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The Digital Skills Divide

More digital skills courses would help community colleges fill the middle-skill career gap, a report asserts.

March 6, 2015

By [Ashley A. Smith](#)

Colleges can bridge the "middle skills" career gap by offering more courses focused on digital skills, a new report suggests.

Those careers in the middle require a high school diploma, but not a bachelor's degree. In 2012, 54 percent of all U.S. jobs were middle skill, according to an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by the National Skills Coalition.

"The Digital Skills Gap in the Workforce" report released Thursday by Burning Glass Technologies and Capital One found that 8 in 10 middle-skill jobs require competency in using spreadsheets and word-processing software. The report also found digitally intensive jobs have grown two and a half times faster than have jobs that do not require digital skills. Those occupations that require digital skills pay 18 percent more than those jobs that do not.

Burning Glass, which gleaned information from about 40,000 employer Web sites, job boards and postings, describes middle-skill jobs as those that didn't require a bachelor's degree but also offered a median hourly wage above the national living wage. That wage was calculated as \$15 an hour for a 2-parent, 2-child household. Those jobs make up 39 percent of U.S. employment, according to the report.

There is demand for jobs that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a bachelor's degree. Which means community colleges could fill that void by making sure their students have all the skills -- including technology skills -- needed for those careers.

"There's no shortage of schools lagging behind," said Matt Sigelman, chief executive officer of Burning Glass, a Boston-based firm that analyzes job advertisements and provides data on the employment market.

"Schools that are ahead of the curve on this are ones that have close relationships with employers, and they direct their students toward or otherwise have their finger on the pulse of what it takes to place graduates," he said.

The report details that those middle-skill careers that required digital skills actually grew during the recession. "These jobs offer a promising career path for Americans who lack a bachelor's degree," it states. Digitally intensive middle-skill jobs grew at nearly the same rate as high-skill positions from 2010 through 2013 -- 4.8 percent and 4.7 percent, respectively.

These digital-focused, middle-skill careers have put pressure on colleges to offer more technology training.

"We're not just talking about skills like Microsoft Excel but also proficiency with more advanced technologies that range from CRM systems like SAP or Siebel to databases like SQL, from graphic software like InDesign to machining automation like AutoCAD," Sigelman said. "With that in mind, practically oriented programs that don't provide training in complementary digital skills may be leaving their graduates with gaps."

Colleges owe it to their students to make sure they are receiving these skills or that they are aware of the skills required in the careers the students are targeting, he said.

"In some cases, particularly within practically oriented programs of study, it could make good sense to integrate training in workplace digital skills within the curriculum itself," Sigelman said. "In many others, such as within liberal arts programs, it may be enough to let students know which technologies they will need to demonstrate proficiency in to land a job."



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