

Our View: Address high costs, view of job market

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Thirty high school juniors and seniors are spending this month at Eastern Connecticut State University participating in the 11th annual Summer Institute for Future Teachers. The program is aimed at introducing young people to teaching as a career. They will leave Eastern with three undergraduate credits for a course titled "Teaching in the 21st Century."

Recently, 3,000 middle and high school students participated in the Connecticut Business & Industry Association's annual Manufacturing Expo in Hartford. The event highlights the wide variety of manufacturing jobs in the state, and its aim is to encourage students to consider careers in manufacturing.

Both programs, and a number of other similar programs offered throughout the state, also have one common theme — careers in Connecticut.

According to state Department of Labor and U.S. Census Bureau statistics, Connecticut has lost more of its 24- to 25-year-olds in the last five years than any other state in the union. A recent study of students from grade 10 and older concluded 75 percent of the state's top math students now are gainfully employed somewhere else.

That shouldn't come as a surprise when you consider the top five occupational growth jobs here in Connecticut during the past five years are jobs at the lower end of the compensation scale. Add to that the rising cost of living here in Connecticut — energy, food, housing — and it's a formula designed to encourage the best and brightest of our future work force to look beyond the borders of Connecticut for their future.

Not the Dream

As Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board Executive Director John Beauregard said in a guest opinion piece this year, "Paying off college loans and barely making ends meet does not equate to the American dream."

Now consider the highly skilled work force we do have is growing older and rapidly approaching retirement age. A business association survey of manufacturers in Connecticut reported 84 companies that likely will need to replace 20 percent of their work force within the next five years; 11 percent saying at least half of their work force will need to be replaced in the next two years.

We are not prepared to replace those workers with a ready work force of younger and talented workers, which makes programs such as the one offered at Eastern, the CBIA Expo and Workforce Investment Board's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) program all the more critical to retaining and growing a healthy economy in Connecticut.

The jobs are here

The STEM program is particularly important because it addresses the central issue: The perception Connecticut does not have the kind of challenging jobs that would interest young people. As part of that program, highly skilled professionals working in science, technology and engineering fields are encouraged to visit classrooms to talk about their work. It's a means of introducing our future workers to what Connecticut already offers — and the potential of the future they could have here in Connecticut.

“If kids don’t know what jobs are there, they don’t think of them,” said Cynthia Lamb, chairman of the investment board. The biggest problem was convincing teachers to invite these folks in to talk. Lamb hopes one day the board can create a “speakers bureau” listing — a “dating service” of sorts that will match teachers looking for speakers and speakers willing to talk.

The efforts of the state’s community college system are an integral part of the solution as well, as schools collaborate with existing businesses in developing specific programs and training to meet industry needs. It’s estimated 75 percent of community college graduates stay in the state — gainfully employed with skills needed today.

We often hear a lot about improving the state’s business climate in an effort to encourage new industry to relocate here or existing businesses to grow and expand. But lost in those discussions is the problem of retaining young workers.

The programs already offered are good and have achieved a certain level of success in meeting today’s needs. But we don’t do enough, nor have we identified this problem as a priority and devoted the necessary resources to reverse the trend of young people leaving Connecticut. Because it’s not just jobs; it’s employment, housing and the cost of living that contribute to the migration.

No one sector, neither government nor industry, can do it alone. It will require a concerted effort on the part of both the private and public sector to ensure Connecticut’s economic future.

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