

Colleges can help close the skills gap

Three steps toward matching young people with good, skilled jobs

Hamilton Spectator
By Rob Maclsaac

With the return of students to college and university campuses here in Hamilton, it's worth taking a fresh look at how well Ontario prepares young people for today's economy.

Many employers throughout our region and across the province say they can't find qualified candidates to fill good-paying, high-skilled jobs. That's despite the fact that Ontario has a high unemployment rate, particularly among young people.

This problem is known as the skills mismatch — the divide between the skills and credentials held by people looking for work and the qualifications sought by employers. The skills gap is a major issue for governments, employers and educators.

The Conference Board of Canada recently reported the skills mismatch costs Ontario as much as \$24.3 billion a year in lost economic activity. What's more, the province is losing an estimated \$3.7 billion annually in tax revenues.

It is more important than ever to help more people get access to career-focused learning and training.

The Conference Board warns the skills gap will widen as new innovations and technology transform the workplace, creating even greater demands for highly skilled people in a wide range of sectors. This increased demand will come at a time when highly experienced baby boomers begin retiring in record numbers.

So it is more important than ever to help more people get access to career-focused learning and training. At Mohawk College, we're doing our part by educating and serving a record number of students, undertaking the largest campus renewal project in our history, and connecting with high-priority neighbourhoods where going to college and university is the exception rather than the rule

And we have partnered with employers like Walters Inc., Arcelor Mittal Dofasco and U.S. Steel to tackle the problem. These employers are proactively addressing the skills mismatch by investing in the education, training and development of our students and prospective future employees.

Provincially, the steps needed to produce a more qualified workforce don't have to be complicated. A number of measures to improve higher learning and narrow the skills gap can be implemented quickly.

First, Ontario can help more students earn both college and university credentials. In many respects, Mohawk and McMaster University lead by example when it comes to forging pathways for students. Our institutions have created highly successful, in-demand collaborative programs in health, technology, and social sciences with students graduating with college and university credentials.

But there's more that can be done province-wide, such as improving the system for recognizing completed credits when a student transfers.

There's no doubt many students want the best of a college and university education. The number of university graduates who apply to college has increased more than 40 per cent from five years ago. Unfortunately, the system for transferring between colleges or universities in Ontario is problematic, arbitrary and discourages students who are looking to further their education.

The problem is the unclear system for recognizing completed credits when the student transfers. Often, students must repeat courses they've already completed, creating unnecessary delays and added costs for students and taxpayers alike. It's a broken system that's forced many promising students to complete their studies out of province where transfer systems are very clear and well defined.

One step toward fixing this problem would be to require every institution's credit-transfer policies to be publicly available and easily accessible. Helping students understand the routes they can take to graduate more quickly will make combining college and university education more attractive to students.

A second way to close the skills gap is to expand the range of available degree programs at Ontario's 24 colleges. This would give colleges a broader appeal to prospective students. Currently colleges are not allowed to issue three-year degrees, placing us out of step internationally. In fact, our province is the only jurisdiction among the 34 member countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development that confers diplomas rather than degrees on graduates of three-year post-secondary programs.

This discrepancy must end. Many three-year college programs in Ontario are already aligned with provincial standards for baccalaureate education. It's time to elevate Ontario to international standards by allowing colleges to offer three-year degrees in career-specific areas. Our students will then graduate with the credentials that truly reflect the academic rigor and calibre of their programs.

A third way to close the skills gap is for colleges to take an even greater leadership role in online education. OntarioLearn, a consortium of Ontario colleges, offers hundreds of accredited courses online that provide flexible learning options to people who are juggling work and family commitments. The province should expand the range of online programs available through OntarioLearn.

Ontario already has the cornerstones in place to educate and graduate the leading-edge workforce we need to compete and prosper in the new economy. With an even greater emphasis on college education, we can close the skills gap and continue to build our regional and provincial prosperity.

Rob MacIsaac is the president of Mohawk College