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Job Worries? Consider Skills Training

At a time of deepening economic concerns, encouraging more young Texans to get the appropriate training to fill the available positions in the skilled trades becomes even more important than in good times. We need to match skills training to the needs of the modern workplace, and that doesn't necessarily require a four-year college degree.

A college diploma signifies one kind of preparation for life. Thanks to rapid advances in science and technology, another kind of diploma (just as valuable to society) is a credential certifying that the individual in question has received the training necessary for a particular kind of skilled work.

Whatever we call the certificate, it is significant because it shows that the student has been well prepared to work in a particular field of endeavor. The name doesn't matter. The standardized, supervised, preparation it represents is what counts.

More and more Americans are receiving these credentials, but Texas, and the country as a whole, can do a lot more to train the individuals needed to handle the work that is there to be done.

Here's one example. If you want a construction worker trained to the exacting standards of the construction industry, you want to make sure that the person hired has the ability to do the job. One way to do that is for the worker to have a certificate showing training with the appropriate curriculum designed by an organization like the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER), in Gainesville, Fla. NCCER is a 12-year-old nonprofit organization created by construction industry leaders to help ensure that tomorrow's workers receive today the specialized training and preparation they need.

NCCER tailored an instruction curriculum to fit standards developed by the industry as a whole. It's a national curriculum, consistent with federal guidelines. And here's the real beauty of it: Graduates acquire portable skills. What qualifies them for work in Texas also qualifies them for comparable work in many other states.

It gets better yet. A document certifying skills training of a higher order is a point of pride for the one who carries it. It tells the world he or she knows the job and how to do it: the very same message a college diploma is meant to convey.

The construction industry's needs happen to be large, as I was reminded in a recent conversation with Ed Prevatt, senior manager for workforce development at NCCER. According to the NCCER, U.S. schools aren't "preparing young people for the career opportunities that are available in our workplace."

(more)



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The NCCER study points out that “28 percent of today’s ninth-graders will complete college, but only 20 percent of the jobs will require a four-year degree ... 32 percent of the population will have the necessary skills that 65 percent of the jobs will require.” Prevatt told me 275,000 construction jobs go unfilled every year due to the lack of worker training. And that’s before the baby boomers, some 75 million strong, begin retiring in large numbers. Prevatt also told me about a study which shows that high school graduates with NCCER training earn, over a lifetime, \$375,000 more than they would have otherwise.

What works in construction would work with all skilled trades. And, by the way, nearly all trades and occupations these days are skilled. Technology sets the pace. Gone are the days when a strong back was all the qualification one needed for many American jobs. Nuclear development, nursing, refinery operation, computer science – the whole roster of modern jobs – requires a knowledge of the basics combined with appropriate skills training.

Job preparation, under the model I am talking about, can be tied to an existing secondary school, community college, or qualified job-training provider. The time necessary to complete it can be a matter of months or two years or more, depending on the difficulty or technical nature of the particular job. Flexibility counts.

A good job is a goal that any successful society strives to make available. Having a recognizable skill and using one’s talents to fill needed demands in the workforce is my definition of a good job. Work boosts the worker’s morale, gives a sense of purpose in life, and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. In addition, proficiency in a skilled trade can become a path to a secure economic future, even in difficult times that we are currently facing.

It’s high time we got over the notion that a four-year college degree is the only piece of paper that shows a man’s or woman’s readiness for success and achievement. No well-trained worker is a second-class citizen. He or she is a contributor to the economic well-being of our society and to the long-term good of the place called 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 unison with its network of local workforce development boards call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.