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Para Jones: On a mission to the close Ohio's talent gap

By Para Jones



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Stark State College is proud of our mission of providing affordable certificates and associate degrees that lead to rewarding employment and/or university transfer. We serve nearly 14,000 students from Stark, Summit, Wayne, Tuscarawas, Portage and several other counties in the region. We collaborate with school districts to ensure that high school students in the region have access to dual enrollment (now called College Credit Plus or CCP) courses, enabling them to earn valuable college credit while still in high school. College Credit Plus reduces both the cost and time to get a degree, which are critically important to all families.

Stark State recently received an Ohio Department of Education grant to include a new population of students in our mission: citizens 22 and older without a high school diploma, who have little or no hope of gainful employment. We are proud and honored to be among only five Ohio institutions developing a pilot Adult Diploma program for residents of Stark, Summit and Wayne counties. We have already begun this work with a network of education and community partners in all three counties, under the leadership of Dr. Betty Rider, the pilot project director.

Ohio has approximately 1.1 million citizens without high school diplomas. Stark, Summit and Wayne counties have a combined 106,699 citizens without a high school diploma and with few prospects for finishing their education and moving into high-growth, high-demand jobs. Meanwhile, Ohio employers have openings for skilled jobs they can't fill because of a shortage of qualified workers.

This talent gap is costing Ohio's economy billions of dollars. It is a major concern of Gov. John Kasich, who believes we must connect Ohio's dropouts to the free education and training they need to enter Ohio's unfilled job opportunities, escape poverty and help fuel a stronger economy.

Stark State will have an important role. The adult students who enter Ohio's Adult Diploma Pilot Program, scheduled to begin this fall, will earn a high school diploma from the State Board of Education. Simultaneously, Stark State will provide these adult students with training toward industrial certification for a job that is currently "in demand" among Ohio employers. The program will be delivered via competency-based education; adults will be able to show what they know and focus their learning in "gap" areas.

Betty Rider, her team and our partners will reach out to these citizens, many of whom do not have jobs, own homes or participate in the community in a way that could lead us to them. We will set up procedures to determine what help these individuals need to be able to take advantage of the program. General knowledge and literacy levels may vary widely. Once we identify individual knowledge and skill gaps, we'll devise systems to help members of this untapped workforce learn and succeed.

Stark State already has many great business and industry partnerships. We will be asking employers in our region to share their greatest workforce needs and what industry credentials and certifications their workers require. The Adult Diploma Program will allow us to build upon these business relationships.

Stay tuned for details on this program and how Ohioans age 22 or older without diplomas can begin to apply for it. Getting the program up and running is an ambitious but achievable task, thanks to Rider's leadership. I am confident that our regional program will be successful in providing adult students with education and training that lead to good jobs and successful futures.

We are pleased that Stark State has the opportunity to, yet again, fulfill our mission and vision by providing undereducated and underskilled adult students with education that leads to employment, career success and a

healthier regional and state economy.

Jones is the president of Stark State College.

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