

No four-year degree: Some say no sweat

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By ERIN CALANDRIELLO

ELGIN -- More often than not, you can find Jeff Turner slapping together an Italian beef sandwich at his In the Neighborhood Deli & Cafe, 195 N. Edison Ave.

But he didn't obtain a bachelor's degree to get where he is, instead Turner went through Elgin Community College's Culinary Arts & Hospitality Institute.

There he "learned the tools of the trade," to effectively run his business, from developing a menu to cooking for customers under pressure, at ECC's Spartan Terrace restaurant.

A recent study showed the U.S. economy needs more skilled workers, like Turner, who received some post-secondary education and training but not necessarily a four-year degree. America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Education and Training Requirements in the Next Decade and Beyond, a study conducted by Harry J. Holzer of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and Robert I. Lerman of American University in Washington, D.C., showed the demand for "jobs requiring post-secondary education or at least moderate-term training" will grow substantially over the next decade.

In other words, the demand for labor in construction, health care, computer use, transportation, hospitality and elsewhere are projected to grow at above-average rates, the study says.

The U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that nearly half of all job openings between 2004 and 2014 will be in middle-skill occupations. This compares with one-third of job openings in the high-skill occupational categories, which require a bachelor's degree or higher.

This is where community colleges, like ECC, come into play through their programs, which prepare students to take on those middle-skill jobs.

ECC offers the only accredited American Dental Association dental assisting program in the Chicago suburbs. Dental assisting, in 2005, was projected by the U.S. Department of Labor as one of the 10 fastest growing occupations through 2014.

Outside of dental assisting, ECC also offers several programs to address growing local and national workforce demands in health fields including clinical laboratory technology, physical therapy assistant, histology and radiography.

In addition to health professions, ECC gives students the opportunity to study heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC). Between 2000 and 2006, the nation's heating and air conditioning positions grew by 21 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But middle-skill job preparation at ECC doesn't stop there. ECC students can study specializations within the area of automotive mechanics from brakes and suspension to engine mechanical repair. Between 2000 and 2006, heavy vehicle maintenance positions rose by 25 percent nationally, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

With these facts in mind, it might be a smart move to "follow your passions and get that hands-on experience," in a middle-skill job, like the culinary arts, said Turner.

But most importantly, above job demands, one should "find something you love to do and you won't work a day in your life," said Turner.