

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**CONTACT:**

Steve Doster, (717) 343-6403  
sdoster@readynation.org

**PENNSYLVANIA’S BUSINESS AND EDUCATION LEADERS: POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES ARE KEY TO BUILDING A STRONG WORKFORCE**

*Greater Access to Higher Education Will Help Close Pennsylvania’s “Skills Gap”*

LANCASTER, PA (May 11, 2018) – Partnerships with business, greater flexibility in education format for students and affordable access to postsecondary education will strengthen Pennsylvania’s economy by creating the skilled workforce the Commonwealth needs to erase a shortfall of qualified workers.

That’s the top-line message from a new ReadyNation report, “Expanding Postsecondary Opportunities for a Stronger Pennsylvania,” released on Friday at an event at the Lancaster Campus of HACC, Central Pennsylvania’s Community College. The report is available [HERE](https://bit.ly/2I5tUBS). (<https://bit.ly/2I5tUBS>)

A wide range of leaders from the local business and educational communities offered strong support for the report’s findings. Speakers at the event included **Sue Suter**, President & CEO, United Way of Lancaster County; **Alex Halper**, Director, Government Affairs, Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry; **Tom Baldrige**, President & CEO, Lancaster Chamber; **Dr. John J. “Ski” Sygielski, Ed.D.**, President of HACC – Central Pennsylvania’s Community College; **Victor Ramos**, Vice-President of HACC’s Lancaster and Lebanon Campuses; **Kathleen Prime**, Chief Learning and Talent Development Officer, The High Companies; **Zoann Parker, Ph.D.**, Vice-President of Academic Affairs, Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology; **Cathy Rychalsky**, Executive Director, Lancaster County Workforce Development Board; **Brigadier General (Ret.) George Schwartz, Ed.D.**, Director of Professional Studies, Immaculata University; and **Congressman Lloyd Smucker** (R-PA), 16<sup>th</sup> Congressional District of Pennsylvania. Several HACC students also spoke at the event.

The ReadyNation report warns that Pennsylvania faces a significant shortfall (or “skills gap”) of qualified workers in the near future, due to a lack of employees with the proper credentials or education to fill open positions. It notes that by 2024, 50 percent of the jobs in Pennsylvania will require some form of postsecondary education, but only 43 percent of working-age Pennsylvanians currently have such credentials. That gap means a less-productive, less-competitive Pennsylvania in which employers will struggle to find qualified workers.

Even worse, the gap is growing more quickly in skilled jobs, as opposed to non-skilled jobs, and the shortfall is particularly pronounced in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields.

One solution? To expand postsecondary opportunities and make educational experiences more flexible and accessible so that more Pennsylvanians will be able to acquire the skills and credentials they need. Participants in Friday's event touted greater educational opportunity as the path to a stronger workforce that will shrink the skills gap.

**Alex Halper** highlighted the severity and urgency of the skills-gap problem, noting that the seven percent gap "equates to over 430,000 jobs that won't have qualified applicants to fill them." He added that "we don't have to wait until 2024 to see the impact of the skills gap . . . more than half of Pennsylvania's employers have reported having difficulty hiring people with adequate skills, training, or education."

The speakers drew attention to the benefit to students of achieving a postsecondary credential. "Research tells us that Pennsylvania workers with some postsecondary education earn almost \$6,000 more annually than those with only a high school diploma," **Tom Baldrige** noted. "Postsecondary education also helps Pennsylvanians *stay* employed—workers with only a high school diploma experience an unemployment rate that is 20 percent higher than workers who have some postsecondary education."

In order to achieve these benefits, students need fewer hurdles between them and credential attainment. **Dr. John J. "Ski" Sygielski** highlighted this, agreeing with the report and specifically saying that "Simplifying the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), providing better student financial counseling and expanding financial aid to include more job training programs," will help address access and affordability for more students. "These common sense improvements to advising and financial aid can increase postsecondary graduation rates, especially for first-generation college goers."

In her remarks, **Sue Suter** added that the goal of building a stronger workforce through postsecondary education pathways aligns with the mission of the United Way. "We fight for a Lancaster County where everyone can obtain the education needed to get a good job and become financially resilient," she explained.

Speakers also emphasized the crucial value of the connection between the classroom and workplace, as partnerships between postsecondary programs and local businesses are another element that bolster the workforce. **General George Schwartz**, who also holds a doctorate in education, discussed how Immaculata University is supporting workforce development, especially for non-traditional students. "Postsecondary programs should be flexible in a way that takes into account students' past learning and life experiences as contributions to their current educational goals," he said.

The report highlighted other existing partnerships between Lancaster County businesses and educational institutions that are creating flexibility for students and preparing them for in-demand, family sustaining employment.

Finally, **Congressman Lloyd Smucker** attended the event and lent his support for greater postsecondary access. "I have my own experience with non-traditional education. I took college courses at night while operating a small construction company during the day," he explained. "Students across Pennsylvania and the nation have similar experiences, and we should be making it easier for them to gain the skills they need to compete in today's 21st century economy."