

U.S. Mining, Energy Sectors Face Workforce Shortage

Vicki Smith, Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — The United States isn't producing enough qualified workers to meet the future needs of the mining and energy sectors, from coal digging and gas drilling to solar and wind power, a new report says.

The report released Thursday by the National Research Council urges new partnerships to tackle the problem of retiring Baby Boomers who cannot readily be replaced. That includes a retooling of higher education to produce more young people competent in science, technology, engineering and math.

The report predicts a "bright present and future" for energy and mining jobs, with continuing demand for workers and good pay for those who are hired. But it says some industries already face labor shortages and others soon will because the nation's colleges and universities aren't cranking out graduates with the skills that growing companies need.

Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration data, for example, show 46 percent of the workforce will be eligible to retire within five years, but there are too few younger workers in the pipeline to replace them.

The oil and gas industry, meanwhile, has a workforce that's currently concentrated at both the older and younger ends of the spectrum, the report says, "creating a gap in experience and maturity" in between and making it difficult to replace retiring leadership.

The report recommends several wide-ranging solutions, including outreach efforts to improve both the public's understanding and perception of energy-producing industries such as oil and gas.

Negative perception driven by concern over pollution, environmental damage and health issues, it notes, "dissuades some from pursuing careers."

It also notes that universities are seeing a faculty shortage that could affect oil and gas, mining and geothermal employers.

"Unless this is corrected," the report says, "the nation risks losing its capacity to provide new science and engineering professionals for the workforce."

The independent, nonprofit National Research Council is the main operating agency of the National Academy of Sciences. The nearly 400-page document was authored by 14 experts from universities, government and the private sector.

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It warns the higher education community that the traditional routes to degrees "do not adequately align" with industries' needs and notes "they are increasingly not affordable and accessible" for prospective students.

Community colleges are proving to be the best vehicle for delivering the technician-level, skills-based education the energy and mining industries need, the report says, offering programs ranging from one-year certifications to two-year associate's degrees.

Schools and employers should form more partnerships like those, the report said, and federal agencies should consider more research funding to schools to help drive technological innovation and develop faculty.

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