Missouri’s Community College Association (MCCA) outlined three issues in Missouri’s workforce and highlighted several ongoing efforts to address these issues in a report released Thursday, April 27.

The report, which pulls from several studies, listed supply and demand gaps for key industries, the availability of middle-skill workers and the availability of adequate soft skills as the three most severe gaps in the state’s workforce today.

According to the report, there is a gap between the number of jobs available and the amount of job seekers in several key Missouri industries.

Health care, business and sales and science and technology each had more than a 9 percent gap between the number of job adverts posted last year and the number of registered people searching for work.

East Central College President Dr. Jon Bauer believes the college is ahead of the curb in helping build a better workforce.

Bauer, who chairs the MCCA, said the college’s Business and Industry and Workforce Development Center were built to combat this exact issue.

“This is exactly why we thought the business and industry center was important,” he said. “One, it supports programs in key areas, especially those in manufacturing. I think it reaffirms what we’ve been talking about for a while and that is one of the primary issues facing us in our region, but also in the state, is a skills gap.”

Bauer said if the issues and gaps in Missouri’s workforce go unaddressed, the economic outcomes could hurt the state. He said without a well developed workforce employers are less likely to invest in the Show Me State.

“We know that there are demands for skilled workers in a number of fields, and yet we also know there is not adequate supply to meet that demand,” he said. “That means there are jobs that are not being filled and jobs that are not being created because employers know that the skilled workforce isn’t there to support those jobs, and we need to address that.
The report found the second gap centered around the number of workers qualified to fill jobs requiring more than high school, but less than a four-year degree. The report showed these “middle-skill” jobs make up 53 percent of the labor market, but only 46 percent of Missourians are trained adequately for these jobs.

Lastly, the report highlighted gaps in the availability of workers with basic “soft skills,” like communication, work ethic and critical thinking.

In one study the report referenced, more than 60 percent of employers reported difficulty finding workers with adequate soft skills.

Bauer said many of Missouri’s community colleges have or are launching several new initiatives, including the new Workforce Development Network, to combat the issues addressed in the report.

“We know that these gaps exist, and our colleges are working to address them,” said President and CEO of MCCA Rob Dixon. “One of the biggest challenges that we face in implementing these solutions is raising awareness among the public.”

Bauer said while there are serious issues in higher education, the issue of creating, supporting and developing Missouri’s workforce is critical. He said not acting on the report’s information would be a grave mistake.

“There are lots of things that we’re concerned about, one of the issues is student debt, and I think that’s a pending economic bubble that we’re concerned,” he said. “But I think equally important is the skills gap. We in higher education have a key role here, locally, in Missouri, and across the country.

“If we don’t step up to meet this need we’re doing a disservice to the people who created us and depend on us,” he said. “It’s a critical economic issue.”

Bauer added that Missouri’s community colleges and employers have a great opportunity to close these gaps by working together.

“There is an opportunity for us, there is an opportunity for individuals and if we're able there is a real opportunity for employers because they're going to be able to grow their businesses and create jobs," he said. “There’s no question about it. Community college have a proven track record of being able to deliver in these areas.”