

OPINION

Workforce training needs improvement

America loves college degrees. Our society has succumbed to higher education's marketing juggernaut. It is the dream of most parents to send their children to college, and the numbers don't lie. College graduates typically earn more than people without degrees.

The glut of baby boomers with college degrees who entered the labor market in the 1970s and '80s caused many employers to over-value college degrees. The market has never corrected for this and the higher education establishment has been cashing in ever since.

Four-year degrees have their place in the formal training of many professionals, but I would stack up a building-trades apprenticeship against any college degree for what it tells me about competencies and skills. Most job-specific skills are learned in real-time settings where observation, mentoring and practice are the norm.

When we turn our attention to the educational advancement of the working poor, we stumble against a harsh reality. These workers, who are generally at or below the livable income threshold, are critical to U.S. economic growth because of their sheer numbers.

We must begin to think differently about how we integrate skill advancement with the

daily demands of work and productivity for low-skill people with serious and pressing financial obligations. These are nontraditional learners, and the approach must also be nontraditional, involving some combination of real-time work and learning which benefits both the worker and the employer.

Community colleges may be able to help because they are more nimble than most four-year institutions in their ability to develop course work and training tailored to the real-time needs of employers.

This will also require a significant change in the way most businesses approach the problem. Some companies have already begun. We talked to a manufacturer recently who is teaching his production workers remedial algebra and applied statistics on the shop floor because they don't have the requisite basic skills coming in.

Our best hope lies in employer learning networks and cluster training projects with higher-education links to work and skill development that grows the bottom line for both workers and their employers. Indiana's future depends on it.

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