

Two things the Louisiana Legislature can do to close the skills gap

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President Donald Trump recently met at the White House with the CEOs of two dozen major manufacturing firms. His goal: persuade them to bring more jobs back to the U.S.

What the president reportedly learned in that meeting was that his request was extremely problematic. How do manufacturers bring home more manufacturing jobs when they can't even fill the ones they have open right now? According to government figures, 324,000 factory jobs are unfilled in the U.S. because our nation lacks qualified and educated workers to fill them.

The dilemma described above is one example of what is known as the skills gap, the disparity between the jobs available and the capacity of our workforce to fill those jobs. The forecast for growth in the skills gap here in Louisiana is not only huge, it also is one we have barely even begun to address.

In a ranking just released by U.S. News, Louisiana came in dead last on the publication's first ever list of "Best States." One of the measurements used to determine the ranking was post-secondary educational attainment, and Louisiana ranked 48th in that category. That's because fewer than 30 percent of Louisiana adults have a post-secondary education. The national average is 40 percent.

A generation ago, 30 percent may have been enough, but it's not anymore. The Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL) recently projected that by 2018, 51 percent of all jobs in the state will require some form of post-secondary education, and those jobs are expected to increase by 20 percent over the next five years.

The skills gap is a national challenge, and most states around the country have begun addressing it with renewed investment in higher education. According to the recently-released Grapevine study, which annually compares state spending on higher education, 39 states increased higher education funding this year by an average of 3.4 percent. Of the states that cut spending on higher education, Louisiana ranked third, with a cut of 7.2 percent, and the bulk of the cut was to the TOPS program.

Read More: [TOPS cuts hit Northwest Louisiana schools \(/story/news/education/college-life/2017/02/22/tops-cuts-hit-nwla-colleges/97358160/\)](/story/news/education/college-life/2017/02/22/tops-cuts-hit-nwla-colleges/97358160/)

But even before the TOPS cut took effect this year, Louisiana was bucking the national trend of reinvesting in higher education. Over the last five years, Louisiana has cut state funding for higher education by 11.5 percent with only Oklahoma cutting a larger percentage over the same period.

Louisiana residents and elected officials often say that we have too many schools and that we need to close some to focus our limited resources. But given the increasing need for a college educated workforce documented above, former University of Louisiana System President Sandra Woodley had it right when she said that, "Our problem is not that we have too many schools, it is that we have too few students." If we hope to even begin closing the skills gap, we need to markedly increase the number of students attending our colleges around the state.

In our recently concluded special session, the Louisiana Legislature wisely chose to spare higher education and TOPS from mid-year cuts, recognizing that Louisiana can't afford to lose any more ground in the education race. But if the state is to truly compete with other states, in the very near future, for the highly-sought employers offering high-wage jobs, we must do more than just stop cutting. To create the high-skilled workforce those employers both desire and need we need to stand up, step up and fund our future – higher education.

To make Louisiana competitive, the Louisiana Legislature needs to prioritize the funding of higher education when it reconvenes for the regular session in April. While Governor John Bel Edwards has said the TOPS program will be the [first program to receive any additional recognized revenue dollars \(/story/news/2017/02/28/tops-first-line-if-tax-collections-tick-up/98516880/\)](/story/news/2017/02/28/tops-first-line-if-tax-collections-tick-up/98516880/) for the upcoming fiscal year, his budget funds TOPS only at 70 percent, which is the same amount of funding allotted for TOPS this year. The lack of full funding this year created uncertainty and concern among students and parents and forced schools to deal with a de-facto cut to their budgets.

Read more: [TOPS, hospitals left short in next year's budget plan \(/story/news/2017/02/23/tops-hospitals-left-short-next-years-budget-plan/98292428/\)](/story/news/2017/02/23/tops-hospitals-left-short-next-years-budget-plan/98292428/)

The Legislature needs to fully fund TOPS in this next year to re-establish confidence in the system. Half measures and partial funding will simply place Louisiana farther behind as other states step up their investments.

But it's not only TOPS funding that needs attention. The Legislature needs to prioritize Go Grant funding as well. Go Grants cover much of the tuition cost not covered by Pell Grants and provide needs-based support to nontraditional and low to moderate income students who need additional aid to be able to afford college. We will not be able to close the skills gap with 18- to 24-year-old traditional students alone. There are thousands of Louisianans who need to be reskilled or upskilled today. That's why the Legislature should support the Louisiana Board of Regents' request for an additional \$35 million for the Go Grant program for next year.

Our colleges and universities are keenly focused on workforce needs and are partnering with major employers to try to produce graduates ready to go to work. But they can't meet employer needs without funding and students. Our best hope for our future is to invest in our people. Let's follow the lead of other states tackling the skills gap head-on and invest in higher education. Our return will be a larger workforce and a stronger, more competitive economy.

Johnette Magner is executive director of the Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher Education.

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