

**The Stigma of Choosing Trade School Over College**  
When college is held up as the one true path to success, parents—especially highly educated ones—might worry when their children opt for vocational school instead.

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Toren Reesman knew from a young age that he and his brothers were expected to attend college and obtain a high-level degree. As a radiologist—a profession that requires 12 years of schooling—his father made clear what he wanted for his boys: “Keep your grades up, get into a good college, get a good degree,” as Reesman recalls it. Of the four Reesman children, one brother has followed this path so far, going to school for dentistry. Reesman attempted to meet this expectation, as well. He enrolled in college after graduating from high school. With his good grades, he got into West Virginia University—but he began his freshman year with dread. He had spent his summers in high school working for his pastor at a custom-cabinetry company. He looked forward each year to honing his woodworking skills, and took joy in creating beautiful things. School did not excite him in the same way. After his first year of college, he decided not to return.

He says pursuing custom woodworking as his lifelong trade was disappointing to his father, but Reesman stood firm in his decision, and became a cabinetmaker. He says his father is now proud and supportive, but breaking with family expectations in order to pursue his passion was a difficult choice for Reesman—one that many young people are facing in the changing job market.



Toren Reesman handcrafted this piece for his wife for Christmas. (Toren Reesman)

Traditional-college enrollment rates in the United States have risen this century, from 13.2 million students enrolled in 2000 to 16.9 million students in 2016. This is an increase of 28 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Meanwhile, trade-school enrollment has also risen, from 9.6 million students in 1999 to 16 million in 2014. This resurgence came after a decline in vocational education in the 1980s and '90s. That dip created a shortage of skilled workers and tradespeople.

Many jobs now require specialized training in technology that bachelor's programs are usually too broad to address, leading to more "last mile"-type vocational-education programs *after* the completion of a degree. Programs such as Galvanize aim to teach specific software and coding skills; Always Hired offers a "tech-sales bootcamp" to graduates. The manufacturing, infrastructure, and transportation fields are all expected to grow in the coming years—and many of those jobs likely **won't require a four-year degree.**

This shift in the job and education markets can leave parents feeling unsure about the career path their children choose to pursue. Lack of knowledge and misconceptions about the trades can lead parents to steer their kids away from these programs, when vocational training might be a surer path to a stable job.

Raised in a family of truck drivers, farmers, and office workers, Erin Funk was the first in her family to attend college, obtaining a master's in education and going on to teach second grade for two decades. Her husband, Caleb, is a first-generation college graduate in his family, as well. He first went to trade school, graduating in 1997, and later decided to strengthen his résumé following the Great Recession. He began his bachelor's degree in 2009, finishing in 2016. The Funks now live in Toledo, Ohio, and have a 16-year-old son, a senior in high school, who is already enrolled in vocational school for the 2019–20 school year. The idea that their son might not attend a traditional college worried Erin and Caleb at first. "Vocational schools where we grew up seemed to be reserved for people who weren't making it in 'real' school, so we weren't completely sure how we felt about our son attending one," Erin says. Both Erin and Caleb worked hard to be the first in their families to obtain college degrees, and wanted the same opportunity for their three children. After touring the video-production-design program at Penta Career Center, though, they could see the draw for their son. Despite their initial misgivings,

after learning more about the program and seeing how excited their son was about it, they've thrown their support behind his decision.

But not everyone in the Funks' lives understands this decision. Erin says she ran into a friend recently, and "as we were catching up, I mentioned that my eldest had decided to go to the vocational-technical school in our city. Her first reaction was, 'Oh, is he having problems at school?' I am finding as I talk about this that there is an attitude out there that the only reason you would go to a vo-tech is if there's some kind of problem at a traditional school." The Funks' son has a 3.95 GPA. He was simply more interested in the program at Penta Career Center. "He just doesn't care what anyone thinks," his mom says.

The Funks are not alone in their initial gut reaction to the idea of vocational and technical education. Negative attitudes and misconceptions persist even in the face of the positive statistical outlook for the job market for these middle-skill careers. "It is considered a second choice, second-class. We really need to change how people see vocational and technical education," Patricia Hsieh, the president of a community college in the San Diego area, said in a speech at the 2017 conference for the American Association of Community Colleges. European nations prioritize vocational training for many students, with half of secondary students (the equivalent of U.S. high-school students) participating in vocational programs. In the United States, since the passage of the 1944 GI Bill, college has been pushed over vocational education. This college-for-all narrative has been emphasized for decades as *the* pathway to success and stability; parents might worry about the future of their children who choose a different path.

Dennis Deslippe and Alison Kibler are both college professors at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, so it was a mental shift for them when, after high school, their son John chose to attend the masonry program at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology, a two-year accredited technical school. John was always interested in working with his hands, Deslippe and Kibler say—building, creating, and repairing, all things that his academic parents are not good at, by their own confession.

Deslippe explains, "One gap between us as professor parents and John's experience is that we do not really understand how Thaddeus Stevens works in the same way that we understand a liberal-arts college or university. We don't have much advice to give. Initially, we needed some clarity about what masonry exactly was. Does it include pouring concrete, for example?" (Since their son is studying brick masonry, his training will likely not include concrete work.) Deslippe's grandfather was a painter, and Kibler's grandfather was a woodworker, but three of their four parents were college grads. "It's been a long-standing idea that the next generation goes to college and moves out of 'working with your hands,'" Kibler muses. "Perhaps we are in an era where that formula of rising out of trades through education doesn't make sense?"

*College doesn't make sense* is the message that many trade schools and apprenticeship programs are using to entice new students. What specifically doesn't make sense, they claim, is the amount of debt many young Americans take on to chase those coveted bachelor's degrees. There is \$1.5 trillion in student debt outstanding as of 2018, according to the Federal Reserve. Four in 10 adults under the age of 30 have student-loan debt, according to the Pew Research Center. Master's and doctorate degrees often lead to even more debt. Earning potential does not always offset the cost of these loans, and only two-thirds of those with degrees think that the debt

was worth it for the education they received. Vocational and technical education tends to cost significantly less than a traditional four-year degree.

This stability is appealing to Marsha Landis, who lives with her cabinetmaker husband and two children outside of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Landis has a four-year degree from a liberal-arts college, and when she met her husband while living in Washington, D.C., she found his profession to be a refreshing change from the typical men she met in the Capitol Hill dating scene. “He could work with his hands, create,” she says. “He wasn’t pretentious and wrapped up in the idea of degrees. And he came to the marriage with no debt and a marketable skill, something that has benefited our family in huge ways.” She says that she has seen debt sink many of their friends, and that she would support their children if they wanted to pursue a trade like their father.

In the United States, college has been painted as the pathway to success for generations, and it can be, for many. Many people who graduate from college make more money than those who do not. But the rigidity of this narrative could lead parents and students alike to be shortsighted as they plan for their future careers. Yes, many college *graduates* make more money—but less than half of students finish the degrees they start. This number drops as low as 10 percent for students in poverty. The ever sought-after college-acceptance letter isn’t a guarantee of a stable future if students aren’t given the support they need to complete a degree. If students are exposed to the possibility of vocational training early on, that might help remove some of the stigma, and help students and parents alike see a variety of paths to a successful future.

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