

Utilities and Community Colleges: The Right Partners to Build California's New Energy Jobs

By Karen Elzey, Jose Millan and Van Ton-Quinlivan

As California continues to struggle with a persistent job crisis and sluggish economic recovery, getting our residents back to work is at the top of everyone's mind. But the current difficulty faced by many companies trying to find skilled workers to fill open positions shows that providing the right kind of training—and at the right time, coupled with a regional workforce development strategy, are also critically important.

It's time for California's companies and community colleges to partner together, creating a stronger, more skilled workforce that will help rebuild an economic foundation for our state and the country.

Right now, there are just not enough skilled workers to fill the projected 350,000 California job openings projected over the next 10 years, according to a recent analysis by PolicyLink, a nationally recognized policy research institute. Many of these jobs are "middle-skill," meaning they are relatively high-paying positions that require less than a bachelor's degree but more than a high school diploma. In particular, utilities are facing a critical shortage of skilled workers and trained professionals to meet increasing demands of an aging population and the emergence of a new energy sector.

There is a clear and very basic mismatch: our residents are having trouble finding jobs, our schools need help preparing graduates, and our utility companies can't find the skilled workers they need. That's why the California Energy & Utility Workforce Consortium has joined together to help train the workforce that will help stabilize our state's economic future. And the path to this stronger economy is through community colleges.

Community colleges are one of the state's key vehicles for economic mobility and social equity. They help countless low-income students and people of color make the jump into the middle class. Joining companies with community colleges to produce the skilled workforce of today and tomorrow makes sense, which is why many of California's companies have already started these types of innovative partnerships.

These types of workforce development efforts are being highlighted today, right here in San Diego. The U.S. Department of Education is hosting a Regional Community College Summit to stress the role community colleges are playing, and must continue to play, in training our current and future workforce.

At the summit, Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) will discuss their 3-year-old PowerPathway™ workforce development program, which works with community colleges to develop industry-advised curriculum, expanding the talent pool of qualified candidates for entry-level skilled jobs in areas like clean tech vehicles, energy efficiency and renewables, engineering and smart grid, and skilled crafts.

PG&E was one of the original companies to make a commitment to *Skills for America's Future* – a new effort announced last fall by President Obama to connect employers with community colleges and workforce partners. *Skills for America's Future* is working to ensure that students can be better equipped with the skills necessary to find and retain jobs. PG&E pledged to expand the company's energy jobs career pathways and provide \$1.5 million of in-kind support for each of the next three years.

Other infrastructure leaders are also recognizing community colleges as the most effective path to finding and training skilled workers. East Bay Municipal Utility District, Southern California Edison, and San Diego Gas & Electric – all members of the California Energy & Utility Workforce Consortium – have collaborated with local community colleges to evolve curriculum to better train workers in the energy and water industries.

Today's Community College Summit at San Diego City College is also focusing on ensuring that we give our veterans – who so bravely sacrificed for our country – the training they need to get good jobs after they return home. This is an effort *Skills for America's Future* is invested in, and PG&E has already had more than 100 military veterans who are transitioning into the energy sector graduate from their partnership programs.

It's clear that effective, thorough, scaled-up training efforts will require more than a textbook. These efforts will require specialized curriculum and equipment, and we are working with our local colleges and districts to sustain and expand the ambitious infrastructure-related work force programs we need.

As we enter a more competitive global marketplace, now more than ever, companies have a responsibility to ensure tomorrow's workers are prepared for the jobs of the future. It's vital to our prosperity, and it won't happen without public-private partnerships, like the ones *Skills for America's Future* are working to achieve.

A robust economic future for California requires us to deliver the right people with the right skills at the right time. Innovative partnerships between companies and community colleges can make this happen.

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