



Four-year College not the only path to rewarding career

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Amid all the speculation about a possible recession, a new report by the Urban Institute, a non-partisan Washington think tank, finds that nearly half of America's job openings during the next seven years will require more than a high school education but less than a bachelor's degree.

These "middle-skill" occupations range from entry-level manufacturing to nursing to electrical work, and they all face a serious shortage of workers to replace retiring baby boomers. In manufacturing alone, nearly 7 million employees — half the manufacturing workforce — will retire in the next few years. Unfortunately, there is a long-standing cultural bias in our country to prepare students for a four-year college education. But not every high school graduate wants to go to college, nor does every rewarding career require a four-year degree. Indeed, two-thirds of college students fail to graduate in four to six years, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Instead, the report indicates that the pathway to 45% of America's good jobs in the next few years will be a certificate or associate's degree earned at a technical or community college. This is particularly true in manufacturing, which contributes \$70 billion to the Illinois economy each year and employs 689,000 people in the state, according to the National Assn. of Manufacturers.

My company in St. Charles employs more than 240 people who make electric motors for restaurant, medical and packaging equipment. Because the shortage of skilled talent is hurting our ability to meet demand, we collaborated with local leaders and the College of DuPage to develop a manufacturing certification program in applied math, blueprint reading and other "middle skills." At an average national yearly cost of \$2,076, community colleges like DuPage are a relative bargain and provide a great return on investment.

Other Illinois manufacturers are addressing skills shortages by providing on-site training, promoting manufacturing careers in high school classrooms and to returning veterans, and sponsoring apprenticeship programs tied to nationally accredited standards.

Unfortunately, too many policymakers imagine "going to college" as enrolling in a university or four-year college, living on campus and graduating in four years. Much of our post-secondary educational and financial aid policies were designed for baby boomers. Many of today's students need flexible educational arrangements that allow them to work part time or support a family, and labor market demand for employees with associate degrees is outpacing demand for all other educational levels.

With the presidential candidates focused on "change," a good place to start is with better public policies to enhance the workforce development capacity of community colleges and help more individuals achieve the American dream.