

Postsecondary education for non-dummies

In this era of high technology manufacturing, four years and a bachelor's degree is hardly the only smart path to take. Only 22 percent of jobs in our state require a bachelor's or above.

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JULY 14, 2017 — 7:00PM

Minneapolis Star Tribune

High school graduation should be a time of optimism about the future and congratulations all around. But I heard recently about a mother who was in mourning at her son's graduation, struggling to restrain tears.

She had implored him to enroll in a four-year college, but he had chosen a two-year technical college instead. Now she fears he has lost his chance at the good life.



ANTHONY SOUFFLÉ

Skills in demand: Bret Lauderbaugh of Ultra Machining Co. in Monticello, Minn., displayed a tool that sends measurements wirelessly to his main computer.

In fact, her son may have made a shrewd decision. Today, too many high school graduates start down the four-year road because they mistakenly think it's the only route to success. Too often, they wind up dropping out, jobless and in debt, and lacking the skills they need to succeed in the 21st-century workforce.

In recent decades, our society has developed a powerful cultural bias that a four-year college degree is optimal for everyone, and that any other path to a career is second-best, "for dummies." But in fact young people who choose alternative pathways — like a two-year associate's degree, an apprenticeship or an occupational certificate — can often land in-demand, well-paying jobs fast, avoid crippling debt and look forward to a secure future. Some earn significantly more than classmates who choose the four-year route.

Of course a four-degree remains an excellent choice for many. But it's increasingly clear that our educational system's single-minded focus on four-year colleges is failing many of our young people. It is also placing our society's future prosperity in jeopardy.

Here's the paradox: Today, while an increasing number of young people — especially young men — are adrift and living in Mom's basement, thousands of skilled jobs are going begging in our state. This is especially true in high-demand fields like technical occupations and the trades.

Our state's manufacturers, for example, struggle to fill two-thirds of the available jobs, according to Minnesota's Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). The problem will grow worse as baby boomers continue to retire.

This skills gap will severely hamper the ability of Minnesota's economy to grow unless we address it with urgency now.

"Today, 79 percent of construction companies can't find enough qualified workers," according to Dennis Medo, who heads Project Build Minnesota. "Unless that changes soon, building costs may skyrocket and many construction projects simply won't get built."

"More than 40 percent of technical workers in the utility industry are eligible to retire in the next five years," says Bruce Peterson, executive director of the Minnesota State Energy Center of Excellence. "But if you take 40 percent of the people out of the power plants, how do you keep them running? None of us can function without electricity." All the skilled trades are "in the same predicament," he adds.

The solution is hiding in plain sight. We must do better at informing students, and their parents, about all their opportunities as they make postsecondary plans.

Many are likely to find the benefits of a non-four-year path enticing. For example, apprentices and students in some technical college programs can begin earning money in their occupation at age 18. The "learn and earn" model enables them to pay for their education and begin their careers with little or no debt as young as age 20.

Those entering in-demand fields can generally expect several job offers before they finish training. Many have impressive earning potential.

For example, the median annual wages for air traffic controllers, medical sonographers and dental hygienists are \$143,000, \$75,900 and \$72,500, respectively, according to DEED.

Electrical repairers and installers' median annual wages are \$58,600, and HVAC repairers and installers' are \$52,200. For electric power line installers and power plant operators, the figures are \$76,400 and \$72,700.

And that's just the beginning. Graduates with a two-year associate's degrees can go on to earn a four-year degree, in a "2 plus 2" arrangement. Sometimes employers will cover the cost of additional education. Those in the trades, such as electricians, plumbers and carpenters, can launch their own businesses if they like.

Unfortunately, many young people never learn about attractive opportunities like these, because of our society's "college for all" mantra, which rests on a number of myths.

The first is that a four-year degree is a kind of ticket you must punch to have a wonderful life. But here's the startling reality: Only 22 percent of jobs in our state require a bachelor's degree or above. Nevertheless, in a recent survey at the Southwest Career Expo, 64 percent of 10th-graders in southwestern Minnesota responded that they plan to attend a four-year college.

In short, today there's a striking mismatch between the educational requirements of the jobs in demand and students' educational pursuits. As a result, some Minnesotans with a four-year degree have a hard time finding work in the occupation for which they trained.

A quarter of all bartenders in Minnesota are graduates of four-year colleges. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 100,000 college-educated Minnesotans are working as retail salespeople, waiting tables and working as maids and janitors — all jobs that require a high school degree or less.

Here's another myth: You use your brain in jobs that require a college degree, but otherwise you're just swinging a hammer or a cog in a machine.

Anyone who believes that hasn't seen a modern manufacturing facility. The Charles Dickens-era stereotype of "dark, dirty and dangerous" is woefully out of date. Today's manufacturing plants are high-tech, safe, and often as clean as a doctor's office.

I recently visited Ultra Machining Co. in Monticello. The computerized numerical controlled (CNC) machines I saw there are operated by highly trained, mathematically sophisticated machinists. The parking lot is filled with late-model trucks — some pulling an ATV or boat — and machinists can opt for a work/life balance that includes a three-day weekend.

At the state-of-the-art Minnesota Carpenters Union training facility in St. Paul, I heard about the many complex skills carpenters master, such as how to use computerized robotics and GPS to lay out building foundations and how to create negative air pressure environments to work safely in occupied hospitals. Yet the average age of those starting their four-year apprenticeships is 28.

“We’d like to get them at age 19,” says Kyle Makarios, until recently the union’s director of government affairs, “but young people don’t seem to see carpentry as a desirable, meaningful career. If they were exposed to its rewards in high school, we could attract them much sooner.”

Robert McLain, a 27-year-old HVAC technician, says he would have chosen his path earlier if he had known how rewarding and intellectually stimulating his work would be. Not one teacher or counselor at his large Minneapolis high school mentioned the trades as a career option, he says. So he drifted from job to job until age 24, then entered Hennepin Technical College’s two-year program, where he snagged one of the school’s many scholarships.

Today, he earns twice as much as a friend who has both a four-year degree and a \$44,000 debt, McLain says. He loves the constant problem-solving in advanced electronics, and the fact that “I never know what puzzles the day will bring.”

In 2014, the average loan debt of students at four-year Minnesota institutions was almost \$32,000, with a typical repayment cost, including interest, of almost \$58,000. In Minnesota, 1 in 9 higher-education borrowers has seriously delinquent student loan debt.

About half of Minnesota high school graduates enroll in a four-year college. But only 36 percent of full-time, first-time students at the state’s public four-year institutions graduate in four years from the school where they started. Fifty-five percent finish in five years. Fewer than two-thirds have completed their degree after six years.

Fortunately, educators, employers, unions, nonprofits and government entities are tackling our skills gap/workforce development challenges in innovative ways.

For example, school districts such as Alexandria, Shakopee, Burnsville and Rochester are revamping their curricula. The Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training in Virginia offers an excellent program called “Career EdVenture” to area schools. The program provides a host of career planning resources, teaches about employers’ expectations and helps students plan their optimal individual career paths.

Meanwhile, employers are donating state-of-the-art equipment to technical colleges, starting their own world-class-level apprenticeship programs or forming industry associations to work together to solve their talent pipeline challenges. In greater Minnesota, where the workforce problem is most acute, whole communities are pulling together to attract and retain skilled workers and to ensure top-quality educational options for all students.

Where can students and parents find the information they need to evaluate all their postsecondary options? A paper from DEED — “What to Know Before You Owe,” available online — lays out a great initial decision-making strategy.

Families can also consult DEED’s remarkable online “Graduate Employment Outcomes” tool, which shows how many Minnesota graduates are finding jobs from a broad range of majors and at what wages. Another online tool from DEED, “Occupations in Demand,” includes information about careers that don’t require postsecondary training.

The Center of the American Experiment, a public-policy institution in Minneapolis where I am a senior policy fellow, has launched a new project titled “Great Jobs Without a Four-Year Degree: What It Means for Students, Parents and Employers.” The project’s mission is to ensure that students and parents know about the many exciting, fulfilling paths to career success.

Going forward, our society needs to re-emphasize the importance of honoring and respecting those who choose alternative career paths for the vital contributions they make to our communities. Our state’s future prosperity, and the well-being of many of our young people, depend on it.

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