

Skills, jobs and VVC

September 29, 2013

As we keep saying, California's unemployment rate is bad (10.9 percent at the end of July, which is about four points less than the real figure when those adults who've quit looking for work are factored in), but the Victor Valley's is worse. Here, while no solid figures are available, we suspect the jobless rate hovers around 15 percent, and the real rate (again, when those adults who've quit looking are included) is probably close to 20 percent.

But there's an upside to this, and it lies in what we're doing about education. Across California, it is not just information-technology jobs going unfilled because of a mismatch between what schools teach and what employers need. In many skilled-job categories — welders, critical-care nurses, electrical linemen, special-education teachers, geotechnical engineers, respiratory therapists — unemployment is practically zero. That includes in the Victor Valley.

Hands-on training

Notice how many of those jobs — particularly welders and electrical linemen — don't require the four-year college degrees some people think are the key to more jobs. No, what they require is trade school education, where people who want to learn a trade are given hands-on training, and when they obtain those skills become enormously valuable to basic manufacturing and repair employers.

For instance, VVC offers courses in automotive repair, plumbing, welding and carpentry... all of which are in high demand. That's why people with basic skills in those fields are in high demand and why if you have those skills jobs are plentiful.

Our view is that VVC's basic education mission these days ought to be directed to such fields. That's why, when we browse through VVC's catalog of courses, we don't linger long over such offerings as World Dance, which is designed "to introduce students to the elements of dances and dance techniques from specific regional areas, cultures or ethnic groups." Is that a valuable skill in this job market? We have our doubts.

A premium on skill

Our modern economy places an ever-higher premium on job skills, and yet we don't seem to have a public education system that responds to this fact. While VVC to its credit does offer several courses in computers why isn't a year or more of computer science a universal high school graduation requirement in California? The fact that there isn't says a lot about why there's a huge disconnect between the skills of the Golden State's high-school graduates and the needs of employers.

California, you may not know, has the highest poverty rate (after cost of living is factored in) of any state in the union. An enlightened governor's office and Legislature could make a start on correcting this by emphasizing the value of basic skills courses in its secondary and higher education systems, but so far Gov. Brown and his cohorts seem more concerned with new ways to regulate business and "protect" the environment than with the skills to make their way.

That's why it's so critical to the Victor Valley's future (and the future of its young people) that VVC satisfy the requirements laid down by the Accreditation Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and return to full accreditation. Struggling along without knowing what the future holds for VVC and the thousands of students who depend on its status does no one any good.

How does that old saw go? Ah yes, give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

Which reminds us. Does VVC offer a course in fishing?

Steve Williams