remained focused on the nursing shortage over the long term, and Legislature and the Governor provided support for growth in this area," the report stated.

A similar trend is now occurring to address the shortage of trained workers in the aerospace industry, the report noted. Among other things, the state has targeted funding for aerospace training and apprenticeship programs, and for increased enrollments in science, technology, engineering and math. The state also makes low-interest loans available through the Aerospace Loan Program to students who have been accepted into specific aerospace training programs in the state.

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