

EDUCATION LAB BLOG

Education Lab is a yearlong project to spark meaningful conversations about education solutions in the Pacific Northwest.

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Guest: How to land a high demand job with a low cost degree

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Cindy Zehnder

With the end of the school year just around the corner, thousands of Washington high school students are focused on what is next in their lives once they've tossed their tasseled caps into the air.

Fortunately, the educational pathways to a living-wage job may be shorter and less expensive than they realize. The challenge is making sure students know about and connect to these abundant education options within our community and technical college system and licensed private career schools.

Turns out, it's not how long you've studied but what you've studied that counts in the job market. Those who pursue short-term degrees in high-demand areas are being rewarded with living-wage jobs in our state. And they can reach those well-paying jobs faster and more efficiently (and often with less debt) than longer, less-focused educational paths.

For example, students in a two-year aviation maintenance technician program at Clover Park Technical College in Lakewood earned \$37,000 on average their first year out of school. Those who completed a nine-month bookkeeping program at North Seattle College earned \$33,000 that first year.

These middle-skill jobs are growing throughout our state. But they have sometimes been overlooked by young people charting their next educational step. It's only now in the

aftermath of a shifting economy that these critical mid-level occupations in manufacturing, healthcare, IT and other growth areas are gaining the exposure they're due.

The good news is our economy is growing, as are the number and types of jobs available in our state. Students who prepare for in-demand careers can find a ready place in our labor market and can grow their careers through new credentials, work experience and education coursework that builds to higher degrees.



Michael Osbun / Op Art

Washington employers are clamoring for workers at a variety of education levels. A Workforce Board Employer Survey conducted in 2012 reported that of an estimated 60,000 Washington employers who were hiring, one in five had difficulty finding qualified applicants. Of those with hiring difficulties, one third left the job unfilled.

Our task is to connect young people to education and training programs that prepare them for these jobs. A further challenge is helping employers connect to the training pipelines that tap this talent pool and can give their business a competitive edge.

One way we're forging these connections is through CareerBridge.wa.gov, which features details on nearly 6,300 Washington education programs along with performance report cards (when data is available) on how many students obtained well-paying jobs in the industry for which they trained. Another resource: CheckoutCollege.com, which ties together the 34 community and technical colleges and their full range of career-focused educational offerings.

Our young people will take many roads to get where they're going in life. They need encouragement, support and direction from all of us to help them target the most promising pathways to prosperity — which are often shorter, faster and less costly than they realize.