

THE TENNESSEAN

Congress could make navigating the job market easier with this bill | Opinion

Nancy Eisenbrandt, Guest Columnist | Published 5:00 a.m. CT Jan. 7, 2019

Middle Tennessee's unemployment rate is at the lowest level it's been in decades. Companies in the Nashville region and across the country are offering well-paid jobs with opportunities to move up a career ladder – in fact, in many locales, there are more jobs than qualified people to fill them.

This is particularly true for middle-skill jobs that require some education and training beyond high school, but not a college degree.

Recruiting and retaining the talent to fill these middle-skill jobs is critical to Tennessee's continued success in economic development.

According to an analysis by National Skills Coalition, middle-skill jobs account for 58 percent of Tennessee's labor market, but only 45 percent of the state's workers are trained to the middle-skill level.

This skills gap hurts Tennessee's growing industries — like advanced manufacturing, health care, information technology, and nearly every trade from carpentry, to welding, to pipe fitting.

This skills gap persists in part because high school graduates and people who want to get a better job by learning new skills or earning an in-demand credential don't always know what opportunities are out there.

They're not sure what industries in their region are hiring, what in-demand careers are most promising, which training programs or community college classes actually lead to well-paying jobs or what the career ladder looks like in growing fields.

This is a way to fix the problem

In 2017, a bill called the College Transparency Act was introduced in the U.S. Congress with strong bipartisan support.

This bill, which is slated for reintroduction in 2019, would, if passed into law, would require the reporting of information about college costs, graduation rates and post-college employment data

in one place: a public, easily navigable website designed to reveal what careers are in demand, which programs lead to jobs, and what kind of wages people earn once employed.

This information already exists – we just don't collect it in one place. Having navigable data like this would be useful to high school students, their parents, high school guidance counselors and working people who want to take the next step (or the first step) in their careers.

This data would improve the efforts of statewide workforce development initiatives like Tennessee Reconnect.

And it's absolutely vital to local and regional businesses because it would shine a light on all of the lucrative, in-demand careers available right here in the Nashville area.

It just makes sense - when people have the data to make an informed decision, they'll pursue fields where employers are hiring.

In this tight labor market, Tennessee can't tackle our labor force challenges without harnessing data.

The College Transparency Act would connect motivated people to proven education and training programs and then to growing businesses – building our state's talent pipeline and growing the state's economy.

Nancy Eisenbrandt is chief talent development officer at the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce.