

BUSINESS TRACK ARTICLE

We should advocate for trade schools just as much as college, especially after a pandemic

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<https://www.uscannenberghmedia.com/2021/07/02/we-should-advocate-for-trade-schools>



Why is it always, “Make sure you go to college,” and never “Make sure you go to trade school?”

Most high school students are funneled into two- or four-year universities. Little thought is given to other paths toward adulthood, and schools and parents often fail to present alternative options.

The allure of a college degree has tarnished the reputation of trade schools.

COVID-19 hammered most professional sectors but many trade jobs saw double or triple growth. During the economic downturn, trade labor continued expanding despite a volatile world. The pandemic revealed just how much rests upon the shoulders of skilled trade workers.

For students who may not know what they want to do, or if they merely want to try something other than college, trade school offers promise. Many trade workers collect far higher salaries than college-educated young adults

and, in some other countries, trade school is popular and encouraged.

One reason high school conversations rarely gravitate to trade school is, in part, because of the stigma that comes with not attending college. But forgoing college does not equate to failure; in some cases it means better pay and better work-life balance down the line.

We should advocate for pursuing trade school just as vocally as we praise the college-bound.

The assumption today is that, without college, you won't secure a job that pays well enough to live comfortably or raise a family. But pursuing a traditional college degree should not be presented as an ultimatum or sole option because it stigmatizes other paths which may be just as viable.

Forcing students — or telling them they have only one viable path to follow — to subject themselves and their families to the cost of education is troublesome. College does not make the most sense for everyone. The upfront investment is high (college tuition has increased 213% in the last 30 years) and returns are not guaranteed.

Underemployment is a measure that determines if an individual is working in a job they are overqualified for. For college grads, the underemployment rate is nearly 50%.

While college does not shield you from potentially working low-wage, physically demanding and labor-intensive jobs, the glowing adulation of a degree makes it seem like it could. What's more, trade and skilled labor jobs fail to capture the attention or respect of those who attend college.



"Stop looking for the 'right' career, and start looking for a job. Any job. Forget about what you like. Focus on what's available. Get yourself hired. Show up early. Stay late. Volunteer for the scut work. Become indispensable. You can always quit later and be no worse off than you are today. But don't waste another year looking for a career that doesn't exist. And most of all, stop worrying about your happiness. Happiness does not come from a job. It comes from knowing what you truly value, and behaving in a way that's consistent with those beliefs."

- Mike Rowe

Jobs that do not require a four-year degree — such as industrial, construction or service trades — still demand highly skilled, competent and effective individuals. More dangerous trade jobs, such as those in the fishing industry or coal miners, pay far better than some white-collar jobs and ask applicants for skills rather than experience.

Mike Rowe made a name for himself by hosting the TV show, "Dirty Jobs." He traveled the country working trade jobs. Plumbers, electricians, brick layers, fishers and innumerable other skilled workers had Rowe join in on their work, leaving him impressed and humbled.

Many of these workers were happy and entrepreneurial, with families and a healthy work-life balance — and many did not attend college.

Rowe's program illustrates how unfairly trade jobs are stigmatized and then avoided in favor of a college degree.

"Our crumbling infrastructure, our widening skills gap, the disappearance of vocational education, and the stratospheric rise in college tuition—these are not problems," Rowe writes on his website. "These are symptoms of what we value. And right now, we have to reconnect the average American with the value of

a skilled workforce. Only then, will the next generation aspire to do the work at hand."

Student loan debt continues to pile up every year (though the Biden administration may address this) and young adults continue to pursue higher-ed. At the same time, millions of trade jobs across the country wait to be filled, but there are too few skilled trade workers who can fill them.

College is a wonderful experience, but it should not be promoted at the expense of trade schools and skilled labor jobs. A Washington State auditor report found that hiring managers in the skilled labor market cannot find enough employees — even despite generous starting-salaries.

Among other things, the report suggested career guidance for high schoolers and middle schoolers that focused on alternatives to the university path.

Finding a trade or undertaking an apprenticeship can pay dividends when compared to the cost of a four-year degree (and 59% of students take five years to graduate anyway). Most certifications from a trade school cost a fraction of what a single semester may cost at a brand-name university, and they take far less time to acquire.

Further, those with a technical education enjoy a higher chance of employment compared to those with academic training, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

At the very least, these options should be given more consideration than they currently are.

The next time you see a high school student, think twice about asking them what college they plan to attend.

Try asking them if they've thought about trade school.



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