

Editorial: Skilled labor a promising option for career path

With the laser-like focus on college preparation in recent years, the appeal of school for many students who won't be pursuing a post-secondary-school diploma has diminished. But the drumbeat that a young person must have a college degree to land a meaningful, well-paying job has drowned out two simple facts: College isn't for everyone, and employers are finding it more difficult to fill positions that require technical skills, rather than theoretical mastery.

A recent New York Times article notes the challenge factories face in hiring skilled workers, even though there are hundreds of applications for each opening. That's because a lot of traditional unskilled work now requires at least a 9th-grade-level mastery of math and more technical expertise. Automation has displaced thousands of workers, but factories still need people to operate increasingly sophisticated equipment.

An extensive survey of National Association of Manufacturers members found that 32 percent of companies faced "moderate to serious" skills shortages, the Times reported. Employers fear that when today's plumbers, electricians, machinists, welders and other skilled workers retire, there won't be a sufficient supply of qualified workers to replace them.

Workshops like the one being run this summer at Spokane Community College can spark an interest that young people may not have realized they had. High school students spend three weeks getting hands-on training in a variety of manufacturing jobs. They weld, draft and operate various power tools and machines.

One Central Valley High School student told The Spokesman-Review that the workshop may cause her to change her career aspirations from engineering to industrial design. Another student said he was now interested in underwater welding.

Many educators are returning to the idea that a broader array of technical-skills classes might hold the interest of some students who would otherwise drop out because the curriculum ignores their interests and needs. This does not mean that these students can slide by in their other course work. Some manufacturers require job candidates to take skills tests that measure aptitude for reading and math.

The college diploma has long been a cherished document, but a more valuable credential for many employers and job candidates is the certification of a specific skill. Ohio State University research shows that there are far more diploma holders than there are jobs that require a college degree.

It would be wise for leaders in the public and private sectors to work together to harness this reality.
