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Efforts Are Under Way to Tie College to Job Needs

By REEVE HAMILTON

Assaying the output of higher education in Texas, Michael Bettersworth evoked the image of a crippled Apollo 13 craft hurtling into space, its future uncertain.

“Houston, we have a problem, and it’s not that too few people are going to college,” said Mr. Bettersworth, an associate vice chancellor at the Texas State Technical College System. “It’s that too many people are getting degrees with limited value in the job market.”

Students throughout Texas are amassing college credits without knowing whether they will lead to employment, and many face serious debt when they graduate.

Meanwhile, the state’s population of skilled laborers is aging and approaching retirement, and there is a dearth of recent graduates with two-year vocational degrees who can take on those jobs.

Experts say a retooling is in order if the state hopes to expand its manufacturing industry.

As the economy begins to show signs of life, efforts are under way at two-year colleges across the state to make programs more responsive to the labor market. Some Texas leaders are trying to reverse the trend toward encouraging students to attain the highest degree possible.

“It’s not that we don’t need engineers and Ph.D.’s and research scientists,” said Joe Arnold, a government affairs manager with B.A.S.F., a chemical company. “We do, but that’s not all we need. We need skilled craftsmen. We need operators.”

The Texas State Technical College System was established in 1969 with the mission of

supplementing the state's work force. Recently, the four-campus system joined Credentials That Work, a new project run by the Boston-based nonprofit Jobs for the Future, which uses new technology that scrapes information from online job postings and provides real-time labor market information. The technology also offers information on which skills — in addition to simply which degrees — employers are seeking.

“Schools have to nail it pretty much in terms of producing graduates that respond to the needs of the marketplace,” said John Dorrer, the director of the Credentials That Work program.

However, even when degrees can be tailor-made to fit companies' needs, students still must be persuaded to pursue them. Mike Reeser, the college system's chancellor, said there was “a misperception in the country that the worst bachelor's degree is more valuable than the best associate's degree.”

Tom Pauken, the chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission, said one of his top priorities this year would be countering that notion. “I think we've got to revisit this entire issue,” he said. “We've gotten completely away from the idea that we've got different talents and there are different approaches in terms of education.”

Should Mr. Pauken's campaign be successful, there will remain the matter of financing. With budgets being slashed at all levels of education, resources are tight, and the more highly specified training is expensive.

“We have to be more efficient, we have to be more effective, and we have to rely on employers for more support,” said Mr. Bettersworth, the associate vice chancellor.

Increasingly, manufacturing companies are taking the initiative by investing in [community colleges](#) in order to produce the workers they need.

This year, for example, B.A.S.F. will give Brazosport College in Lake Jackson the final installment of a \$1 million grant for the creation of a new facility devoted to the petrochemical, energy and nuclear industries. This academic year was also the first of five years in which the company would provide \$50,000 in scholarships.

“Community colleges are workhorses for us,” Mr. Arnold said. “The problem is there aren't enough people going to them seeking education that will put them to work for us.”

Mr. Arnold is on a Texas Association of Manufacturers committee that is looking into the causes. So far, he said, there certainly seems to be an image issue.

“People know that we need more manufacturing, but they don’t think of those jobs as something they want to send their kids to go do — or to do themselves,” he said.

But Leo Danna, 20, who enrolled at the T.S.T.C. campus in Waco after two years at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, said the switch has worked for him.

“That kind of college wasn’t right for me,” he said. “I couldn’t focus and didn’t understand what I was going to do when I graduated. Here, in the first semester, you’re already talking to companies in your field.”

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