

\$165

\$165

\$88

\$50

\$165



Grow economy by modernizing our approach to college

Amanda Russell, Iowa View contributor Published 1:43 p.m. CT Jan. 9, 2018 | Updated 1:48 p.m. CT Jan. 9, 2018



(Photo: Merle Laswell/For the Register)

In the 50 years since the Higher Education Act was signed into law, students, workers, businesses and our economy have all transformed in response to the technological revolution that has swept the globe.

Yet our nation's approach to higher education seems to be stuck in neutral. It's time for our federal education policies to catch up with the reality of today's students, employers and job seekers in the new economy.

In 2017, the National Federation of Independent Business found that 45% of small businesses (<https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-04-12/america-has-to-close-the-workforce-skills-gap>) in America were unable to find qualified job applicants to fill job openings.

There are more than six million job openings across the U.S. – a record high (<http://money.cnn.com/2017/09/12/news/economy/job-openings-record-high/index.html>). Much of this workforce shortage is due to a serious middle-skills gap (<https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf>) in growing sectors of our economy such as advanced manufacturing, health care, IT, logistics, transportation, construction, infrastructure and others. In nearly every region of the country, lack of trained, skilled workers has hamstrung businesses and stalled economic growth. At the same time, millions of working people are in low-wage, low-skill jobs without access to the training, skills and education they need for a career in these fields.

Good jobs in many of these sectors don't require a four-year degree, but a certificate, credential or two-year degree. If we want to grow businesses, get people the skills they need to get their foot in the door and grow our economy, we've got to put short-term certificate programs and industry-recognized credentials on equal footing with traditional, four-year college degrees. The way to do that is by modernizing the Higher Education Act – in particular, the Pell Grant Program.

Since the 1980s, federal education funding like Pell Grants have supported traditional, four-year degrees, but not short-term certificate programs. This Pell Grant model was created before we were introduced to the Internet, email, smartphones or any of the technologies people are using on the job today.

Our approach to higher education needs to change with the times. We aren't investing in the students who want to earn the very credentials that are most important to employers. For instance, Pell Grants can be used for four-year degrees in French Literature, but not necessarily for short-term certificates or occupational credentials for in-demand careers such as welding or advanced manufacturing. Our country should invest in both kinds of students. To thrive, our nation needs philosophers and computer numerical control machinists, central supply technicians and coders.

We must remove the bias in federal education funding against career-minded students who want to work in the trades or earn a certification for a new, in-demand skill.

There is a bill in the House of Representatives called the PROSPER Act. This bill would amend the Higher Education Act to allow Pell Grants to be used for short-term occupational programs. The PROSPER Act is a start, but it is missing a critical piece – assurance that the programs would lead to high-quality credentials sought by employers.




Amanda Russell (Photo: Special to the Register)

There is a better, bipartisan bill called the Jumpstart our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act that would not only allow Pell Grants to be used for short-term occupational programs, but would also lead to quality credentials by encouraging employers and educators to work together to ensure programs teach the in-demand skills sought by employers. This is one of the few ideas in Washington supported by Republicans and Democrats in Congress, as well as the Trump Administration.

The future of the American economy is at stake. If we can modernize our federal education policies to better reflect the needs of the current labor market, we can help companies at home grow, bring companies back to the U.S., jump-start U.S. manufacturing, improve our infrastructure, keep our families healthy, enhance our cyber security and defend our homeland. The time to act is now.

Amanda Russell, Human Resource Generalist with Bazooka Farmstar, an advanced manufacturer in Washington, Ia. Russell is a member of Business Leaders United, a non-partisan organization dedicated to strengthening America's workforce.

Read or Share this story: <http://dmreg.co/2CYvCI0>



20% off your entire purchase

Visit us at Logan Circle

SHOP NOW

*exclusions apply