

We Need More Vocational Training

Mike Collins, author of Saving American Manufacturing

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The concept of “everyone should go to college” is finally being questioned, which I think is long overdue. In fact, the U.S. Labor Department says that most jobs (69 percent in 2010) don’t require a post high school degree.

To get an idea of what the economy is going to offer in the next ten years, look for the Labor Department chart titled “Occupations with the largest job growth, 2010 and projected 2020.” This cites a big quantity of the jobs that will be created in this decade. You will find registered nurses, teachers, physicians, and accounting jobs with good wages, but all of the other jobs average about \$33,840 per year. The simple reason is a degree in nursing, teaching, accounting, and medicine all teach specific skills that are used in their jobs. It is time to convince parents that the “college for all crusade” is no longer valid and the new mantra should be “get skills in your education.”

Hiring, By The Numbers

I think a better alternative for the four year humanities and liberal arts students is a vocational or two year education to learn applicable skills. Vocational education started out in the 1960s with great promise, but the idea was sabotaged when community colleges found that it was easier and cheaper to become prep schools for four year colleges and the emphasis on vocations slowly faded. But interest in vocational education seems to be growing again.

A study by Michigan State University (“Recruiting Trends Report,” November of 2012), projected four year college degrees would grow three percent in 2012/13. However, they also found that employers expect to increase hiring of associate degrees by 31 percent, compared to five percent for bachelor degrees.

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There are thousands of four year graduates in history, psychology, sociology, the arts, music, and literature who are employed as waiters, bartenders, baristas, retail clerks, food preparers, truck drivers, cashiers, and personal care aids. On the other hand, associate degree graduates can get skilled jobs such as veterinary technicians, engineering technicians, occupational therapy assistants, paralegals, webmasters, radiological technologists, machinists, firefighters, IT technicians, and auto mechanics, where they learn the skills to get a family wage job. They pay much less for school, incur less debt, finish school two years earlier than a bachelors graduate, and can start earning money and climbing their career ladder earlier.

Manufacturing Needs Skilled People – Now

A recent report by Deloitte LLP Consulting for the Manufacturing Institute, based on a survey of manufacturers, found that as many as 600,000 jobs are going unfilled per year. At the lower end of skill jobs there is always a shortage of welders, grinders, and machine operators, and most students are simply not interested in these jobs...yet. Even though these lower skilled jobs are going begging, I would like to make the case that what manufacturing really wants are multi-skilled craftsmen. Companies say they want more hands-on experience, advanced problem solving skills, advanced troubleshooting skills, and employees that have the skills to participate in innovation and new products. They want generalists who can do a wide variety of jobs in the plant and they need a true craftsman more than a machine operator.

The only way we will get these kinds of skilled employees in manufacturing is for the government to help ramp up the community college programs and to join them with apprentice or on-the-job training sponsored by the employers. These are highly paid jobs in machining, fabricating, assembly, troubleshooting, testing, and field service, to name a few.

What Is The Government Doing To Help?

Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis and Under Secretary of Education Martha Kantar announced nearly \$500 million in grants to community colleges around the country. The grants support partnerships between community colleges and employers to develop programs that provide pathways to good jobs, including building instructional programs that meet specific industry needs.

“The president knows that building a well-educated workforce is critical to reviving and strengthening the American economy,” said Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. “These grants will help community colleges and businesses work together to give students the skills they need to compete for good jobs in growing industries.”

In his State of the Union message in January 2013, President Obama proposed \$1 billion for 15 manufacturing innovation institutes around the country. These centers are supposed to encourage research and development activities and deploy new

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innovations for manufacturers in the area.

We live in an age where there is much recognition for students who are going to college to become doctors, lawyers, politicians, presidents, actors, or professional athletes. But there is little or no recognition for people who could be very good as electricians, plumbers, carpenters, machinists, and other highly skilled jobs.

We lack the education and training systems to teach these skills and help more people get the family wage jobs produced in the new economy. We have an overabundance of general four year college graduates who are going to find it hard to get a family wage job and pay back their debt.

I have a couple of suggestions. First, we could make the loans and grants for general degrees more expensive to get because they are higher risk. Second, divert government money now going to universities to vocational programs or classes that emphasize job skills. It is time to reconsider the idea of "college for everybody" in this economy and to evaluate the other options to get kids a family wage job and at least a good grip on the bottom rung of a career ladder.

Mike Collins is the author of Saving American Manufacturing. You can find him on the web at www.mpcmgt.com [2].

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