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Opinion

'If you've got a trade, you've got it made'

Forcing all high school students onto a college-prep track is not only wrong, it's dumb.

By Mike Rustigan

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One repeated theme in President Obama's education agenda is that he wants the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. As he put it in an address to a joint session of Congress, "We expect all our children not only to graduate from high school but to graduate from college and get a good-paying job."

Although I applaud the president's strong commitment to higher education, he is seriously neglecting the importance of vocational training in school. Not every student needs to go to college. There are plenty of high school kids who find college-prep classes boring and irrelevant. Many drop out because they feel school is not preparing them for anything practical. Most of these kids are not lazy or defiant; they just want to work with their hands, learn a skill and pursue a solid, honorable, blue-collar trade after high school.

For too long, academic elites and politicians -- both Democrats and Republicans -- have oversold us on the necessity of getting a college degree. We have reached the point at which it has become almost un-American to admit that for a sizable number of our young people, college is a waste of time.

According to a growing number of demographers and labor experts, the U.S. soon will be experiencing a severe shortage of skilled workers. Blue-collar baby boomers are retiring, but schools aren't preparing the next generation to take their place. Our nation needs blue-collar workers -- skilled mechanics, machinists, welders, carpenters and electricians, as well as computer, solar and cable technicians, etc. -- just as much as it needs college grads.

As one retired plumber told me: "No one is going to outsource your local repair guy. If you've got a trade, you've got it made."

Most European countries offer a strong two-track system -- one for the trades and one for the university -- whereas the majority of our high school graduates have no employable skills whatsoever. Of course kids should be encouraged to consider college and achieve academically, and they shouldn't be pushed into a noncollege track against their will. But we are currently ignoring an important cadre of students who need something different.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who benefited from vocational education growing up in Austria, has repeatedly sought federal funding for similar training programs. But he is swimming against the tide. In high schools across the nation,

vocational programs have declined in number and quality.

Back when California had perhaps the best public education system in the nation, career and technical classes were considered necessary and respectable. The leading educators of the 1960s and the 1970s had a good understanding that there are multiple paths to success. The recent decline in vocational education flies in the face of the growing demand for both male and female high school graduates skilled in the fields of health, electronics, automotive, home improvement, wood and metalwork, culinary, green energy jobs and a vast number of technical support and repair services.

To be sure, basic reading, writing and math proficiency is necessary for all graduates. But for the state of California to expect every high school student to meet university admission requirements is not only foolish, it is tyrannical.

Much has been written about the lack of discipline in kids who skip classes and eventually drop out. As the cynics keep telling us, nothing can be done with these lazy, low-achieving slackers because the root causes are broken homes and lousy parenting.

Yet, in my experience, when you offer these same kids the right form of education, they flourish. The magic of learning something that is useful and relevant sparks a strong desire to achieve. The transformative power of education is convincing. Right now there are hundreds of new, experimental, small-scale shop programs throughout the nation that are showing very promising signs of success.

Obama needs to visit these pioneer programs. His heart is in the right place, but he should be pitching vocational education just as vigorously as he extols a college degree. I'm betting we would then start to see fewer dropouts and more young adults with a chance to become productive members of society.

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