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## Wisconsin children must have education to find jobs in changing economy

By Tom Still  
Inside Wisconsin

A veteran television reporter recently asked me to name a few fields in which today's Wisconsin students can expect to find jobs after they complete their education. The real answer is: I don't know. And if I did know, I would invest every penny I have in those industries and gleefully count my earnings.

But the question about jobs for tomorrow deserves far more than a glib answer. Nervousness about the economy is changing how many people in Wisconsin view the future - especially young people, who may feel there's nothing to hold them here. Reversing that pessimistic state of mind is instrumental to spurring Wisconsin's economic growth.

A poll conducted by Wood Communications Group for the Wisconsin Realtors Association offered encouraging news about how people feel about the quality of life in their state, their communities, and their homes. The same poll of 600 Wisconsin residents 18 years old and older showed signs of despair over the economy. For example:

- \* 52 percent said the economy has hurt their employers and 35 percent expect more pain in the next six months.

- \* Only 58 percent claimed they're happy with their pay.

- \* Most consider job opportunities now to be fair to poor for just about everyone. Four out of five laid-off skilled workers don't think they will find a job. Only one in two people rated their own job opportunities as good. Most discouraging, however, were the attitudes expressed by young people. About three-quarters (73 percent) of high school graduates don't think they have a good chance of finding a job here.

If they judge their chances by today's economic mix in Wisconsin, those young people are right. Traditional farming hasn't contributed to Wisconsin's job growth in decades, although there are promising careers in agricultural bioscience and many food processing fields. Manufacturing accounted for more than 20 percent of Wisconsin jobs before the recession, but tens of thousands of those jobs have been lost since 2000. The days when a young person could graduate from college and land a lifetime job at the local factory are mostly gone - unless that young person is educated for a career in the "Knowledge Economy."

Tomorrow's job opportunities begin with education. For all the colleges, universities and technical colleges in Wisconsin, the state actually lags behind the U.S. average for adults with four-year degrees (23.8 percent versus 26 percent).

How can that be true in a state with the highest high-school SAT and ACT scores in the nation? Some Wisconsin-born young people have voted with their feet and moved elsewhere after college to find well-paying jobs. Also, the state does a remarkably poor job of attracting young college grads from other states - again, because there's a lack of good jobs. On the plus side is the technical college system, for about 96 percent of its graduates stay in Wisconsin and find jobs.

Manufacturing will always be a major part of the Wisconsin economy, but the manufacturers of the future are more likely to rely more on 21st century technology than 20th century assembly lines. Brains will replace brawn, and resourcefulness will supplant the ability to perform repetitive tasks.

What fields hold the most promise for today's Wisconsin students?

They must look to areas in which the state can produce goods and services that are competitive in a global marketplace. Today, industries that are trying to secure or regain that competitive edge include printing, papermaking, medical equipment, health care, education (a \$21.7 billion industry in itself), advanced manufacturing, food processing and transportation. The service sector is sometimes characterized as being filled with low-wage jobs, but some of the best-paying jobs in Wisconsin today are with business and financial services firms that rely on information technology.

In addition, there are a dozen or so "clusters" within Wisconsin's emerging high-technology disciplines that appear to have a head start. About half are in biotechnology and the life sciences; the rest are focused in information technology and communications.

Tomorrow's jobs will go to young people who are educated, who know how to communicate and think, and who develop technical expertise within their field. It's impossible to pick industry "winners and losers" within a rapidly changing global economy, but it's not difficult to predict that high-quality workers will be needed.

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