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Can the U.S. Produce Good Jobs and Good Workers to Fill Them?

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As we struggle to recover from the "Great Recession," the quantity of jobs being generated in the U.S. remains our paramount concern, and we stay focused on the national unemployment rate that the Department of Labor announces each month.

But, over the longer term, we also need to pay attention to the quality of jobs our economy produces, and the skills of workers who might fill them as well. In order for all Americans to have the opportunities to earn family-supporting wages and salaries, they must be able to get and keep not just any jobs but especially good-paying ones.

But will our economy continue to produce such jobs? I believe the answer is clearly "yes." Some industries and employers still choose "high road" pay practices and create "high performance workplaces" where they pay high wages and benefits for a given level of worker education. But, in a world where markets are becoming ever more competitive - because consumers and employers have many more choices available to avoid high-priced products or workers (due to growing globalization and the use of digital technologies) -- high-road pay practices must coexist with high worker productivity for these firms to survive and thrive.

For this to happen, high pay must now be accompanied by strong skill development. If employers have difficulty finding or producing skilled workers, they will instead create low quality jobs here in the U.S. and move good jobs overseas. In fact, high worker quality is becoming a precondition for good job quality. Employers will only invest in training, promoting and retaining workers who bring enough basic skills and education to the workplace to make those investments worthwhile.

But are the good jobs only for those with bachelor's and advanced degrees? The answer is "no." Some good jobs are, in fact, disappearing for non-college workers -- mostly, the production and clerical jobs that used to be filled by high school graduates or even dropouts. But, over time, the American labor market still produces good-paying jobs in health care, manufacturing, financial and professional services, information technology, construction (which will eventually recover from the Great Recession) and even retail trade that require some significant post-secondary education or training, but less than a four-year college diploma. Workers with certificates or

associate degrees from community or technical colleges in key sectors, or who have gone through apprenticeships and gotten certified, can still find good jobs in these sectors to fill.

What does all this mean for public policy? Rather than focusing only on academic skills and higher education alone, we need education and workforce policies that more effectively are linked to sectors and employers where good jobs are being generated. Education institutions (like community colleges in the U.S.) and other training providers must work more directly with employers and industry associations, and must use data on employment growth and job vacancies to target high-demand and higher-wage sectors.

It is not enough just to send our students to college, where so many drift and ultimately drop out or get degrees in low-paying fields. They also need information and career counseling that helps them choose good-paying fields of study, and more courses offered in areas where demand is strong. They might also need real-world work experience to strengthen their skills and their connections to employers. And those who need remedial classes to improve their basic skills should find such help directly provided in their occupational training classes, and not in stand-alone classes that now generate very high dropout rates.

Thus, while strong academic skills and high standards are very important, our education system should not focus on them exclusively. Instead, a range of career pathways should be available for students to obtain both good skills and good jobs. This can be done through high-quality career and technical education at both high schools and community colleges, which combine strong academic and occupational training; and through sectoral workforce programs, where training providers partner with employers and industry associations to generate skilled workers for good-paying jobs that are in high demand. In fact, research evidence shows that such efforts are often the most successful and cost-effective training programs for low-income workers.

Of course, technologies and global trends can make the job market very unstable, with even highly educated workers losing their jobs and having difficulty finding new ones in their fields. All workers must receive strong general training, not just tied to specific occupations and industries, so their skills can be portable across firms and sectors. And our training systems must be nimble enough to allow for workers to be retooled and retrained when needed. Workforce programs must be able to engage employers on a large scale, so that they find it practical and affordable to retrain some of their incumbent workers or new hires, when necessary.

Taking such steps alone will not fully generate equal opportunity in America, but they almost certainly would help many of the disadvantaged who suffer from low earnings and employment right now.

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