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Seeking middle ground

Certification, two-year-programs open career paths

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A year after her 2006 graduation from a major four-year university, Liz Finnegan had little to show for her degree in psychology other than a job as a bartender. Deciding she wanted to work in medicine, not psychology, Finnegan began exploring training options offered by community colleges.

In August 2008, she enrolled full time in the radiologic technology program at Palatine's Harper College, which she had attended during the first two years of her undergraduate studies. This July, Finnegan, 27, will earn her Associate in Applied Science degree from Harper, and plans to go to work as a registered radiologic technician in a hospital or an emergency care clinic.

Finnegan is one of a growing number pursuing training toward what are termed "middle-skill occupations," those fields requiring more than a high school education but less than a four-year college degree.

It's a move likely to make them attractive to employers. In the greater Chicago metro area, one third of job openings through 2016 will be in middle-skill positions, says Mitch Daniels, labor market economist with the Illinois Department of Employment Security in Springfield. Each year through 2016, an average 53,500 new and replacement job openings will be mid-skill jobs, he adds.

Many of the positions will be comparatively high-paying jobs, some paying more than what many bachelor's degree holders earn. And there's good reason for the attractive wages. People holding these skills are often in great demand.

"In some cases, the young people being trained, or the older people being retrained, barely have time to complete their programs, because the demand for their skills among employers is so great," Daniels says.

Why the gap?

In this era of rising college tuition costs, ever-greater college debt burdens and iffy employment prospects for four-year degree holders, why aren't more students pursuing training for middle-skill jobs? The reason is outdated thinking about what such jobs entail, said Ken Ender, president of Harper College.

"Let's take a look at HVAC technician," he says. "That job has gotten so sophisticated that it's hard to go into without an associate degree. Automobile technician, same deal. Those are great jobs that are going unfilled in some parts of the country. People who say, 'I don't want my son or daughter working as a grease monkey' don't understand. Those are not grease jobs anymore. They are very professional, sophisticated and technical types of occupations."

Daniels echoes the sentiment. "There is such a stigma about what used to be called 'vocational ed'," he says, noting the stigma is unjustified today.

"You get into the labor market much quicker and begin earning at a rate equal to or greater than someone with a baccalaureate degree. So you'll have more years of earning in your career. And you enter with less college debt." What's more, the route offers flexibility. Students who pursue mid-skill education right out of high school don't have to forget the dream of a bachelor's degree, says Glenda Gallisath, associate vice-president for academic affairs, including workforce development, at Glen Ellyn's College of DuPage.

"What typically happens is [students] go to work, are successful in their fields, and are valuable employees who know the technical side. But to move up into management, their employers encourage them to go back and get a bachelor's degree," she says. "Many employers will support them financially in their educations, and four-year institutions will provide incentives to enroll, like flexible class schedules and off-site learning opportunities."

Where the jobs (and schools) are

In Northeast Illinois, mid-skill occupations are concentrated in such fields as health care, manufacturing, transportation, construction and leisure/hospitality, Daniels says. These industries must fill such middle-skill positions as registered nurses, health information technicians, welders, computer numerical controlled (CNC) machine operators, general maintenance and repair workers, auto service technicians, carpenters, electricians and chefs. Computer support specialists and accounting technicians are required in every industry, he added. Many more mid-skill jobs of the future haven't yet been created, Ender says. These jobs will likely meld two or more disciplines such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology and manufacturing technology. There are and will continue to be several means through which to gain the post-secondary education such jobs will require. The first is earning a certificate or an associate degree through a community college. (In Chicago, programs are offered by the seven Chicago City colleges: Harold Washington, Kennedy-King, Wright, Truman, Malcolm X, Daley and Olive Harvey Colleges.)

A second avenue is training while in military service. And a third is earning a certificate offered by corporations that operate their own credentialing services, particularly in information technology, Ender says.

Of course, most such options involve much less time and far less expense than earning a bachelor's degree. Many occupation-specific certificate programs take six, nine or 12 months to complete, Daniels says, while associate degrees generally require two or a little more than two years to finish if pursued full time.

As far as costs go, "it's an astronomical difference," Finnegan says. Her final year toward her bachelor's degree set her back \$20,000, but the program she attends at Harper costs \$5,000 a year. "And I don't feel like I'm getting a lesser education," she says. "If anything, I like it a bit more at a community college, because it's smaller and professors know my name. I don't have to talk to the teachers' assistants, I can talk directly to my professors."

Because community colleges work closely with employers in their areas to identify job needs and design mid-skill education programs, they can often help grads identify prospective employers and make the transition to full-time work.

When she graduated from Harper in 2006 with an Associate in Applied Science degree in dental hygiene, Deborah Bray relied on a book Harper's dental hygiene program had compiled listing dental offices needing hygienists, she recalled. That led to a position with a dental group with offices in Barrington and Glenview. Says Bray of her two years at Harper College: "The teachers and everyone there really helped you, and really wanted you to succeed."

Cutting-edge technologies

Mid-skill training often means mastering advanced, cutting edge technology. Such is the case in a certificate program offered through the Laser Photonics and Optics Department at College of Lake County (CLC) in Grayslake.

The certificate program, which is expected to become a full associate degree program in 2011, trains students in the use of lasers in such industries as medicine, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, defense, automotive, fusion energy and heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), said Steve Dulmes, professor and chairman of the Laser Photonics and Optics Department at CLC.

The first course this fall started out with 16 students, several of whom were mid-career wage earners who had been unemployed for up to a year, Dulmes says.

"Four of them rewrote their resumes to reflect their [new] training in photonics and optics, and three of those had interviews and jobs in about two weeks," he says. "They all went to companies here in Lake County."

Today, there are about 30 community colleges across the United States offering programs in lasers, photonics and optics, he adds. One of them, Indian Hills Community College in Ottumwa, Ia., produced 18 graduates last spring, 14 of whom wound up hired at Northrop Grumman Corp. in Rolling Meadows, where their average yearly starting salary was about \$56,000, Dulmes says.

Students can complete the certificate at CLC in about a year, "if they are ambitious and take courses at night," Dulmes says. Most applicants are those with work experience as electricians or in manufacturing or engineering, but those with strong high school science backgrounds can also enter the program.

Yes, there are futuristic characteristics to some mid-skill disciplines, such as CLC's photonics program, but that's not their common denominator. What these positions tend to have in common is an enduring relevancy. "Many of the fields we are preparing students for are career fields that will survive over time," Gallisath says. "The tools of auto technicians, welders, architects, and HVAC technicians may have changed, but the core fundamental need is still there." †

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