

# American Prosperity

Harvard's Joseph Fuller discusses the importance of closing the skills gap By Audrey LaForest



◀ Educators and employers must work together to close the skills gap and enhance competitiveness.

employers have got to start thinking about creating a supply chain for talent.

My research indicates that companies will benefit by applying that exact same type of logic to skilled labor. Work with the supplier – it might be a unified school district, community colleges – define what the workers need, help them develop the curriculum and the materials, and have the resources to deliver workers who are workforce ready.

## What employers seem to get it right?

It's been very interesting to watch several companies in the area around Chattanooga, Tenn., really start working closely with local schools and ultimately setting up their own kind of technical high school to get skilled workers in the manufacturing area. Now, it's no surprise that those companies are actually German companies. Big employers in the United States – these are companies like Siemens and Volkswagen – but they come from a background, a human resources background, where they're very used to the employer being the unabashed leader of the system.

You can also see, though, American companies making similar types of commitments. You can see a company like Arrow Electronics in Denver, which has a very large company, multiple different businesses, that has worked with educators to develop programs to get young people the skills they need, so Arrow can consider them qualified to join the company.

## What changes do educators need to make?

They need to become much more oriented toward data information. (In regard to) What are the actual jobs out there? What



2012), Joseph Fuller explains the ongoing issue of employers unable to find qualified workers and students unable to find gainful employment after high school or college graduation. *(Editor's Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

## How do we close the gap between supply and demand when it comes to skilled trades?

The first thing we have to do is acknowledge that our current system does not consistently provide aspiring workers with the type of background they need to be a success and/or employers with a steady supply of people who are workforce ready.

The first thing we can start doing is (helping) employers to recognize that they have to own this problem, that they can't just kind of throw up their hands and say, "Well, our education system is failing, community colleges are failing. ... Oh, woe is me." Particularly for jobs that have a major impact on their performance,

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do the job descriptions say? How does that fit with our curriculum?

The second thing they need to do – and this is very important at the state level – they need to make it easier for educators to change requirements, add requirements and add new programs. You'll hear very consistently that with certificate programs – and particularly degree programs – innovation, changing them, making them fit with the market is very complicated because of the state department of education's requirements. Community colleges in many states scramble to try to find a way to make an existing approved program and change it to reflect some new need without triggering a requirement to go back to the state capitol and have it all reviewed and approved by the bureaucracy.

#### What about for students?

We need much better information available to students. ... Everything from how many of those types of jobs there are to how well

**"The first thing we can start doing is (helping) employers to recognize that they have to own this problem, that they can't just kind of throw up their hands and say, 'Well, our education system is failing, community colleges are failing.'" — Joseph Fuller, Senior Lecturer, General Management, Harvard Business School**

they pay over time can differ dramatically. And very, very, very few students have any idea of (what they want to do) that they start looking at a course catalog, they go to the orientation at school, they talk to neighbors, friends, caregivers, parents and siblings and make choices based on almost a random selection of information. Young adults, usually 18 to 24 years old, they usually only have one shot to get this right.

**What type of policy do we need to see out of our elected officials on this issue?**

At the state and local level, we need to revisit what's going on with practical skills training and vocational education in our K-12 system. Obviously, high school is what I'm really talking about here. Those programs – in many places, not everywhere – have been underfunded. They've been viewed as backwaters or places where kids that somehow don't fit into the regular curriculum go. We need to have policies that actively encourage those districts and those community colleges, and other parts of state college systems to seek out and work with employers. We need metrics of evaluation, for particularly the community college system, that talk about job placement, the number of graduates going into jobs that they actually studied for as opposed to they got a degree or certificate in health care technology, and they're working at Starbucks. ■ Audrey LaForest is the editorial associate for the *Detroit*.

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