

## Ensuring the Growth of California's Transportation's Workforce



### ■ Trade and Transportation

*By Thomas O'Brien*

I've written a number of times about workforce development issues in this column. For one thing, I'm in the education and training business. My own success, and the success of our university, is measured in part by how well we prepare students for the challenges of a changing workplace.

Second, for those of us in the CSU and UC systems, we are acutely aware of how budget cuts and furloughs impact the ability of colleges and universities to respond to demands for relevant educational and professional development programs. For the transportation industry - which is what interests me most - the need for well trained engineers, planners, designers, construction managers and logisticians is greatest just when we are most challenged from a capacity perspective.

This issue has been on the radar screen of industry, government and academia for some time. We have known that the aging baby boomer generation would bring about changes to the workplace. By 2020 somewhere between 16 and 20 percent of the population will be 65 or older. More than 50 percent of the state transportation agency workforce eligible to retire in 2003 will do so by 2013.

This is a figure more than double that for the nation's entire workforce. These trends are forcing transportation agencies to consider the role that succession planning, job recruitment and job retention play in their agency mission and training strategies. The nature of the workforce replacing soon-to-be retired workers is also changing. There will be more women, more Hispanics and more Asians seeking employment. Training programs must respond to their unique needs.

At the same time, the transportation industry is being forced to rethink how it operates as a result of changing trends in technology and service delivery. This has an effect on the type of skills needed by employees of both the public and private sector, particularly mid- and senior-level managers. Skills once considered complementary, like project management and communications, are now considered central to effectiveness. Many of these skills have not been included in the curricula traditionally used to train transportation engineers and planners.

There are other issues. Professionals are not well prepared for the multi-agency coordination and public-private partnerships that are now a hallmark of major infrastructure efforts. Graduates of our colleges and universities do not enter the workforce prepared to address issues as diverse as team building, capital project analysis, visioning, and even community justice and civil rights. Public agencies in general are confronted with the need to identify means of designing training programs that respond to both agency-specific and individual needs. In California, for example, new legislative priorities at the state level may require transportation professionals to learn to calculate carbon footprints within the next few years. Is that on the syllabus?

Efforts to address these workforce development challenges have often resulted in fragmented or industry-specific programs that do not get at the heart of the changing nature of transportation systems and services. In response, a number of key leaders from the worlds of policy, industry and education have come together to develop a national transportation workforce development strategy that will offer new policy solutions to address workforce issues and produce high-performing transportation professionals now and in the future.

The timing of this effort is not coincidental. The next major piece of federal transportation legislation could come in 2010. If education and professional development programs are going to be part of the nation's transportation strategy over the next six years, then the case for funding them has to be made now. A national summit is being planned for Washington next fall to inform policy makers and elected officials about the

seriousness of the problem and the need for coordinated solutions.

In the run-up to the national summit, a series of regional summits is being held to document the transportation workforce issues in different parts of the country, gather data and highlight effective programs already making a difference.

One of these regional summits focusing on the unique case of California will be held in Long Beach on February 1 and 2. It will be sponsored by the METTRANS Transportation Center at CSULB and USC and the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University, in partnership with Long Beach City College.

“Ensuring the Growth of California’s Transportation Workforce: Developing the Right Workers for Today’s Challenges and Tomorrow’s Jobs” will identify the gaps in our workforce development efforts and offer solutions tested and refined in California’s unique and challenging environment. C-level executives, mid-level managers, front line supervisors, educators - anyone who hires, trains and educates transportation workers – will have a stake in the outcome and making sure that the right information gets to Washington.

One focus of the summit will be the role of the college and university as workforce development partner. By understanding our students as clients with particular needs, we may do a better job of designing new programs that keep us competitive in this difficult economic environment. We can’t expect our students to be open to new opportunities if we’re not open to them ourselves. That’s workforce challenge number one.

For more information on the Long Beach Regional Workforce Development Summit, please see [www.workforcesummit.org](http://www.workforcesummit.org).