

Commentary/Op-Ed - September 2009

Will Low-Skilled Workers Benefit from Economic Recovery?

In this commentary for *The Huffington Post*, CUF's David Jason Fischer and Brandon Roberts of the Working Poor Families Project sound the warning that low-skilled workers—already bearing the brunt of the recession—may find themselves left behind as an economic recovery takes hold.

by David Jason Fischer and Brandon Roberts

As summer ends, confidence seems to be mounting that the Great Recession, the most serious economic downturn in decades, is gradually drawing to a close. But for millions of Americans at the margins of the labor market, a return to aggregate economic growth is unlikely to improve their personal circumstances.

The August jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found the number of long-term unemployed Americans remains close to a record high, and that the overall seasonally adjusted unemployment rate of Americans who did not complete high school is 15.6 percent and rising. This is nearly twice that of individuals with some college or an associate degree (8.2 percent) and over three times those with a bachelor's degree and higher (4.7 percent). It seems likely that many of the long-term jobless are among the least-educated and lowest skilled, and their difficulties raise the specter of an economy-wide skills mismatch in years ahead.

This might already be happening in Michigan, where a recent study found that 1.7 million working age adults lack the basic skills to get a family-supporting job and 44 percent read at a sixth-grade level or lower. The widespread lack of basic skills deficits is such that the state's widely lauded "No Worker Left Behind" community college training program may not be as accessible to as many workers as policymakers had hoped: the program, which provides up to two years of tuition for a post-secondary credential in a high-demand field, doesn't do much for those whose skills fall short of admissions standards.

Michigan is merely one example of a nationwide problem with functional illiteracy and very low skill levels. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that 90 million adults in America had "below basic" or "basic" literacy, meaning that at best they "can perform simple and everyday literacy activities." This basic skills shortfall closely tracks national educational attainment deficits: Census data from 2007 compiled by the Working Poor Families Project found that 26 million adults lack a

high school degree or equivalent, and another 56 million had no post-secondary experience.

Unfortunately, our public systems are woefully inadequate, in terms of capacity, support, and public attention, compared to the magnitude of the need. Only about ten percent of adult Americans without a high school degree are even enrolled in adult education classes; of this group, a very small percentage (PDF) earns a GED. In some specific areas, the situation is even worse: the number of adults who reported speaking English less than very well rose by more than 20 percent between 2000 and 2007, while the number of government-supported slots to teach English for Speakers of Other Languages was largely unchanged over the same span.

Despite the large and growing need, federal and state resources for adult basic education have stayed flat or even declined in recent years. Surprisingly, the billions of dollars for education reform in the federal stimulus package passed earlier this year included no support for adult basic education. This represents an opportunity missed: similar to the challenge of No Worker Left Behind in Michigan, the national basic skills shortage threatens to undercut the Obama administration's proposed American Graduation Initiative, intended to help low-skilled and low-income workers gain access to and succeed in community college.

One piece of good news is that six Midwest states under the auspices of the Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears initiative are developing policies to help low-skilled adults obtain post-secondary credentials. For example, Illinois is developing Bridge programs that connect adult basic education programs with high-demand occupational instruction at community colleges, enabling students to combine basic skill remediation with career skills training. And similar work is underway in Michigan with the direct goal of raising workers' basic skills so they can take advantage of the state's community college training program. Efforts such as these must assume a more central role in federal and state education and skills development programs.

Successfully remediating basic skills gaps should be a priority both for those primarily concerned about economic growth and those whose focus is on equity. Research estimates that each additional year of education per individual raises earning power by approximately 15 percent--a rate so high that it justifies robust public investment. But there is a strong inter-generational impact as well: a powerful relationship has been shown to exist between parents' educational attainment and that of their children. In other words, better educating adults today is likely to yield an additional payoff in schooling outcomes for the current generation of schoolchildren.

One point that can't be stressed or repeated enough: in the "knowledge economy" of the 21st century, it is essentially impossible to gain and hold a job that pays a family-supporting wage without post-secondary educational attainment. Going forward, it's estimated that 80 percent of all new jobs (PDF)--and almost every job that pays a family-supporting wage--require education beyond high school completion. In turn, it's impossible to attain a post-secondary credential, from a vocational certification to a four-year college degree, without basic skills mastery. Helping every American reach this level, as President Obama has called for, is crucial to the nation's and every family's economic prospects in the years to come.

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