



Texas Workforce Investment Council

Policy News Highlights

Issue 10, Quarter 2, June 2010

Texas Workforce Investment Council – *Policy News Highlights* is a quarterly review of selected reports relevant to the policy and research functions of the Texas Workforce Investment Council (TWIC). Federal and state agency websites, in addition to numerous public policy and educational databases are scanned monthly for relevant and emerging issues. Reports are catalogued and stored electronically in TWIC’s Information Repository (IR). Topic areas include: economic development; higher education; K-12 education; literacy and adult basic education (ABE); and skills, training and employment.

Policy News Highlights is organized into three sections, beginning with selected articles that focus on workforce trends and issues that have received heightened attention over the previous months. The second section contains abbreviated summaries of recent articles of interest to the Council and the final section consists of a comprehensive list of all articles and their sources that were added to the IR in the last quarter.

This Quarter’s Selected Articles

Middle-skill occupations and the demand for workers with these skills are frequent topics of discussion in workforce circles. Recently, two leading economic experts published papers about the labor market and how low-, middle-, and high-skill occupations are distributed within it. Given this occupational area’s significance to both workforce policy and the economy as it continues to emerge from the recent recession, this quarter’s highlight looks at these two perspectives on middle-skill occupational trends.

The Polarization of Job Opportunities in the U.S. Labor Market – Implications for Employment and Earnings, Center for American Progress, April 2010.

Between 2007 and 2010 the number of employed workers in the United States (U.S.) fell by over eight million and the employment-to-population ratio dipped to 58.5 percent, the lowest it has been in over 25 years. Yet in spite of this negative trend, as Dr. David Autor, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology points out,

history assures the nation that unemployment will eventually abate.

However, in his April 2010 paper, Dr. Autor emphasizes two key challenges facing the U.S. labor market that he believes are certain to endure. First, there has been an increase in the demand for skilled workers over the last few decades, and unfortunately, a slowdown in educational attainment in the U.S., particularly for males. Second, Dr. Autor argues that there has been change in the basic structure of the American economy and that job opportunities have become polarized. He states that the job market has expanded at the high-skill, high-wage and low-skill, low-wage ends of the spectrum, but has contracted in the middle-wage, middle-skill range for both white- and blue-collar jobs.

Autor argues that two market elements have polarized simultaneously: occupational skills and wage growth have both migrated toward these extremes. He further contends that skill and wage polarization indicates labor demand is rising at

both the high and low ends of the employment spectrum. In support of this position he notes that two indicators, employment and earnings, have increased for professional, technical and managerial jobs at the high end of the spectrum. These indicators are also up for food service, personal care and protective service occupations that require low levels of education. While Dr. Autor acknowledges that observing the polarization is more straightforward than understanding its root causes, he and other researchers attribute it to the continued automation and off-shoring of routine middle-skill tasks.

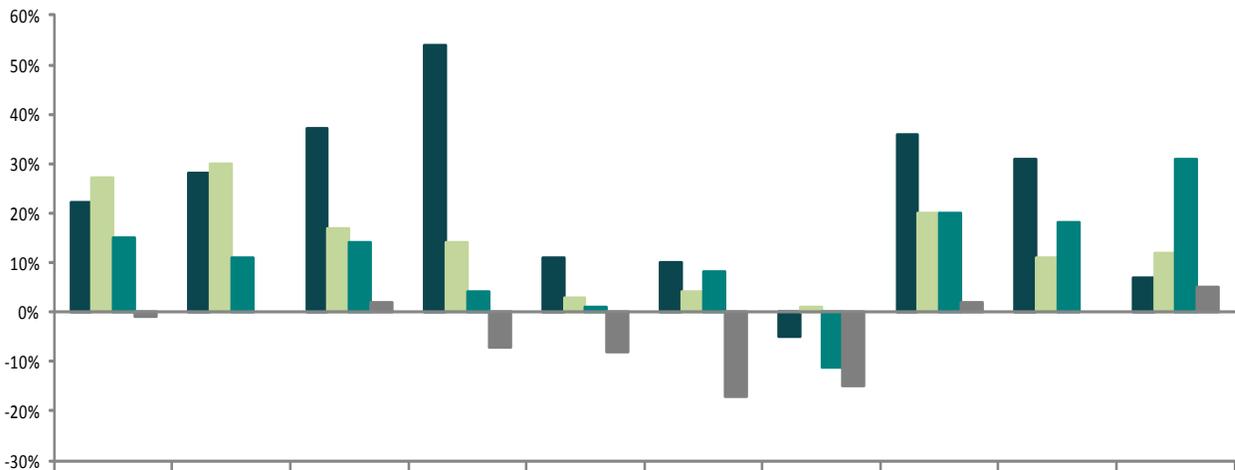
Autor defines routine tasks as those that were formerly carried out by workers with high school credentials but not a four-year degree. Non-routine “abstract” tasks are at the high end of the spectrum and non-routine “manual” tasks are at the low end. Today, routine tasks can in fact be executed by either computers or individuals with even less education than high school. Additionally, Dr. Autor states that routine tasks

are characteristic of many middle-skill occupations such as bookkeeping, clerical work and repetitive production tasks. As these tasks become automated or are sent abroad, jobs are lost and the comparative demand for non-routine tasks rises.

In addition, Dr. Autor discusses the problem that demand for highly educated workers is rising, while supply is lagging, creating a situation of earnings inequality in the U.S. He is concerned that due to the decrease in middle-skills jobs, workers without postsecondary education have fewer job opportunities. Among his policy suggestions, Dr. Autor says that young adults should be encouraged to pursue higher education and that the K through 12 platform be improved so that more young people will be adequately prepared for higher education. He also calls for more training programs to elevate skill levels and earnings for individuals in low-skilled service jobs. Last, he notes that there should be an emphasis on developing jobs in the areas of energy, health care and the environment. ★

Percentage point change in employment by occupation, 1979—2009

Percentage change in employment



| | Managers | Professionals | Technicians | Sales | Office and admin | Production, craft and repair | Operators, fabricators, and laborers | Protective services | Food prep, building and grounds cleaning | Personal care and personal services |
|-----------|----------|---------------|-------------|-------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1979-1989 | 22% | 28% | 37% | 54% | 11% | 10% | -5% | 36% | 31% | 7% |
| 1989-1999 | 27% | 30% | 17% | 14% | 3% | 4% | 1% | 20% | 11% | 12% |
| 1999-2007 | 15% | 11% | 14% | 4% | 1% | 8% | -11% | 20% | 18% | 31% |
| 2007-2009 | -1% | 0% | 2% | -7% | -8% | -17% | -15% | 2% | 0% | 5% |

Source: May/ORG CPS data for earnings years 1979-2009. The data include all persons ages 16-24 who reported having worked last year, excluding those employed by the military and in agricultural occupations. Occupations are first converted from their respective scheme into 328 occupation groups consistent over the given time period. From these groups, occupations are then consolidated into the 10 broad categories presented in the figure. The occupation share is the percentage of all workers employed in that occupation.

Is the Middle of the U.S. Job Market Really Disappearing? A Comment on the “Polarization” Hypothesis, Center for American Progress, May 2010.

Dr. Harry Holzer, a well-known economist and professor of public policy, published a paper presenting his own views on the status of middle-skill occupations in this country. He agrees that there has indeed been some shrinkage of middle-skills jobs requiring only routine tasks, particularly in the areas of production jobs for machine operators and for clerical office workers. However, while this is occurring, other categories of middle-skill jobs are holding steady. For example, technician jobs and service jobs in health care remain strong.

Holzer lays out the definition for middle-skills jobs that he and his colleague, Dr. Robert Lerman, have extensively used in their writings: “those jobs that generally require education and training beyond high school but less than a four-year bachelor’s degree.” He points out that Dr. Autor defines middle-skill jobs by occupational category inconsistently and that in some instances, he uses wage data from 1980 to separate jobs from high-to low-skill. In other instances, Dr. Autor adapts broad occupational categories by identifying wage and employment trends among workers with different levels of educational attainment. Drs. Holzer and Lerman also present data for broad occupational categories, but they include current projections about educational attainment trends, along with regional industry reports on labor markets and worker shortages to craft their view of middle-skill occupations.

Dr. Holzer also objects to the way that Dr. Autor “lumps” together certain categories. For example, Dr. Autor puts “production,” and “craft and repair” categories together, but Holzer points out that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS),

“craft and repair,” better known as “installation, maintenance, and repair,” has incurred steady employment growth and comparatively high wages over the last 20 years.

Holzer conducts a close examination of Autor’s data and argues that it does not fit all that clearly into the “polarization” theory. For example, according to Holzer, Autor’s data reflect major inconsistencies across specific periods of time in wage and employment growth over the last three decades. Holzer points out that in the 1980s, employment and wage growth at the bottom of the employment spectrum lagged behind both the middle and the top. In the 1990s, employment growth was generally robust, but compared to the strongest growth at the top, low and middle portions of the spectrum were modest. Holzer continues that in the 2000s, the lowest-paying jobs had the most employment growth, but the highest-paying did not grow any faster than mid-paying jobs. Furthermore, real wage growth during the years between 1988 and 2006 was modest for all groups except very few earners at the top. Therefore, while middle-skills jobs have lagged to some degree since 1989, “no consistent ‘polarization’ story emerges at any time during this entire period.”

Dr. Holzer acknowledges that middle-skills occupations have diminished. In 1986, they were at approximately 55 percent of the workforce, whereas in 2007, they had dropped to 48 percent. Production-transportation and clerical jobs accounted for most of the decline. Nevertheless, Holzer maintains that using BLS figures, middle-skills occupations have and will remain a large portion of the labor force and account for forty percent of all hiring through 2014. This is because other middle-skills jobs requiring the performance of non-routine tasks remain strong, specifically, technician jobs and service jobs in health care. ★

Of Interest - Abbreviated Summaries

Economic Development

Maximizing the Potential of Older Adults: Benefits to State Economies, NGA Center for Best Practices, April 2010.

According to *Maximizing the Potential of Older Adults*, by 2030, one in every five Americans will be at least 65 years old, and by 2050, this older demographic will increase by 147 percent. In 2000, 23 states had populations where 13 percent of citizens were over 65, but by 2030,

all states will have more than 13 percent of their populations in this age range. This “new geography of older adults,” will most likely have a significant impact on states which could lose economic competitiveness. As vast numbers of adults retire, living standards will decline as individual savings and investment rates also decline. Worker shortages could hamper states’ productivity as suggested by the Bureau of Labor Statistics: the number of workers 55 years of age or older will increase by 43 percent between 2008 and 2018, while the worker population between ages 25 and 54 is projected to increase by just two percent. This *NGA Issue Brief* sets out steps states can follow to counter the barriers many older adults face regarding employment, volunteerism and education in order to keep them engaged in society:

- Establish public-private partnerships to address the issue of engagement and recommend programs and policies to increase opportunities for engagement
- Increase public awareness—among state leaders, businesses and older adults—of the benefits of older adults remaining engaged in the workforce and society at large
- Connect older adults to work, volunteer and educational opportunities
- Fortify existing engagement opportunities in existing workforce and education systems for older adults
- Encourage public-sector workers to not only remain in the workforce longer, but to reconnect to the workforce after retirement and to volunteer ★

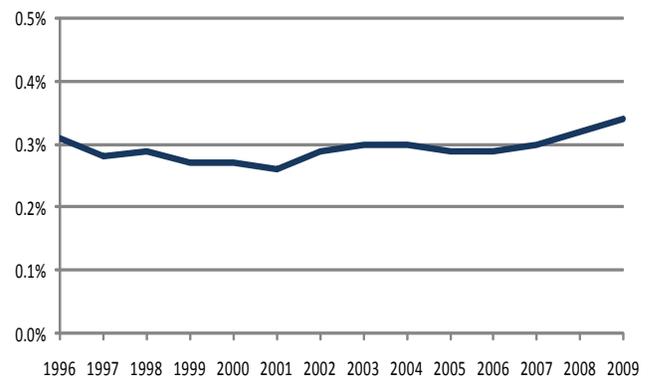
The Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity 1996 to 2009, Kauffman Foundation, May 2010.

This index looks at entrepreneurial activity in the U.S. for the 14-year period between 1996 and 2009. The number of individuals reporting that they had become entrepreneurs reached its peak in 2009. While this rate went up in all demographic categories, the greatest increases were among older Americans and African Americans. *The Kauffman Index* relies on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) to assess what percentage

of the adult, non-business population has started a new business each month. The CPS is a survey conducted each month by the U.S. Bureau of Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The *Index* also includes information from select metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) and is the only national measure of business creation broken down into specific population subgroups. Some of the findings are:

- In 2009, 340 out of 100,000 adults, or 0.34 percent, created a new business each month
- Men are more likely to start a business each month, and in 2008 accounted for 0.43 percent as opposed to 0.25 percent for women
- Entrepreneurial activity for African-Americans went up between 2008 and 2009 from 0.22 percent to 0.27 percent
- Oklahoma had the highest rate of entrepreneurial activity, with 470 new businesses per 100,000. Texas was fourth with 450 new businesses per month for every 100,000 adults
- Houston had the highest entrepreneurial rate of 0.63 percent of the 15 largest MSAs in the U.S.

Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity (1996-2009)



SOURCE: Robert W. Fairlie, University of California, Sant Cruz, using the Current Population Survey. ★

Getting Prepared - Economic Development in a Transforming Energy Economy, International Economic Development Council, June 2010.

This paper starts from the perspective that with an increasingly volatile energy market and commensurately evolving policies shaping that

market, a low-carbon economy—possibly with a cap and trade or carbon pricing model—may become a reality. Since this would have significant implications for American industries and regional economies, this paper is designed to aid economic developers to begin thinking of how they can prepare in order to benefit from this type of transition.

Getting Prepared explains what cap and trade is, and what opportunities and challenges adopting this approach would entail. The paper contains nine case studies of states that profile each one's energy generation, industry mix, policies already in place to reduce their carbon foot print, and how to transition workers and industries toward a lower carbon economy. They are Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio and Tennessee. ★

Higher Education

Building Effective Green Energy Programs at Community Colleges, Workforce Strategy Center, May 2010.

This paper focuses on community colleges that are involved in federal and state initiatives aimed at training low-income persons for new “green jobs.” There is growing belief among educators and policymakers that green jobs training can be an integral part of moving the unemployed and disconnected into career pathways to higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs. However, the paper's authors identify significant problems, such as the fact that identifying green jobs for low-skilled workers has been difficult, and that demand for low-skilled workers in green sectors appears to be marginal.

“The speed and scale of the green energy initiatives, along with the newness and uncertainties of the industry itself, are placing community colleges in the position of serving as change agents—the hallmarks of community colleges’ workforce development activities—are helping to define the industry.”

Therefore, community colleges will need to play a major role in training if low-income and inexperienced workers are to enter the green

economy. Green jobs that pay family-sustaining wages can only be secured with postsecondary credentials and continued skill development. The paper profiles nine community colleges that have used a coordinated high-technology approach to offering students clear pathways, and that have responded directly to regional demand. ★

A Portrait of Low-Income Young Adults in Education, Institute for Higher Education Policy, June 2010.

This paper is the first in a new series launched by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. *Portraits* will be short research briefs focused upon low-income young adults and their involvement in postsecondary education. This initial paper takes a broad look at who constitutes the adult low-income population and then reports on their postsecondary status and economic outlook. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008, 15.5 million out of 35.2 million young adults came from families living at or below the poverty level.

Despite this, almost 60 percent of low income adults were either pursuing postsecondary education or had a postsecondary credential. Yet, according to this paper, about one in ten low-income adults with a postsecondary credential is still poor. Based upon this conundrum, the *Portraits* series will focus on these two questions: Are low income young adults able to take full advantage of their postsecondary education? Are there realistic and appropriate levers, which, when exercised, will result in improved educational and labor market outcomes for this population? The paper considers young adults between the ages of 18 and 26 and provides demographic characteristics and a brief overview of both pre-college and postsecondary attainment trends. ★

K–12 Education

What is “Career Ready?” Associate for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), April 2010.

According to this brief, the terms “career ready” and “college ready” are often used interchangeably. While it is certain that a rigorous level of academic proficiency is necessary to advance beyond high school, the paper's authors state that it takes much

more to be truly career ready. Career readiness requires three critical skill areas:

- core academic skills and the ability to apply those skills to workplace situations and daily routine activities
- employability skills such as critical thinking and responsibility
- technical, job-specific skills related to particular occupations and career pathways

To conclude, the authors strongly suggest that U.S. high schools focus on offering their students a strong foundation that spans all three areas, regardless of the student’s pathway. ★

Science Achievement and Occupational Career/Technical Education Coursetaking in High School: The Class of 2005, National Center for Education Statistics, May 2010.

For the last two decades, federal legislation has been directed at improving the academic achievement of students who take career and technical education (CTE) classes. Research in this area has measured academic achievement

| Percentage of public high school graduates and of concentrators in each occupational program area in high school: 2005 | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Program area | Percent of all graduates | Percent of concentrators |
| Concentrators, total* | 37.6 | 100.0 |
| Agriculture | 4.8 | 12.9 |
| Business finance | 1.4 | 3.8 |
| Business support and management | 5.7 | 15.2 |
| Communications and design | 5.5 | 14.7 |
| Computer and information science | 3.8 | 10.2 |
| Construction and architecture | 2.1 | 5.7 |
| Consumer services | 2.1 | 5.7 |
| Culinary arts | 1.5 | 4.0 |
| Engineering technology | 2.6 | 6.8 |
| Health science | 3.4 | 9.2 |
| Manufacturing repair and transportation | 7.2 | 19.3 |
| Marketing | 2.4 | 6.3 |
| Public services | 1.4 | 3.8 |

* Concentrators earned 2.0 or more credits in the program area indicated. The total concentrator row includes graduates who earned 2.0 or more credits in at least one of the 13 program areas listed. NOTE: Details may sum to greater than the total, because some graduates concentrated in more than one occupational program area. Standard errors can be found in appendix B. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005 High School Transcript Study (HSTS) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2005 12th-grade science

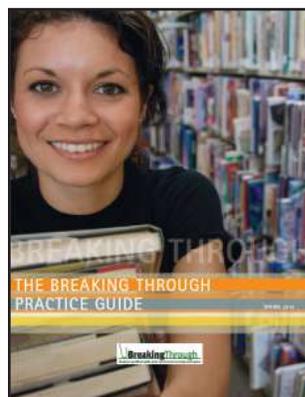
in two ways: tracking and analyzing trends in academic coursetaking by CTE participants; and by testing. This particular brief concentrates on science achievement among CTE participants,

taking into account the types and levels of credits earned. It compares public high school graduates in 2005 who concentrated in 13 different CTE occupational programs with graduates who did not. General findings of this study showed that occupational concentrators who graduated in 2005 earned fewer science credits than graduates who did not concentrate in CTE occupational education. However, the authors emphasize that patterns varied widely and that among CTE concentrators, those who concentrated in agriculture, business finance, communications and design, computer and information science, and engineering technology, scored higher or not measurably different from non-concentrators. The authors also noted that self-selection, individual aptitudes, and prior coursework could also be factors. ★

Literacy and Adult Basic Education

Breaking Through Practice Guide Helping Low-Skilled Adults Enter and Succeed in College and Careers, Jobs for the Future, Spring 2010.

This guide is intended to assist practitioners better serve adults with low literacy and math levels who are striving for success in postsecondary education. It highlights successful innovations on the part of community colleges that participated in the Breaking Through collaborative initiative (launched by Jobs for the Future and other funding partners between 2005 and 2009) aimed at connecting low-skilled adults with postsecondary occupational or technical education. The *Practice Guide* has four major components that community colleges and other programs may use to improve their success with this population. They are: accelerated learning, comprehensive support services, labor market payoffs, and aligning programs for low-skilled adults.



These four strategies derive from institutional barriers that were identified during the earlier phase of the Breaking Through research. For example,

most adult remedial programs are slow, which presents an impediment to the adult who needs to advance quickly. Therefore, the recommended strategy is to accelerate the pace of learning. Similarly, many adult students face multiple barriers to success, but most precollege programs do not provide support to overcome such barriers. Therefore, the recommended strategy is to provide comprehensive support strategies to help students in creating realistic plans to enroll and remain in school, especially at difficult transition points. The authors refer to the *Practice Guide* as a compendium of evolving practice. It contains profiles of community colleges that have successfully implemented the strategies to put low-skilled younger and older adults on a pathway to either a family-supporting career or success in continued studies. ★

Skills, Training and Employment

The Critical and Emerging Role of Workforce Investment Boards: How Federal Policy Can Incite Workforce Innovation, Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, January 2010.

This paper is offered by the Workforce Innovators Network, a group comprised of Executive Directors from local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) and brought together by the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. The brief seeks to challenge the notion that WIBs' role is simply to manage WIA grants.

“Workforce leaders in communities must collaborate across multiple sectors, organizations and systems, convening the right stakeholders for the right reasons, at the right times around strategies that help people and firms thrive—all guided by thoughtful public policy.”

WIBs are important conveners of talent development and the writers of this brief strongly believe that federal policy and legislation could and should cast WIBs as strategic policy boards, charged with bringing together community stakeholders around common economic strategies. The brief outlines five additional ways federal

legislation could help WIBs to better serve individuals and communities:

- Aligning federal agencies around a common goal of increasing economic competitiveness and community prosperity
- Enabling more effective community-focused WIBs
- Creating a national data system that is accessible and transparent to the public
- Mandating coordinated funding streams across state systems
- Transforming the state five-year plans into a strategic planning document ★

Energy Efficiency Services Sector: Workforce Education and Training Needs, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, March 2010.

This study was funded by the Department of Energy and provides a baseline assessment of today's energy efficiency-related education and training programs. It looks at what will be needed in terms of education and training in order to support the expected growth in the energy efficiency services workforce. The energy efficiency services sector (EESS) workforce as defined by the researchers has about 120,000 full-time equivalent workers, which when allowing for the fact that most in the sector spend only part of their time on energy efficiency activities, equates to about 400,000 people. The authors say this may include as many as 1.3 million people by 2020.

According to the writers, three things are impeding the expansion of the EESS workforce: a shortage of experienced program managers available to mentor the next generation of program managers in EESS firms, a shortage of experienced engineers, and the fact that the building and construction trades have a limited awareness that the EESS is poised for significant growth. The paper makes recommendations for ensuring that the EESS workforce will be able to keep up with demand, including targeting the building and construction trades for energy efficient education and training, better coordination and tracking of training efforts within states, and increasing short-duration, applied trainings in order to enhance on-the-job training for existing EESS workers and to introduce new workers to this field. ★

Rx for the Health Care Workforce, Jobs for the Future, April 2010.

This paper begins from the position that the need for a skilled health care workforce has been largely missing from the recent nationwide debate over health care reform. As health care reform offers expanded coverage and improved quality, the health care workforce must not only meet today's needs, but also the needs of an aging and diverse population. Frontline health care workers are often invisible, but they are critical to the delivery of quality health care and include home health care workers, medical assistants, laboratory technicians, and community health care workers.

According to this paper, there are about 12,000,000 health care workers most of whom earn under \$40,000 and are women with less than a Bachelor's degree. Institutions delivering primary care will feel the greatest impact of health care reform, which is expected to increase the number of insured individuals by 30 million people by 2015. Other things



besides health care reform will increase demand for health care workers. As they age, 78 million Baby Boomers will increase the demand for direct healthcare workers. The conversion to electronic medical records will increase the demand for health information technology workers. Public health care workers will be in higher demand with the increased focus on prevention, chronic disease management, health education and outreach, food safety, and emergency preparedness.

One of the barriers facing the expansion of a skilled health care workforce is the lack of formal paths within and between health care occupations that would permit workers to advance. Another is the fact that many health care institutions are not equipped to provide incumbent workers the educational and financial boosts they need to raise their skill levels. The paper's author notes that the lack of competency-based standards and formalized credentials prevents incumbent workers from being able to validate what they know and learn on the job. The paper enumerates promising models for building a skilled frontline health care workforce in the workplace, postsecondary, and community sectors. Learner-friendly workplaces and innovative health care employers who collaborate with community colleges are described in programs in Massachusetts, Arkansas, Maryland, and Kentucky. ★

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