

OPINION

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Career Education is Pathway to Opportunity

BY DR. KARIN EDWARDS

There's something about the turning of the new year that gives people a mind to make changes. The new year presents us with a blank slate, a chance to reinvent ourselves. People want to eat better, get into shape, spend more time with their families, do more of the things they love to do.

All of these things are worthy goals, but why not aim for a fundamental change? Why not decide to make this the year that you find a great new career?

The fact is, having a steady job with good pay and benefits — in other words, a career — leads to a more satisfying life with more self-determination. I'm not suggesting that money buys happiness, but a gainful job offers a person more choices: choices on where to live, what to do with your spare time, how you wish to raise your family, and much more.

Today's gainful employment, according to a recent Georgetown University study, can increasingly



be found in "skilled service fields," which include industries such as health care, finance, and information technology. In addition, as members of the Baby Boom generation transition into retirement, there is a rising demand for traditional skilled workers, like electricians, welders, and mechanics. For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2024 our economy will need as many as 165,000 new trained electricians to meet market-place demand.

What these trends mean is that most living-wage jobs today require a significantly higher standard of technical training and education than in generations past. According to the Georgetown study, more than 95 percent of the jobs created during the recent economic recovery have gone to people "with at least some college education, while those with a high school diploma or less are being left behind."

What does this mean, then, to someone contemplating a change

in career, or to a young person considering options for their future? It means it's time to enroll in community college.

Why community college, you might ask? For two reasons: First, not everybody is interested in earning a four-year degree, and there are lots of living-wage jobs out there that don't require a four-year degree. Second, the price of a bachelor's degree has increased exponentially over the past three decades. Community colleges remain the section of the higher-education system with the fewest barriers to entry. For many students, particularly low-income students and students of color, this can mean the difference between a bright future and not much future at all.

Third, community college career and technical education programs maintain a very high standard of training and education, and remain in constant communication with private-sector to ensure that students are trained with the latest cutting-edge equipment, technology, and techniques to ensure that they're ready to enter the workforce.

Here's just one example of what

I'm talking about. Vigor Industrial Inc. operates a 60-acre facility on Portland's Swan Island, where they build, repair, and refit ocean-going ships of all kinds. Through our partnership with Vigor, Portland Community College maintains a training facility at Vigor's site where PCC Maritime Welding students can learn their trade on real ships alongside skilled industry veterans. These students are supported by faculty and staff at PCC's nearby Swan Island Training Center, where people can also learn to become electricians, millwrights, industrial mechanics, and a range of other skilled trades.

Newly-minted maritime welders can expect a starting wage of around \$17 per hour to as much as \$27 per hour, depending on the specifics of the job and the workplace. And these are jobs that are unlikely to be outsourced — as long as the world needs ocean-going ships, it will need welders to work on them.

What's more, PCC is pursuing a federal designation of its Swan Island facility as a Maritime Center of Excellence, which would

expand its capacity to train domestic maritime workers by admitting more students, expanding facilities, creating new maritime career pathways, and awarding credit for prior learning experience — including military service.

These kinds of opportunities didn't come to pass by accident. They're part of a deliberate push by PCC to become our area's premier job training and workforce development engine. In fact, at PCC, we call them "Pathways to Opportunity," and they are spelled out under our president's work plan.

The Maritime Welding program is but one example of the many Pathways to Opportunity available through PCC. Whether you want to be an electrician, a medical assistant, a paralegal, a web designer, a medical lab technician, or any one of a wide range of gainful occupations, PCC could be the right fit for you. There is a path to a living-wage career, economic security, and a prosperous future — and it leads through community college.

Dr. Karin Edwards is president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus.

Reparations as Answer to Racial Wealth Divide

Black America's vanishing wealth is bad for all

BY BOB LORD

Want an impossible task? Try identifying the most disturbing trend in America today.

Consider the choices: Climate change denial, extreme political polarization, gun violence, etc.

Those are just the ones on the national radar. Here's one that isn't, but needs to be: the systematic destruction of black wealth.

The reality is horrific, according to the recent Institute for Policy Studies report *Dreams Deferred*. "Between 1983 and 2016, the median black family saw their wealth drop by more than half after adjusting for inflation," the report notes, "compared to a 33 percent increase for the median white household."

Further, the report finds, "the median black family today owns \$3,600 — just 2 percent of the \$147,000 of wealth the median



white family owns."

This affects you regardless of your color. Because inextricably connected to the widening racial wealth divide has been the extreme concentration of wealth at the very top.

During the same three decades over which black wealth eroded,

wealth at the very top also explain why the racial wealth gap existed in the first place? No — but two and a half centuries of slavery and another century of Jim Crow do. (Although those same immoral laws also created incredible family fortunes for plantation owners and others, whose descendants still

reach parity with their white counterparts.

Narrowing the racial wealth divide must necessarily involve not only de-concentrating wealth — the nearly exclusively white wealth — at the very top. It also must address a moral imperative that's been neglected for too long:

“Narrowing the racial wealth divide must necessarily involve not only de-concentrating wealth — the nearly exclusively white wealth — at the very top. It also must address a moral imperative that’s been neglected for too long: America must repay its centuries’ overdue debt to the descendants of enslaved Africans, the children and grandchildren of Jim Crow, and the victims of mass incarceration.”

three of the wealthiest American families — the Koch, Walton, and Mars clans — increased their wealth by an astounding 6,000 percent. With the racial wealth gap dragging down America's median wealth, that gives these billionaires ever greater say over what happens to the rest of us.

Does the concentration of

benefit today from that accumulation of extreme wealth.)

Concentration of wealth at the top doesn't even explain fully the destruction of black wealth that's occurred in recent decades. Structural and overt racism contributed as well. America's policy of mass incarceration has hamstrung the ability of black Americans to

America must repay its centuries' overdue debt to the descendants of enslaved Africans, the children and grandchildren of Jim Crow, and the victims of mass incarceration.

Only one policy fits the bill: A reparations program. Wealthy Americans should pay the most, but nobody that's benefitted from

the discrimination should be exempt.

Designing an effective reparations program will be tricky, to say the least. At a time when the country's billionaires are systematically fleecing not just black Americans, but all Americans, reparations would have to lift black America in way that isn't temporary. That will be a monumental challenge.

But the challenge involved in designing a reparations program pales in comparison to the challenge that shouldn't be a challenge at all: getting a critical mass of white Americans to recognize that the wrongs of the past have never been righted, that they've continued to this day, and that repaying America's debt to black Americans cannot be ignored any longer.

And before we even begin the challenge of persuading white Americans to do right, we first must persuade ourselves to stop doing wrong. Racism, structural and overt, is alive and well in America today.

It's time for decent Americans to recommit themselves to these challenges. If not now, when?

Bob Lord is a Phoenix-based tax attorney and an associate fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies. Distributed by OtherWords.org.