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Opinion

The Vocational Revolution

By Dante Ramos GLOBE COLUMNIST JANUARY 18, 2015

IN THE topsy-turvy world of American education in 2015, it's remarkable when a teenager from an affluent suburb finishes high school with practical skills.

Eighteen-year-old Jack Gallagher comes from Needham, the kind of town that families seek out for its public education system, and he grew up on a block abundant with high-powered professionals. But by his account, he was always the odd kid out. So after middle school, he enrolled at Minuteman High, a regional public vocational school in Lexington, and chose the horticulture and landscaping track.

Gallagher was among a small focus group of students (selected, I should note, by school staff) whom I met at Minuteman last week. His ambitions now include sustainable farming, and he hopes to get a degree from the agriculture school at UMass. But he and his classmates also have training that could prove useful immediately upon graduation, or in finding lucrative side jobs in college. In the horticulture program, students learn to operate tractors and Bobcats, and they earn industry certifications that make them immediately more attractive to prospective employers.

There's a powerful expectation — call it middle-class autopilot — that kids from decent homes will take a standard college prep curriculum in high school and then move onto four-year colleges. Somehow, it's been OK for burned-out lawyers to turn to carpentry or organic farming, but lots of upscale college-educated parents would wrinkle their noses should their children skip college and go straight to handcrafted furniture and artisanal Brie.

Yet the dynamics are changing amid high debt loads for recent college graduates and proliferation of jobs that require technical proficiency but not a bachelor's degree. In these circumstances, vocational high schools — long scorned as out-of-district placements for troubled students — offer a model that the rest of the education establishment should emulate.

In recent years, economists and tuition-paying parents alike are asking whether the costs of college have escalated beyond the value of the degrees. Meanwhile, even as the Obama administration recently proposed free access to community colleges, it's raising the pressure on four-year colleges and universities that leave graduates with big debts and no prospects.

In December, the US Department of Education issued a draft plan to rate schools that take federal financial aid. The criteria — loan repayment rates, graduation rates, and accessibility to disadvantaged students — reflect the legitimate concerns of a government that shovels billions of dollars into higher education every year.

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Colleges and universities have reacted with alarm, insisting that academic quality can't be captured in such crude terms. By any objective standard, though, some degrees from some institutions provide students little benefit at significant cost.

Both four-year colleges and the high school curriculums that lay the groundwork for them are built to keep students' career options open, for better or worse, well into their 20s. The ethos at vocational schools like Minuteman differs in one key respect: Through the hands-on experiences that these schools offer, students must reckon early on with their own talents and needs.

Self-awareness goes a long way. Gallagher, the senior studying horticulture, was initially attracted to the biotechnology track but figured out that he prefers working outdoors, digging in dirt, and jumping in holes. In the school's engineering program, Julio Esparza came to realize he enjoys making things that are imaginable but don't yet exist. Now a senior, he hopes to become an industrial and product designer.

Historically, the knock on vocational high schools was that they steered teenagers — often poor kids, minority kids, and kids with special needs — into low-skill jobs and denied them the academic training to choose a different path. Today, Emma Clemente, a senior in Minuteman's environmental technology program, has better options. Because of the certifications her program offers, she's qualified for a job at a water treatment

plant, but she's applying to four-year schools and hopes to study aquatics and fisheries science.

Because of the increasing technical sophistication of blue-collar fields and the advent of high-stakes tests such as the MCAS, vocational schools have been forced to beef up their academics. The calendar at Minuteman devotes a week to vocational instruction, and the next to traditional classroom courses, which run the gamut from reading to AP English and AP Calculus. On MCAS, students score as proficient or higher at rates approaching the state average — noteworthy for a school where about half of students are classified as having learning disabilities or other issues requiring special interventions.

For certain teens, a hands-on exposure to soil science or hydrogeology is bound to feel more meaningful than a richer helping of literature in the classroom. Either way, students benefit when they have to confront their own strengths and weaknesses — and when adults confront their preconceptions about what an education looks like.

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