

Chris Rosander: Real world skills offer a big value

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I'm going to scream B#8t-R5\$9! if I see one more television commercial or Internet article urging all high school students to attend university because of the earnings gap between young adults with and without bachelor's degrees.

That's like offering students a Mercedes or a Volkswagen without mentioning the BMW, which is Career Technical Education. They're comparing the earnings of 20% to 30% of the population who earn a bachelor's degree with the rest of the population, most of whom graduate from high school without real technical skills training (if they graduate at all).

I recently attended a CTE conference and sat next to a gentleman who told me he earned so much from his electronics trade in the construction industry that he was able to retire early and pick up a credential to teach high school CTE for fun.

During the conference, the speaker mentioned the need for more CTE classes for high school students.

The electronics teacher spoke up, agreeing with the speaker and then added his strong opinion that high school counselors were a major part of the problem, steering most students into college-prep courses to meet their counseling department's "scorecards" for university enrollment.

He didn't realize it, but the woman sitting on the other side of me was in charge of high school counseling for one of the local school districts, and I sat there wondering if she would react to his opinion. She did, but she waited until after we had watched an excellent video discussing the misalignment between education and the work force.

The video, written by Kevin Fleming and titled "Success in the New Economy," should be required viewing for guidance counselors so they understand the need for exposing students to a broad array of college and career pathways.

That exposure should begin in middle school so that students entering high school are excited about taking courses aligned with their interests and relevant to their future.

According to Fleming, higher income perceptions have fueled college enrollments to the point that students will go to any college and major in anything in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. The result is 66% of today's high school graduates enrolling in college.

But most are dropping out and only one-fourth of them are finishing a bachelor's degree.

He estimates that half of college graduates are underemployed.

In fact, I know someone who majored in psychology but wasn't interested enough to pursue the graduate degree needed for a decent job in that career field.

He had spent summer vacations learning construction with his uncle's home-building company, so he started a remodeling business after graduating from college and eventually became a successful developer making millions.

If it hadn't been for the construction skills, he might have become another underemployed college graduate.

According to Fleming, for every job requiring a master's degree or higher, there are two jobs requiring a bachelor's degree and seven jobs requiring skilled technicians and trades. This ratio is fundamental to most industries and was the same in 1950, 1990 and will be the same in 2030.

The labor market is desperate for highly skilled and trained technicians, and sending more students to college won't change the types of jobs available.

It won't help students find satisfying careers, and it won't necessarily result in higher incomes. Fleming argues that students are more likely to excel and earn higher salaries in careers aligned with their interests, aptitudes and abilities.

In the video, he compares the average annual income of \$105,000 for management occupations versus \$51,000 for electricians and cites the example of a student pursuing a business degree because of perceived higher incomes instead of following his aptitude and interest in becoming an electrician.

Lacking a genuine interest in business, the most likely outcome is a job at the bottom of the management pay scale earning \$52,000 rather than excelling in a career aligned with his aptitudes and the likelihood of rising to the top of the pay scale for electricians at \$86,000.

After watching the video, the high school counseling manager finally spoke up, saying she had been amazed by the information and would make changes in her department's approach to career counseling.

You can see Kevin Fleming's video at www.vimeo.com/67277269. Please share it with others.

It provides a powerful argument for the value of CTE and why it should be fully implemented to serve the majority of high school students.

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