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Trade and Transportation Literacy

■ Trade and Transportation

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The trade and transportation industry offers tremendous opportunities to young people in our region. Our role as a leading trade gateway means employment opportunities in a wide range of fields; and our relative proximity to trading partners in Latin America and Asia creates a demand for skilled personnel who not only know how the supply chain works but also how to navigate the political, social, economic and cultural differences among and between trading partners.

Language plays a big part in this. More doors will be open to job applicants with knowledge of a second or even a third language. And we are increasingly a linguistically diverse nation. America's foreign population has grown from just 10 million in 1970 to more than 42 million today; and roughly 1/5 of Americans speak a language other than English at home. There are close to 200 languages spoken in the greater Los Angeles area according to the Census Bureau, a figure second only to New York's among the 15 largest metropolitan areas in the country. Of the 35.3 million people in the state of California over five years of age, 15.35 million speak a foreign language at home.

The millennial generation is even more diverse than the general population. According to the US Census' 2014 American Community Survey, one in four millennials speaks a language other than English at home. In New York, New Jersey, Texas, New Mexico and Nevada that proportion increases to 1 in 3. In California, fully one-half of all millennials speak a language other than English at home.

We've looked at the role that language plays as part of our research at the Southwest Transportation Workforce Center (SWTWC) at CSULB. SWTWC's study area is an eight-state region stretching along the US-Mexico border from California to Texas and including Nevada, Oklahoma, Colorado and Utah as

well. Our analysis of the transportation labor market in the region indicates that in addition to employment opportunities in the trade sector there will also be tremendous growth in other transportation sectors. This includes a 22.6% increase in demand for transportation and operations engineers by 2022 and a 13.5% increase in rail-related operations positions over the same period.

For the next generation workforce, readiness for these positions will depend upon a range of skill sets that include those often grouped together as the STEM disciplines. But language also plays a critical role. Surveys of employers often reveal concerns about the lack of soft skills that new hires exhibit. These skills include basic communication, both oral and written. Language learning helps develop these skills. And when we talk about language development, we shouldn't forget that what we learn in English language class is also integral to success on the job.

Innovative educational programs increasingly contextualize the learning process so that students have an opportunity to develop discipline-specific knowledge while they are learning languages. This may mean using on-the-job training manuals in the English-as-a-Second language (ESL) classroom or asking English students to write critically about transportation-related topics.

It also means paying close attention to digital literacy. Communication these days is increasingly mediated through electronic channels. How to effectively use these channels is another challenge that new entrants to the workforce will face; and we should not assume that a generation raised on computers always knows how to use them on the job.

All of this increases the complexity of the workforce development process and places added responsibilities on those of us in the education sector who prepare students for the workplace. Making the most of our comparative advantage as a region, including our diversity, depends upon harnessing the efforts of the education community in concert with industry. Only in working together can we both identify the skills needed by employers and assess our effectiveness in producing graduates with those skills.

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