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Labor Day and the American Dream

College isn't for everyone.

By WILLIAM MCGURN



Mike Rowe wants to restore the luster to Labor Day. As host of the cable TV show "Dirty Jobs," Mr. Rowe has done them all: from steel-mill worker and pig-slop processor to hot-tar roofer and sewer inspector. In the last year, he's teamed up with industrial-supplies giant Grainger to set up a Web site (www.mikeroweWORKS.com) aimed at the millions of Americans who find their calling outside a university's hallways.

In an entry headlined "WORK IS NOT THE ENEMY," Mr. Rowe nails his thesis to his Web page: "We've convinced ourselves that 'good jobs' are the result of a four-year degree. That's bunk. Not all knowledge comes from college. Skill is back in demand. Steel-toed boots are back in fashion."

Well, not quite back in fashion, at least judging by the way we mark Labor Day. As the Labor Department's Web site notes, the original intent for the holiday was a parade that would illustrate "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations." Over the years, however, Labor Day has morphed into little more than a three-day weekend signaling the end of summer.

It gets worse. Over the past few decades, union manufacturing jobs that were once the big ticket to the middle class have been disappearing. The reason, economists tell us, are productivity improvements that in a competitive global economy depend more on brains than brawn. One result is the large (and widening) gap in lifetime earnings that has opened up between Americans who have a college degree and those who don't.

It's true that, on average, a college grad will make much more money and have significantly greater job security than his high school counterpart. For most Americans, it's also true that the likeliest path to upward mobility runs through the college quad. Averages, however, never tell the whole story.

In a paper called "America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," two economists—America University's Robert Lerman and Georgetown's Harry Holzer—say that there are still plenty of jobs that don't require college but pay above the national average. The catch is that for high school graduates to get these jobs, they need to upgrade their skills through apprenticeships, community college, on-the-job training, certification programs, etc.

Mr. Lerman points out that physical therapists earn about \$74,000 a year, while power plant operators average \$58,000. Both jobs can be done by high school graduates who have had extra training, and both pay above the American mean earnings of \$42,000 a year. And American employers continue to complain about a shortage of

workers with the kinds of skills these jobs demand.

The point is that while college is a good way to gain human capital, it's not the only way. Other skills matter, too: from the ability to communicate and work in groups to old-fashioned virtues such as punctuality and reliability.

Further education matters too, though what constitutes education is far more varied than a college sheepskin. Even—perhaps especially—for those in the trades, community college and certification programs are important, and generally lead to higher earnings. Apprentice programs, some of which Mr. Rowe highlights, can also be valuable. Alas, our public education system remains mostly oriented to one-size-fits-all: college.

"Our system for education and training is uncongenial to a lot of people who don't like to sit in the classroom," says Mr. Lerman. "In my view we need a larger portfolio of options that will help people get the skills they need, both in our classrooms and on our jobsites."

Finally, there is another time-honored path for people without college: entrepreneurship. And there are many more realistic models than Bill Gates and Microsoft. Closer to my own home, for example, a few years ago a young man still in high school blanketed our New Jersey neighborhood with a flier offering to do yard work. So we hired him, and found him to be honest, dependable and good at what he does.

Today, Keegan Abendschoen is just 25 years old—but now has two people working full-time for him. He's also taken courses in landscaping management and design from the County College of Morris, with the result that Keegan's Landscaping has expanded its offerings to include laying out driveways and walkways and such. In other words, young Mr. Abendschoen is not just a worker: He's the proprietor of a successful enterprise who continues to invest in himself so he can expand his business.

None of this diminishes the value of education. But this Labor Day, it bears remembering that arguably the most valuable skill in today's economy is the ability to learn new skills—whether that means working for an advanced degree, completing the requirements for a technical certification, or simply having enough smarts to let an accomplished mentor teach you the tricks of the trade.

Of course, working in the trades or starting up a small business is not for everyone. Then again, neither is college.

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