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Report: Indiana workers need more college money

By Ken Kusmer
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INDIANAPOLIS - A new report says nearly a million Indiana workers lack the education needed to become gainfully employed or to move into better paying jobs but have little financial aid available to obtain the skills they need.

The report by the Indiana Institute for Working Families said most state financial aid programs are designed for traditional students ages 18 to 24, leaving low-income adult workers unable to afford more schooling or training.

Since 2000, Indiana has lost about 200,000 high-paying manufacturing jobs for which little advance training was needed, and those jobs have been replaced by lower-paying positions in the service sector, the report said.

“As a result, we have more and more families struggling to maintain economic self-sufficiency,” lead author Sarah Downing said in an interview Monday.

The report said more than a high school diploma is needed for 37 of the “Hoosier Hot 50 Jobs” – high-wage occupations the Indiana Department of Workforce Development predicts will have the largest growth in the state by 2016.

“Further education is necessary,” whether it be a certificate program requiring one or two years of training, an associate degree or more, Downing said.

Most of Indiana’s state student financial aid programs target low-income traditional students up to age 24 who are still supported by their parents, she said.

“However, Indiana dedicates only a miniscule amount of its financial aid dollars (2.23 percent) directly to the needs of working adult students,” the report said.

Claudia Braman, executive director of the State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana, said some of the data the commission provided for the report was misinterpreted.

However, most of the aid the commission distributes – about \$250 million annually – is for full-time students, she said, agreeing it should offer more help to part-time students.

“The need for higher education is greater than it was several years ago,” Braman said.

Gina DeSanto, senior deputy commissioner of the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, said the state receives \$50 million annually to help workers raise their level of skills and education, but sometimes not all of the money is used.

Workforce Development and the Indiana Commission for Higher Education announced last week that the state had received \$31 million in federal stimulus funding to award up to \$3,000 per year, or \$6,000 over two years, for tuition, books and fees for an associate degree or vocational training program. Part-time students are eligible.

Downing said the program appropriately targets displaced workers and students from low-income families, but she noted it is a one-time deal because it uses stimulus funds.

“It does take a step toward overcoming the affordability barrier,” Downing said.

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