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EDITORIAL: Vermont's at the bottom; no excuses

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When a state has a 3.1 percent unemployment rate – as Vermont does – anyone who wants a job has a job. We've arrived at what economists call full employment, which begs the question: Why the worries?

It is a little like racing down a country road with the top down and the accelerator pressed to the floor; it's great while it lasts, and it's tempting to ignore the fuel gauge, but it's a problem when the engine sputters to a stop.

That's Vermont's fear; when we look down the road, we worry about having enough gas, or whether we even have the right car.

According to a report titled Advance Vermont, four out of five jobs lost during the Great Recession were held by Vermonters with a high school education or less. Those jobs no longer exist and it's anticipated by 2020 – four years away – that two-thirds of the jobs will require more education than the majority of Vermonters have.

That is a problem. Talk to anyone in advanced manufacturing or health care who is hiring: they struggle to find qualified applicants.

If the present trends continue, according to the report, Vermont will have 6,664 fewer people with a degree or "credential of value" by 2025 than we have today.

That is a potential crisis in the making. Of all New England states Vermont has the lowest percentage of high school students applying to college. We're at 60 percent. Among the low income, only 37 percent enroll in college, also the lowest percentage in New England.

Yet, as a state, we spend more than all of them except Massachusetts for a preK-12 education. We have much smaller class sizes. Our teacher student ratio is far below anyone else's. Our high school graduation rate is higher than almost any other state's. And we're still at the bottom.

Just when we should be putting down the accelerator - getting students to enroll in college the following fall - we look down at the gauge to see there is no fuel left.

It's interesting to see how the aspiration rates [those who express an interest in enrolling in college] vary from county to county and where the challenges are most pronounced. The county with the lowest aspiration rate for first generation high school graduates is Lamoille, where only 53.1 percent show any interest in college. Windham is second with 59.9 percent, Grand Isle is third with 60.6 percent and Rutland is fourth with 63.2 percent. [Franklin County is seventh with 67.9 percent.] Equally troubling is the fact that about a quarter of those who were followed in the 2012 report said they were going to enroll in college upon graduation, but did not.

Not only is this a problem for tomorrow's employers, it's a problem for institutions like the Vermont State College system, and the University of Vermont. They need the ratios to increase to populate their institutions. To meet the challenge the Advance Vermont goal is to have 70 percent of working age adults to have a postsecondary degree or "credential of value" by 2025.

To get there would require doubling the number we have now. Money is part of it. Obviously. Vermont's tuition rates are among the nation's highest, which makes it easier for students and their families to rationalize why the investment isn't worth it. Figuring out how to reconfigure our priorities so that post secondary education ranks higher than it does is a priority.

But figuring out ways to help lower tuition rates doesn't solve the state's most intractable problem, which is the battle the 40 percent face who aren't prepared to enter college, or those who don't think they have what it takes to succeed. In other words, for a fair percentage of our students it doesn't do much good to help pay for their tuition if they were raised in an environment that wasn't sufficiently supportive. That "environment" includes both home and school.

If Vermont is to succeed in reaching its 70 percent goal by 2025, it will need to do two things: first, establish that it's no longer sufficient to have a high school degree and second, commit to the understanding that Vermont's challenge is poverty and the environment that accompanies it.

Vermont's growth rate is stagnant, at best. The only way to increase the percentage of working age Vermonters with an adequate education is to address the needs of the 40 percent who say higher education is not part of their future.

The only way that can be accomplished is to devote more resources and more creativity to the needs of those children from ages two on.

It's not a battle to be fought in the last moments of a student's high school education. By then, it's too late.

There isn't anything easy about it. But if this is about keeping gas in Vermont's engine, and if today's students are tomorrow's engine, then what choices do we have if doing nothing isn't one of them?