



Why Our Old Approach to College Is Putting a New Generation at Risk

BY MARK C. PERNA

Society has done a huge disservice to young people by relying on outdated educational and workforce-training models developed 50 years ago. Our one-size-fits-all approach that promotes college as the single path to a profitable, high-skilled profession is putting both the economy and an entire generation at

risk.

We face a national crisis of rising college costs, decreasing degree-requiring jobs and employer frustration with the younger generations in the workplace. Meanwhile, we're pushing young people to obtain college degrees while simulta-

neously ignoring the importance of also acquiring valuable work skills. As a result, only [1 in 5 students](#) feel prepared for today's job market. We're saddling them with [enormous college debt](#) for degrees that may not pay off.

Today's emphasis should no

longer be just about getting young people ready for college. It should be about preparing them for careers for which college is one of many available options. College is a great postsecondary option -- if their career path requires it. Too many young people today go just to go, and too often, because of lack of forethought, they choose a field of study where there either are no jobs available or they aren't adequately trained for a profession.

What young people don't often know -- because no one tells them before they venture into the workforce -- is there are great, living-wage careers to pursue that don't require them to go to college. Many of today's high-paying, high-skilled careers require a specialized industry credential or certification, not a college degree.

The disconnect between sending young people off to study for degrees without regard for whether it trains them for a profession has resulted in dramatic skills gap in today's workforce. Employers are starving for people with hands-on skills and experiences that come from certifications, apprenticeships, licen-

tures and career training programs. A recent study showed that by 2025, the United States will be [short 11 million](#) qualified workers to support the economy.

Manufacturers around the country, for example, are in desperate need of precision machinists. But attracting the younger generation to the work is remarkably difficult because of the stigma that only lower-performing students choose this kind of career. Still, the field offers immediate employment, high wages and advanced opportunities. Far from the old stereotype of a dead-end factory job, work in this field now ranges from a robot operator to a machine builder to a computer automated manufacturing engineer.

Students in both middle and high schools need to be made aware of the plethora of career avenues available and their respective training and salary prospects. Intentional career planning early on will allow them to choose advanced education purposefully and give them a better chance of reaching their goal.

Prioritizing early career exploration also:

1. Gives young people a sense of direction. Once they're made aware that their interests can translate into exciting career opportunities, they can begin exploring the appropriate academic pre-requisites and early training opportunities that will catapult them into a promising future.

2. Answers the "why" behind their high school educations. "Because I said so" is not enough of a reason for Gen Y and Zers who want to know the "why" behind all what's asked of them. Opening their eyes to the path needed for pursuing a chosen career can spark enthusiasm to perform at a higher level. They'll understand the relevance of their education to the life and career they want to achieve.

3. Invites more experiential learning. When teachers, coaches and counselors know what careers their students want to pursue, they can connect the coursework toward the attainment of their students' dreams. Assignments, field trips, guest

speakers, service projects and more can allow students to explore their interests and prepare for their various career paths.

4. Allows them to acquire skills and industry knowledge that can empower young entrepreneurs. Internships, apprenticeships and other hands-on opportunities are just a few of the ways young people can begin to excel in their fields of interest. [Studies](#)

[show](#) that students who are exposed to career options early on in their educational journey graduate high school in great numbers (93% over the national average of 80%). Career and technical education programs give students a distinct competitive edge.

5. Positions them to know their objectives before investing time and mon-

ey. Most young people have been taught to first pick a college to attend, then pick a major, and when they finally graduate, then decide what job they want to do. But reversing the order would help direct them along the way and save them from having to figure out life with that enormous financial clock ticking.



MEET MARK C. PERNA

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