

## Rebooting a Career, at a Technical School



Michael Stravato for The New York Times

Jonathan Beam is studying to be an electrical technician. "Ever since I was a kid," he said, "I liked taking things apart and seeing how they work."

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**FOR** workers who have been laid off, the recession amounts to a crash course in the school of hard knocks. Many of them are responding by taking crash courses of a different sort: programs at technical or vocational institutions that provide marketable skills in a hurry, often in fields completely different from the ones in which they have spent their careers.

Jonathan Beam, 25, enrolled last year in a course to become an electrical technician, after the closing of a physical therapy practice where he was an executive office assistant. Before that, he supervised a hotel banquet department. The course, at the Houston campus of Everest College, has provided him with a chance to make ends meet — and to make a clean break with his résumé.

"I just wanted something completely different from the hectic pace I was used to and the Word documents and PowerPoint presentations," he said.

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The course, which he has nearly completed, runs nine months and costs \$14,000. Much of that is covered by a grant and loans, he said.

Amy Sutton of Portland, Ore., began moving toward the health care field about the time Mr. Beam moved away from it. After her long career as a real estate broker became imperiled by the plunge in home prices and sales, she began a one-year program in January to become a medical assistant, taking classes at Everest's Portland campus.

Because she was self-employed, there was no single moment when she knew she would need to find another line of work. Sales dwindled until there were none. "I had gone a number of months without any income at all," she recalled. Running her own small business, she said, "it was like having no job and no unemployment insurance."

For Mr. Beam, the new career choice reflects a lifelong interest. "Ever since I was a kid," he said, "I liked taking things apart and seeing how they work."

Ms. Sutton, who is 55 and has two grown children, decided on her new field after canvassing job Web sites and seeing thousands of listings for medical assistants. When she finishes the \$10,000 course, she will be qualified to do administrative work in hospitals and trauma centers, as well as performing light patient care, like keeping charts and taking blood pressure readings.

It is unclear how many students in technical or vocational programs are using them to achieve career changes after a job loss. But program providers cite anecdotal evidence to suggest the number is growing. Enrollments over all have been rising, they say, and the student body has been skewing older.

Vocational colleges and for-profit learning centers are appealing partly because of their convenience and efficiency. Unlike traditional campuses, they tend to offer a workmanlike atmosphere that allows progress to be made at a fast clip.

"We don't know how widespread it is, but there are a lot of white-collar workers who have been laid off and are looking to get back to work quickly," said Harris Miller, president of the Career College Association, an industry group. "Our schools are designed so that you can do a two-year program in 16 to 18 months or a four-year program in three years."

WyoTech Schools, a chain of technical institutions owned by [Corinthian Colleges](#), the same company that owns Everest, has had an increase in what Stephen Whitson, WyoTech's director of education, calls "nonstandard students." These include those who have been laid off or who fear the worst and have chosen to jump before being pushed.

The military also accounts for much of the enrollment growth, Mr. Whitson said. Hard times mean that veterans are absorbed less readily into the civilian work force after they are discharged.

Institutions that offer training in white-collar fields also report an influx of students whom the poor labor market has forced into seeking new careers.

"I have heard repeatedly from our admissions offices that when they interview prospective students, they're saying they just lost their job or fear that they might lose their job," said David Pauldine, the president of DeVry University, which offers programs in fields related to technology and business.

Their enrollment is "a calculated investment as a hedge against unemployment," he said. "They've been in XYZ and now they want to move into something that has legs." To attract more of these students, DeVry is offering "employment gap scholarships" of up to \$1,000 a semester for up to nine semesters for students who have been laid off in the

last 12 months.

The motivation for enrolling at DeVry reflects “the interaction of passion and practicality,” Mr. Pauldine said. “When the economy is good, more often we see those with a passion for the fields we offer. When the economy is bad, practicality starts to trump passion.”

FOR Ms. Sutton and Mr. Beam, some of both led them to enroll in their courses, but practicality was clearly the main factor.

Ms. Sutton said she regarded a job as a medical assistant as “something where I could make a difference” and also “something less stressful for the rest of my working years.” She would like to work in a physical rehabilitation center but plans to keep her real estate license and continue part-time with clients she knows well.

Mr. Beam said that he considers his customer-service experience and other skills picked up in previous jobs as “always something I could fall back on,” but that he views opportunities as an electrical technician to be “limitless.”

“Anything that has a plug in the wall, we can work with,” he said.

He is especially interested in finding a job in renewable energy, on a wind farm or at a [hydroelectric](#) plant. Displaying the pragmatic streak that led him to enroll in his course, he explained, “You can work for a couple of years, make killer money and learn an excellent trade.”

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