4-year college for all? Maybe not

Some experts now question relevance of bachelor degrees

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Beatriz Cruz is a senior at Jay High School and a student at the Alamo Aerospace Academy. Before enrolling in the academy, she had planned on being a veterinarian.

College for all.

It's become a familiar mantra in the U.S., often wed to the idea that every student should aim for a bachelor's degree.

But many experts are reconsidering the notion that everyone is cut out for — or even needs — a four-year degree.

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce estimates 63 percent of all job openings between 2008 and 2018 — about 30 million — will require some

post-secondary education. But of those, nearly half will require an associate's degree or less.

That includes jobs for paralegals, electricians, medical staff, construction managers, dental hygienists and airplane mechanics.

Plenty of people are going to college these days, but not enough are emerging with degrees. Community college dropouts alone cost taxpayers nearly $1 billion annually, according to a report released this month by the American Institutes for Research. Students also are racking up record amounts of debt, prompting President Barack Obama last week to announce reforms aimed at lowering borrowers' monthly payments. Even those with four-year degrees in hand are finding it hard to get good jobs — some have taken to the streets to join the Occupy Wall Street movement railing against economic inequality.

Rather than prodding everyone down the bachelor's track, schools and educators ought to beef up vocational alternatives that are quicker and lead to good careers, said Nancy Hoffman, vice president of Jobs for the Future, a Boston, Mass.-based nonprofit organization.

"The hardest thing for Americans to get over is the perception that a liberal arts degree is for the fancy people, and vocational education is for the leftovers," Hoffman said. "A four-year degree may not be what some young people are ready for, and it is not always the best ticket to the job market."

In San Antonio, a city that needs more educated residents at all levels, the drumbeat to go to college is getting loud, especially under Mayor Julián Castro. But like Obama, Castro is broad with his definition of college, including vocational certificates and two-year degrees.

Austin Phillips and Ricky Aguilar, both seniors at Southwest High School, ditched plans to go off to a university when they heard about a vocational program that could put them at the Toyota plant making about $20 an hour a couple of years out of high school.
In their junior year, the pair enrolled in the Alamo Manufacturing Academy, a partnership between the Alamo Colleges and various industry partners and school districts. They are taking college classes while still in high school, and this summer rose at 5 a.m. for an internship at Toyota.

"You get treated like an adult over there, it's pretty cool," Phillips said.
Phillips wanted to play tennis at the University of California; Aguilar aimed to study agricultural engineering at Texas A&M University.

Now, both plan to graduate high school, finish up an associate's degree at the Alamo Colleges and work as skilled team members at Toyota. If they get hired and want to continue toward a bachelor's degree in engineering, Toyota will reimburse tuition.

Phillips and Aguilar could graduate with no debt and solid résumés. But they will sacrifice the traditional college experience.

"Things change," Phillips said with a shrug. "You have to grow up and realize, 'This is the best option for me.'"

Skilled workers wanted

Earning a bachelor's degree does pay a premium — on average, 35 percent to 45 percent higher weekly wages than someone with an associate's degree or less, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

But that number does not tell the whole story.

About 27 percent of people with licenses or certificates make more than the average bachelor's degree recipient, and hundreds of thousands of students who enroll in bachelor's degree programs each year end up dropping out with debt and no degree. In today's faltering economy, recent college graduates are taking jobs they consider beneath their education level, while employers can't find enough "middle skill" workers, according to recent surveys by Rutgers University and ManpowerGroup.

Skilled tradesmen topped ManPower's list of hard-to-find workers this year, followed by sales representatives, information technology staff and machine operators.

David Crouch, vice president for Toyota Motor Manufacturing Texas Inc., said the toughest jobs to fill at Toyota are the 15 percent that require skilled labor.
"We originally tried to recruit from Bexar County, then we went statewide, then nationwide," Crouch said.

Toyota's partnership with Alamo Academies is an effort to strengthen that pipeline, which has declined along with career and technical education in high schools.
Like manufacturing — which has a reputation as hard, dirty work — vocational education has an image problem, said James Stone, director of the National Research Center for Career & Technical Education. Stereotypes of the shop-class kids as goof-offs are hard to overcome.
Gene Bowman, director of the Alamo Academies, said he does not get too many referrals from high school counselors or teachers for the programs in manufacturing, aerospace and information technology.

Despite the benefits — good jobs, free college classes — the academies are only enrolled at 72 percent capacity, Bowman said.

Today's skilled jobs are not the dirty, repetitive work of the past, Crouch said. They require understanding of complex machinery, problem-solving and good communication.

Many students like using their brains, but hate sitting in a classroom, Stone said.
In Bexar County, school district officials say they're sold on the importance of vocational programs. Northside Independent School District recently opened a Construction Careers Academy, and the San Antonio Independent School District is spending $74 million of its 2010 bond package to enhance career and technology facilities, including a new aquatic science lab.

But the message from No Child Left Behind and state testing is to focus on core subjects, said Chrissie Kolb, a spokeswoman for the North East Independent School District. In Texas, students now are required to take four years of math and science, elbowing out not just vocational education but athletics and the arts.

"There is just no time," Kolb said.

Not everyone agrees the focus on a bachelor's degree is misguided, even if students fail to get the piece of paper.

Stephen Rose, a research professor Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, said salary data show a financial benefit for "some college."

Most workers end up in cubicles, Rose said. If nothing else, "some college" gives them enough background in task completion to prepare them for the life of an office worker.
"They have been getting skills. It is not like it is a total waste," Rose said.
Also, success rates are worse for shorter-term credentials.

Completion rates for full-time students in certificate and associate's degree programs at public institutions range from 19 percent to 27 percent, compared to 61 percent for bachelor's degrees, according to a recent report by Complete College America, a Washington-based nonprofit.

For-profit career schools brag higher completion rates, but their tuition often is five times the cost of a public college. Students borrow heavily to attend, and many end up defaulting on their loans.

It helps to get students interested in careers when they are young, before "life" gets in the way, statistics show.

Beatriz Cruz, a 17-year-old senior at Jay High School and a student at the Alamo Aerospace Academy, worked as a summer intern making $10 an hour at Gore Design Completions, a company that does custom outfitting of private jets. Before enrolling in the academy, she had planned on being a veterinarian. Cruz still wants a bachelor's degree, but probably not in animal science.

"I realized this was way better," Cruz said. "I found something I liked and am interested in."

The American way

In Europe, students are directed toward career pathways early in their schooling. But that smacks of "tracking" to many Americans, hearkening back to a time when girls and minorities were pushed down vocational paths with little choice in the matter. American students have a choice, but they need better information to make good decisions, said Jo-Carol Fabianke, vice chancellor for academic partnerships at the Alamo Colleges.

At the Alamo Colleges, most incoming students are herded down the same path of core curriculum classes, with the expectation they will eventually transfer to a four-year university. Chances of that happening are not good, especially for those who start out behind.

Next fall, the Alamo Colleges will launch new advising guidelines that take the student's goals and ability level into consideration and present options that are a good match. "We would like to think that everyone can be a rocket scientist, but not only is that not possible, many students are not interested in that," Fabianke said.

As it is, students often meander aimlessly, change their minds, or quit and come back later.

"Welcome to America. It's a healthy tension," Rose said. "There is no perfect system here because there are late bloomers, and our system allows for late blooming out the wazoo."

Laura Salazar, a local art instructor, has attended Houston Community College, the Alamo Colleges and University of Texas at San Antonio, where she dropped out after taking out $5,000 in loans.

"I basically wimped out," Salazar said. "It was killing me. I could not work to support my child."

Salazar opened a craft shop and school called the DIY Factory and is happy with her career, but the lack of a degree still nags at her.

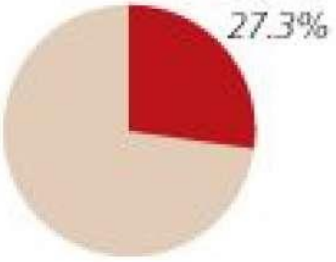
"I think about it every time I talk to my daughter about the importance of going to college," Salazar said.

Hard time finishing

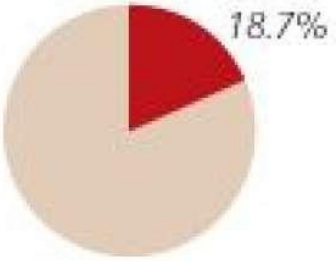
A study by Complete College America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, found that too few students are leaving college with a credential.

COMPLETION RATES FOR FULL-TIME STUDENTS

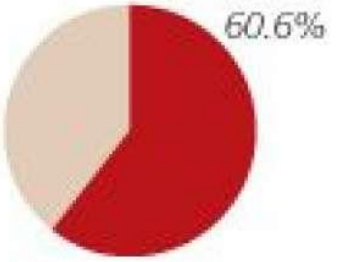
WITHIN 2 YEARS, only 27.3% have completed a one-year certificate



WITHIN 4 YEARS, only 18.7% have completed a two-year associate's degree



WITHIN 8 YEARS, only 60.6% have completed a four-year bachelor's degree



Source: Complete College America

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