One of the most significant challenges facing the fuel and petrochemical industries is finding the next generation of craft professionals ranging from electricians to millwrights to everything in between. This challenge has led us to contemplate where will we find the next generation of craft professionals that we need. I have the answer – the SkillsUSA Championships being held this week in Louisville, KY.

SkillsUSA is a partnership of students, teachers and industry working together to ensure America has a skilled workforce. The SkillsUSA Championships is THE competition for the best of the best high-school, college/postsecondary and middle-school students enrolled in career and technical education programs. This is exactly what the industry needs, as it faces a combination of impending retirements over the next 5-10 years as well as the need for more craft professionals right now due to the number of new industry projects thanks to shale oil and natural gas. To make it to the main event, each of the 6,000 contestants had to win local and then state-level competitions. They then compete in one of over 60 skilled and technical competitions at the Championships including welding, engineering technology, occupational health and safety, electronics technology and more. Over 1,100 judges from business and labor evaluate the students' work and determine the winners.

The philosophy of the Championships is to reward students for excellence, to involve industry in directly evaluating student performance and to keep training relevant to employers' needs. From what I have observed on the competition floor, these students know their material and truly are the future of craft professionals.

AFPM supports efforts like those of SkillsUSA that encourage students to consider craft careers. As we like to say, from a GED to a PhD, there is a place for you. To the students competing this week, I strongly encourage you to steer yourself towards the fuel and petrochemical industries. You are champions at work, and we welcome you with open arms.

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