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Making a Promise to Long Beach



■ Trade and Transportation
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After a 2009 that most would rather forget, 2010 has begun on a better note. The unemployment rate dropped below 10% for the first time since October, and trade volumes are up at our local ports. There's still a long way to go on our path to recovery (a 9.7 percent unemployment rate means that almost 15 million Americans are still out of work), but a little bit of good news can go a long way in strengthening your resolve for the road ahead.

There was a little bit of good news mixed in with some sobering reality at the recent workforce development summit co-sponsored by the METRANS Transportation Center at CSULB and USC. Titled "Ensuring the Growth of California's Transportation Workforce: Developing the Right Workers for Today's Challenges and Tomorrow's Jobs," the summit identified gaps in our transportation workforce development efforts and offered solutions tested and refined in California's unique and challenging environment. The summit, held in Long Beach, is part of a national effort led by the U.S. Department of Transportation and designed to identify solutions to a workforce crisis stemming from a number of issues. These include the retirement of the baby boomers, and a generation of students ill-prepared to plan for, design and develop the transportation systems of the future. First, the doom and gloom. At the summit, Gus Koehler, a Northern California-based workforce policy expert,

argued why both California and the U.S. should be concerned about our ability to compete with emerging economies. As a nation, we haven't kept pace with our competitors in some key indicators. We're clearly middle-of-the-road in terms of broadband penetration, which is related to growth in employment opportunity. And while we produce more researchers than any other country, those numbers are flattening out. Furthermore, China is catching up. Koehler predicts that California needs an additional 650,000 graduates of college programs to keep up with the world's top performers. By 2025 we will need almost a million people with a graduate degree. And they will need to be technically literate. Like much of the developed world, the U.S. has lost a significant amount of manufacturing jobs - in our case nearly 14% - in the period between 1992 and 2003. The story is similar in Japan, Germany, the UK, and France. That means we must compete in higher-end, value-added and information-based services.

The problem - as UC Berkeley professor Elizabeth Deakin put it - is that economic realities are making it hard for California's community colleges and four-year universities to respond to the challenge. According to Deakin, every \$25 million cut at the UC level means a 13 percent increase in student fees, another 10-20 furlough days for employees, or an additional \$500 million endowment needed to fill the gap. All this makes it hard to fulfill the mandate of the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, which pledged affordability, accessibility, and excellence in education for everyone who could benefit from higher education.

Things aren't much better at the high school level either. Young students need direction in choosing college and career pathways, but our state has the highest student-to-guidance counselor ratio in the nation: 900 to 1, compared with the national average of nearly 280 to 1.

The good news is that there are people working to change this. It's even better news for us that some of the most innovative thinkers are home-grown. The workforce development summit provided an opportunity for representatives of the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), Long Beach City College (LBCC) and CSULB to share some valuable lessons that could prove to be models for the rest of the U.S.

Long Beach Unified, which has done research to better understand why students drop out of school, has developed an Academic and Career Success Initiative that offers students a multi-year, multidisciplinary curriculum, combining classroom and work-based learning. Themes include biomedical science and engineering. Supplemental services include counseling, support classes, structured tutoring, mentorship and career advising.

Perhaps the most forward thinking response is the Long Beach College Promise, a program presented at the summit by CSULB President F. King Alexander; LBCC President Eloy Oakley; and Robert Tagorda, a special assistant to LBUSD Superintendent Chris Steinhauser.

The Promise offers "the opportunity of a college education to every student in the Long Beach Unified School District." More than that, it is designed in part to increase the percentage of LBUSD students who are prepared for and attend college directly from high school. The program exposes fifth- and sixth-graders to the college campus, helps families of middle school students set up college savings accounts, tests high school juniors to determine if they are college-ready, and offers tuition assistance. The center piece of the Promise is a guarantee that all LBUSD and LBCC students who complete the minimum college pre-requirements or transfer requirements for the CSU system will have a place at California State University, Long Beach. The coordinated efforts help give students and their families direction and purpose; and it keeps good talent local.

Who delivered the message was just as important as the message itself. The Long Beach Promise has support at the highest levels, and after some bad news, it was nice to be inspired by strong leadership. For those of us with ties to Long Beach, that inspiration came with a little pride in knowing that our port city is also exporting some valuable lessons.