



Universities, business must collaborate on workforce needs

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Devinder Malhotra

All across the nation, legislators and employers alike are concerned about a shortage of qualified workers. A number of factors are at play in this, including a low unemployment rate, a decreasing pool of high school graduates, a shift in population from rural areas to the Twin Cities metro, and a large wave of baby boomer retirements.

Over 10 years, the Minnesota economy will need to fill over one million jobs. Complicating an already difficult challenge, 74 percent of those jobs will require postsecondary education.

Minnesota State shares the concerns about this shortage and is partnering with the Legislature, business, and industry to ensure that Minnesota has the talent it needs to sustain its economic vitality and our residents have access to rewarding careers.

This was the topic of a workforce conversation recently held at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and I would especially like to thank President Richard Davenport for his role in facilitating this important discussion. On the same day, I also traveled to South Central College's Faribault Campus to co-host an discussion with SCC President Annette Parker, with representatives from the college, area companies, education and community organizations, as well as five area legislators.

As I reflect on these conversations, this much is clear: In communities across the state, the colleges and universities of Minnesota State, including MSU and SCC, play a critical role in solving the workforce shortage because they are engaging in two critical strategies: leveraging the strength that exists in the system and fostering strong partnerships with the K-12 sector, business and industry.

Our state colleges and universities work with each other to serve student and workforce needs in a number of ways: Students who complete specific associate degrees at a Minnesota State college can transfer to a Minnesota State university to earn a bachelor's degree without losing credits or taking extra courses.

Collaborative campus and regional planning enhances access to educational opportunities and reduces costs to students and taxpayers. We are pooling our portfolio of non-credit programs into regional enterprises that deliver continuing education, customized training and consultative solutions that better meet the needs of businesses and incumbent workers. By partnering on these initiatives, each Minnesota State college or university provides a door through which business and industry can access the strengths of all 37 colleges and universities across Minnesota.

Our partnerships with K-12 allow us to accomplish even more. We work with schools to offer Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) that allow students to earn college credit while still in high school, and we offer a variety of summer camps and outreach programs that get middle and high school students excited about career opportunities they may not have considered previously. In addition, we work with Adult Basic Education and community-based training organizations to help ensure students are ready for college-level work.

At our roundtable, I was especially pleased to see participation from so many strategic partners of MSU — it was an excellent environment for the University's Strategic Partnerships Division that matches the skills and expertise of its students, faculty and staff to the needs of business, education and the community.

A few of the partners in attendance included Taylor Corp., the cities of Mankato and North Mankato, the Mankato Area Public Schools and other prominent business and community leaders. Partnerships with the University, such as the “Bold Futures” summer camp for high school girls that was sponsored by the Glen A. Taylor Foundation, have been tremendously beneficial for the greater Mankato area.

And finally, public/private partnerships are vital to our success. A good example is the Workforce Development Scholarships that were funded by the Legislature and supplemented by private contributions from business and industry partners.

These innovative partnerships, forged by our colleges and universities in each of their respective communities, provided hundreds of new scholarships for students enrolling in programs with high employer demand — such as advanced manufacturing, agriculture, health care and information technology — and made higher education even more affordable within these high demand industries.

The leveraged equipment program funded by the Legislature is another good example: This program has made it possible for our colleges to give their students hands-on experience with the latest technology.

All of the partnerships showcased during our roundtable, as well as the numerous regional and community advisory boards that serve the university’s programs, are vital to the success of the greater Mankato community, to our students’ success, and to our success as a system of public higher education.

Fundamental to the success of all is our ability to adapt to the disruption that is affecting all sectors of the economy, including higher education. Building our capacity to adapt and become more creative, innovative and entrepreneurial is a strategic priority for the colleges and universities of Minnesota State. States and communities that will thrive will continue these conversations and ensure opportunities for all.

Devinder Malhotra is the chancellor of Minnesota State, which includes 30 community and technical colleges and seven state universities serving approximately 375,000 students. It is the fourth-largest system of two-year colleges and four-year universities in the United States.

http://www.mankatofreepress.com/opinion/letters_to_the_editor/universities-business-must-collaborate-on-workforce-needs/article_1fd35c47-3bd8-5ace-a774-19c4741859b2.html