

Workforce Credentials Assure Economic Vitality

By Dr. Al Roberts

News headlines recently focused on the startling announcement that the number of people in America's middle-income tier had fallen to less than half of the nation's population. Some families moved out of the middle class by climbing the socioeconomic ladder into greater wealth. Many others, however, slipped into poverty. The shrinking of the middle class and corresponding increases in income inequality pose significant concerns because sustaining a vibrant middle class is vital to our nation's economic health.

In this regard, Virginia faces unique challenges. The Commonwealth has suffered lost employment opportunities within the tobacco and coal industries, and force reductions within the military sector have increased the numbers of our neighbors who are seeking employment.

Yet employers also face challenges. In a recent study done by Burning Glass Technologies, a company specializing in labor market analytics, employers reported difficulties in finding qualified skilled workers. The study estimated that more than \$1 billion in potential wages had been lost as Virginia's employers struggled to fill open positions. The situation is especially acute here in Southside Virginia where our employment figures continue to lag behind those of other regions.

To help address these concerns, Virginia's community colleges developed a comprehensive plan to expand worker-training programs and ensure that our labor force has the credentials employers require. As a partner in this effort, Southside Virginia Community College is committed to tripling the number of credentials earned by students. Last year, in addition to awarding hundreds of associate's degrees in various fields, the college also prepared students for state licensing in several different nursing fields and helped other students achieve certifications in work-related areas. In fact, SVCC students can currently pursue many different industry-recognized credentials from entities such as the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), American Welding Society (AWS), and National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER),

National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS), and Microsoft. Furthermore, we're working with businesses right here in Southside Virginia to identify which additional certifications or other credentials will best prepare workers for more and better jobs.

Expanding the availability of financial aid is another important part of this work. Data demonstrate that the low-income and out-of-work students who are most poised to benefit from short-term workforce training opportunities are the least able to afford the tuition. For this reason, SVCC is working alongside our sister institutions within the Virginia Community College System to encourage legislative support to expand access to short-term training financial aid for individuals pursuing in-demand and high-demand credentials.

As individual successes lead to increasing prosperity for families, the economic vitality of Southside Virginia will be assured. At SVCC, we are eager to help our neighbors achieve career goals through the attainment of credentials that will enhance our region's reputation for the quality and competitiveness of its workforce.

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.