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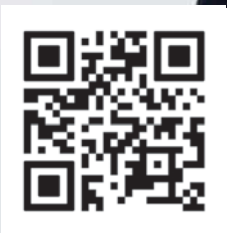
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REDEFINING POWER & PURPOSE

The Future of the American Economy is in Skilled Hands

By Chelle Travis, Executive Director, SkillsUSA



SkillsUSA members gathering in Washington, D.C. during an advocacy day.

COURTESY OF SKILLSUSA

We're at a crossroads. With millions of skilled labor positions unfilled, it's clear we have starved our economy of the essential talent required to build, protect and power our country. The workforce challenges facing our nation are not merely a series of HR headaches for businesses. They represent a fundamental threat to our national security and economic resilience.

For too long, the national narrative has implied that a four-year degree is the only path to success. Now, we must illuminate the full spectrum of high-value postsecondary opportunities—from certifications, non-degree credentials and apprenticeships to community and technical colleges, as well as bachelor's degrees and beyond. Our economy depends on it.

Skills Gap

The "skills gap" is often discussed in the abstract, but its consequences are startlingly concrete. In the construction sector alone, 92% of firms report difficulty filling positions. The same survey by the Associated General Contractors of America and the National Center for Construction Education and Research also indicated this labor shortage resulted in 19,000 fewer homes being built last year, costing our economy an estimated \$10.8 billion.

The manufacturing sector faces a similar cliff. Between now and 2033, we will need 3.8 million new workers, according to research from Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute. Without a robust talent development strategy, nearly half of those positions—1.9 million

high-wage jobs—could remain vacant. These aren't just numbers on a spreadsheet; they represent delayed infrastructure, weakened supply chains and a loss of global competitiveness.

SkillsUSA Framework

At SkillsUSA, we are bridging the gap between education and industry through a proven blueprint: the SkillsUSA Framework. We believe that technical proficiency is only one-third of the equation. To be truly career-ready, a student must also possess the personal and workplace skills that today's employers demand, but too many entry-level workers lack.

Our research, conducted with the Student Research Foundation, proves this approach works. Students who participate in

SkillsUSA have significantly greater career clarity than their peers. They are more likely to earn industry certifications and transition seamlessly into high-wage, high-demand roles.

Take, for example, Victoria Ingram, a SkillsUSA student leader from Virginia. Victoria is an engineering student who has mastered not only the technical demands of her field but also the communication and project management skills needed to lead. Her story—and the stories of the more than 400,000 students we serve—demonstrate that when you give a student the "SkillsUSA difference," you create a professional who can deliver under pressure from day one.

Strategic Mandate

To meet the urgency of this moment, we have launched our Drive to 65 strategic plan. Our goal is to grow our membership to one million students by 2030. We are expanding our digital infrastructure through platforms like SkillsUSA Pathful to democratize access to career exploration, ensuring that no matter where a student lives, they can connect with industry leaders in AI, cybersecurity, health care, the skilled trades, public service and more.

However, we cannot do this alone. To build a truly resilient economy, we need a unified effort across several fronts. The federal investment in career and technical education (CTE) must be modernized to reflect the rising demand and inflation of the 21st century. We also must incentivize industry experts to bring their real-world experience into the classroom. Without a strong pipeline of CTE instructors, there can be no pipeline of skilled workers. And we must focus curriculum on work-based learning. We need to formalize and fund the continuum of learning—from middle school career exploration to registered apprenticeships.

Path Forward

CTE is a proven solution to our most pressing economic challenges. It is a pathway to dignity, a high-wage career and a stable middle class. I recently testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Education and the American Family. As I shared with Congress, the future is in good hands—because it is in skilled hands. By investing in our students today, we aren't just filling jobs; we are building a stronger, more resilient America for tomorrow.

At SkillsUSA, the nation's leading workforce development organization for students, we work every day to prepare young people to become skilled professionals, career-ready leaders and responsible community members. The organization serves more than 444,000 career and technical education students and teachers



SkillsUSA's Executive Director Chelle Travis met with student leaders from SkillsUSA Maine during a leadership training.



Chelle Travis met with student leaders from SkillsUSA Puerto Rico during an advocacy day in Washington, D.C.

in middle schools, high schools and postsecondary institutions nationwide, representing 130 in-demand occupational areas, from 3-D animation to welding. Since its founding in 1965, SkillsUSA has supported more than 15 million members and remains a vital part of closing the nation's skills gap. Learn more at skillsusa.org and follow

us on Facebook, Instagram, X and LinkedIn.

Chelle Travis is executive director of SkillsUSA, the nation's leading workforce development organization for students. Since 2019, she has overseen record growth in membership and partner engagement. Her career spans secondary, postsecondary and technical education, where she has worked with career and technical



education stakeholders to shape curricula, programs and policy. Her work focuses on advancing CTE and helping students reach their full professional potential.