



From the office of Texas Workforce Commission

Chairman Tom Pauken

Opinion/Editorial

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Is College Education For Everyone? by Tom Pauken

Over the last week, college seniors across the country attended commencement ceremonies where they were lauded for their educational accomplishments. Such events are a time of celebration for graduates, their families and their friends. But the good mood will come to a quick end for many students and their parents. One study says that 85 percent of seniors will move back home upon graduation as they struggle to find work that will justify the high cost – in both dollars and time – of their new degrees.

Meanwhile, a story in the May 6 edition of *The Wall Street Journal* reports that manufacturing businesses across the country are struggling to find employees with the math and science skills and training necessary to “operate and repair sophisticated computer-controlled factory equipment.” These jobs pay well – some as high as \$80,000 – yet high school students are consistently pressured not to pursue them by an educational system that believes earning a college degree is the only path to success.

Walter Gasper, one of the students profiled in the *Journal* article, had an interest in working with machinery but was discouraged from pursuing vocational classes by a school counselor because he had good grades in his college-prep courses. He rejected the advice and at age 17 he became an apprentice at a plant near Pittsburgh that makes small, precision crafted metal parts for ships and machinery. Gasper was later wooed away by a larger firm who needed his talents and could offer him more money. He makes \$55,000 and he didn’t have to give up four years to attend college or take on the high levels of debt that saddles many young adults and their parents.

Since 1990, the cost for college has increased by more than 285 percent, a growth rate some three times higher than inflation during the same period of time. We’ve long justified the high cost of college by citing statistics claiming that over the course of a lifetime, a degree holder makes a million dollars more than those with only a high school diploma. But a new study by Mark Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute says that the difference is much smaller. When you factor in the cost of tuition and forgone wages, someone with a bachelor’s degree makes, on average, about \$300,000 more in lifetime earnings than a high school graduate.

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And the difference is less than \$200,000 for graduates of universities with low admission standards.

And what about those who start college, because they are told that it is the key to a successful life, but lack the skills it takes to do well at that level? Career counselor Marty Nemko cites a disturbing statistic on this topic: “Among high school students who graduated in the bottom 40 percent of their classes and whose first institutions were four-year colleges, two-thirds had not earned diplomas eight and a half years later.” Are we setting young people up for failure by promoting the idea that a college education is their only ticket to the good life?

Texas community colleges play an essential role in providing skills training and I believe that we need to place a greater emphasis on vocational and technical education at the secondary and post-secondary levels of education. Many young Texans would be better off receiving training in the skilled trades starting as early as high school.

We must stop pushing a one-size fits all approach to education which emphasizes the goal of every high school student getting a four-year university degree. The skills required for so-called blue-collar jobs are impressive, and they allow young workers to make a good living and raise a family. Having a recognizable skill and using one’s talents to fill demands in the workforce is my definition of a “good job.” It is high time we got over the notion that a four-year college degree is the only piece of paper that indicates a person’s potential for success.

Tom Pauken is the Chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission and author of Bringing America Home

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The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in coordination with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.