

OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

Millions of High-Paying Trade Jobs Sit Empty

My advice for grads: learn a trade

BY CHUCK COLLINS

In the classic 1960s movie *The Graduate*, a family friend offers Dustin Hoffman, the recent graduate, one word of advice: “plastics.”

My advice for today’s high school graduates: “learn a trade.”

Unfortunately, there’s a historic stigma about “vocational-ed,” the result of snobbery toward certain occupations.

Yes, there’s also the shameful practice of tracking low-income whites and people of color into blue-collar jobs while encouraging wealthier white students to attend college. But now there are millions of rewarding, high-paying trade jobs sitting empty.

Instead of training for those, tens of millions of high school graduates are on college autopilot, loading up an average of \$37,000 in debt, and graduating without any practical skills.



Not only is our economy suffering for lack of skilled workers, but also a huge number of workers are unhappy and earning below their financial potential.

There are legions of depressed Dilberts out there in cubicle land, sitting in front of computer screens, wondering who will be laid off next. And there are millions of young people sitting in college classrooms dreaming of being somewhere else.

Put these same people in an apprenticeship with a skilled adult and they’ll thrive. Instead of wasting their intelligence in an office, they could deploy it in a bicycle or auto repair garage, woodworking shop, or on a farm or construction site.

Princeton economist Alan Blinder says the job market of the future won’t be divided between people with college degrees and those without, but between work that can be outsourced and work that can’t. “You can’t hammer a nail over the internet,” he observed. “Nor can you fix a car transmission, rewire a house, install solar panels, or give a patient an injection.”

The value of a liberal arts college education is exposure to a wide range of ideas and knowledge, along with social networks. But college is certainly not the only path to such learning. And four-year residential college today has more in common with a party on a luxury cruise ship than a platform for learning a vocation.

True, today the lifelong earnings of college graduates exceed those who don’t attend college. But there’s no evidence this will be the case going forward. Have you paid an electrician or a plumber anytime lately? There’s a reason they’re hard to find and can command a high wage. It’s called scarcity.

Millions more “green collar” jobs are emerging in our transition to the renewable energy economy. And at some point, our nation will have to repair our aging bridges, roads, and transportation facilities and retrofit buildings to be more energy efficient.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one third of all new jobs through 2022 will be in construction, health care, and personal care. The fastest growing oc-

cupations are solar and wind energy technicians, followed by plumbers, machine tool programmers, HVAC mechanics, and iron and steel workers.

Changing attitudes about different occupations is part of the challenge.

Parents and guidance counselors can start by respectfully talking about the opportunities in trades. They can introduce students to people with satisfying careers in the trades and steer them to useful web resources on the path to trades.

Congress could help by making Pell grants available for short-term job training courses, not just college tuition. It could also restore funding for Tech-Prep, a neglected federal program that supports vocational education.

Let’s dump the old class-biased stereotypes. It takes all kinds of intelligence and advanced training to do a trade. And it can be financially rewarding and enormously satisfying.

Chuck Collins directs the Program on Inequality and the Common Good at the Institute for Policy Studies. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

On Maternal Healthcare, Race Trumps Everything

Disparities bring issue into focus

BY OSCAR H. BLAYTON

Most people of color can point to at least one moment when they realize that popular culture in America distorts the reality of their history and existence.

The most memorable experience for me was when I was in the sixth-grade in my segregated public school in Virginia. One of our courses was Virginia history and the state had provided us with the required history textbook. Somewhere between the covers of that book was a picture of a group of smiling, dancing enslaved African Americans being observed by a small group of amused white people – presumably the owner and his family. The text explained that most slaves were happy with their condition and prospered under the kindly supervision of their masters.

Fortunately, my sixth-grade teacher was having none of it. He had us open our books to that page and told us that we were being

fed lies so that white people could remain in power in the state. He explained that truths were being kept from us because knowledge is power. It is the power to improve your life.

There are so many lies in American popular culture, beginning with the moment we’re born – in the maternity ward. Several studies demon-

strate that racism in America kills black expectant mothers and their newborn babies, but popular culture tells us that they are receiving the best health care.

A New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene 2016 report titled “Severe Maternal Morbidity in New York City, 2008–2012” put it this way: “Black non-Latina women with at least a college degree had higher Severe Maternal Morbidity rates than women of other race/ethnicities who never graduated high school.”

The National Center for Biotechnology Information published a paper in 2016 that states: “Racism and racial discrimination in the USA is thought to be a major driver of the differences between birth outcomes among different racial and ethnic groups,

particularly between black women and women of other races.”

The Centers for Disease Control found that during 2011 to 2013, there were 12.7 deaths per 100,000 live births for white women within a year of giving birth. But for black women, the rate of death was almost four times higher at 43.5 deaths per 100,000 live births.

While few popular media outlets have focused on this problem, *Newsweek* magazine published an article in 2016 that reported: “The shameful secret is that even when controlling for age, socioeconomic status and education, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that African-American women ... face a nearly four times higher risk of death from pregnancy complications than white women. In parts of the U.S. with high concentrations of women of color who live in poverty, such as Mississippi, maternal death rates can surpass those of sub-Saharan Africa.”

Despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary, particularly in the area of maternal health for black women, the popular thinking is that U.S. health care is the best in the world.

In 2015, *Time* magazine, MSNBC, CBS, CNN and other news outlets reported that the nonprofit organization Save Our Children, in its annual report, ranked the United States as 33rd among 179 nations in the world for quality of life for women and children. That ranking was based upon an overall score that took into account mothers’ and children’s health, educational, economic and political status.

What these news outlets did not report is that the United States ranks 61st in maternal health, 42nd in children’s well-being and 89th when it comes to the political status of women.

The high infant and maternal mortality among black women and babies is masked by the low numbers among more affluent Americans. For example, Save Our Children points to a 2011 study that revealed that infants in Washington D.C.’s Ward 8, where half of all children live in poverty, died at a rate more than 10 times higher than the death rate of infants born in Ward 3, the richest part of the city. The report also pointed to San Francisco, where an African American mother is six times as likely as a

white mother to lose her baby before her child’s first birthday.

Because the United States performs well on economic and educational status in the Save Our Children study, the country is able to mask its abysmal performance when it comes to the health and well-being of expectant mothers and newborn babies.

Black expectant mothers, whether they are well educated or poorly educated, deserve the best health care this country can afford. But pointing out the disparity in health care between well-educated black mothers and poorly educated white mothers brings into focus the significance of race relative to health care because education is supposed to be the great equalizer. But just as race trumps everything else in America, race trumps education.

Those who brag about America having the best health system in the world, like those before them who touted the benefits of chattel slavery, have no interest in the truth. They merely want to keep the truth from us, because knowledge is power.

Oscar H. Blayton is a former Marine Corps combat pilot and human rights activist who practices law in Virginia.

Advertise with diversity in The Portland Observer

Call 503-288-0033 or email ads@portlandobserver.com