AVID Weekly®

You can get a good job without a bachelor's degree

By Chauncy Lennon, Anthony P. Carnevale

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"To get a good job you must have a bachelor's degree." This is a common myth that needs to be debunked. For years, Americans have been told that, with the decline in manufacturing, the blue-collar job that required a high school degree or less was gone for good.

The truth is that not all good jobs for people with less than a bachelor's degree have been eliminated. Far from it. There are 30 million jobs in the U.S. that pay good wages without a B.A.: The median salary is $55,000 with an opportunity to move up the career ladder.

But it's important to understand that today's good jobs are different from those of the past. Job-seekers without a B.A. in 2017 need to search beyond traditional blue-collar sectors and look to skilled-services industries. Nationally, a gain of 4 million jobs in financial services, health services, information technology and other skilled-service industries has more than offset the 2.5 million well-paying jobs lost in manufacturing since 1991.

There is a catch: To secure these roles, workers need to get some education or training beyond their high school diploma. Much of the growth in good jobs that pay without a B.A. (including in manufacturing) has benefited workers with associate degrees or some college education -- 4.1 million since 1991.

These jobs are not isolated to just a few communities. Twenty-three states have increased good jobs that pay without a B.A. in blue-collar industries, including Utah where these jobs have more than doubled. Jobs in skilled services have also increased in nearly every state, more than doubling in Arizona, Idaho and Montana since 1991.

We're not saying that B.A.s are overvalued -- the degree is still one of the surest ways to gain a competitive edge in the job market and earn middle-class wages. But we cannot expect every student to attend a four-year college and get a B.A. before they start working.

College debt is at an all-time high, and students are questioning the return on their investment. Many young people will work full-time for years before getting a B.A.; others will never complete a four-year degree at all. Those without a bachelor's degree shouldn't be consigned to a lifetime of minimum-wage jobs or miss out on a chance to be a part of the middle class.

There's an added concern: Not everyone has equal access to the jobs we're talking about. White workers have the largest share of good jobs that pay without a B.A., but the number is declining. Latino workers have a smaller share, but have seen the most growth, and black workers have the smallest share with only slight growth. Men hold the largest share of these good jobs, 70 percent, a proportion that has been consistent for 25 years. Women, lamentably, have not gained ground in the non-B.A. job market.

We can do better.

The best way to promote Americans' access to good jobs at the sub-baccalaureate level is through policies that strengthen the connections between school and work. Policymakers should ensure that students are being exposed to career possibilities as early as middle school, and that high school students have greater access to career and technical education, work-based learning programs such as internships and youth apprenticeships, and effective career counseling that helps them get on pathways to good careers.

Across the country, we see states and cities developing innovative new approaches to prepare students for careers in in-demand fields. Colorado has started paid apprenticeships for high school students to gain real-world experience in growing sectors such as advanced manufacturing and technology. New Orleans is developing paid internship opportunities aligned with credentials that have value in the labor market. And 34 states have said they will consider some measure of career readiness in how they hold schools and districts accountable under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the new federal K-12 law.

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In postsecondary education and training, leaders should use three strategies to promote the labor market value of such programs. First, they should ensure the transparency of non-B.A. college programs' economic value by investing in consumer information tools -- students should know what college will be worth. Second, governments should encourage the use of outcome-based funding models, such as the Department of Education's gainful employment rule, so that programs are awarded public and private funding based on how their graduates are doing in the workplace. Finally, policy-makers, educators and employers need to better align skills training with the needs of hiring companies. Tax incentives -- such as the tax credits for employer-provided training used by Kentucky, Virginia and several other states -- have helped to improve collaboration.

A college degree will always be an important path to work. But it's not the only path, or even the best one.

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