COMMENTARY· EDUCATION

I've owned and operated trade schools for 40 years and Gen Z is onto something: They recognize the value of vocational education

BY **STEPHEN TAVE**
Stephen Tave is CEO and president of the American Higher Education Development Corporation.
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Vocational colleges have long been overlooked, misunderstood, and underappreciated. But now they're having an unmistakable moment.

A recent survey offers a case in point. Only 16% of Gen Z parents now believe a college degree guarantees long-term job security, according to research from Jobber, a home services software maker. Indeed, 77% of Gen Zers themselves indicate that choosing a career resistant to automation is a "top priority."

The professions that Gen Z parents ranked most "AI-resistant" were plumbers, HVAC technicians, electricians and nurses" – most of whom undergo training at vocational schools. The higher-education sector once stigmatized these trade and technical schools. Vocational schools were, after all, decidedly blue-collar. Mainstream society, generally intent on grooming doctors, lawyers, accountants, scientists, engineers, and computer coders, perceived a student learning a working-class skilled trade as somehow lowly, poorly compensated, a second-class citizen. Vocational schools were regarded as an afterthought, a last-ditch option, offering vastly less prestige than traditional universities, particularly vaunted Ivy League institutions.

But that tide has turned.

That attitude is fast becoming history. Early this year, President Trump called for a “renaissance in manufacturing” and, in the bargain, advocated more funding for technical colleges. More recently, Trump even called on Harvard University to build a vocational school of its own, according to Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick. Also recently, Jim Farley, CEO of the Ford Motor Company, called for U.S. companies to invest in skilled trades and launched a campaign to partner with vocational colleges, complete with scholarships for future technicians.

A long wave rising

As it happens, the trend toward growing acceptance of vocational schools as reputable, legitimate enterprises was already under way. Trade school enrollment rose 5% between 2020 and 2023, about double the rate for four-year universities, according to the higher education marketing firm Validated Insights. In community colleges focused on vocational training, registration increased by 16% last year, reaching its highest level since 2018, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. A survey from the American Staffing Association found that one-third of 2,000 high school graduates (33%) advocated for enrolling in trade schools, more than the 28% who advocated for a four-year college.

A degree or certificate from a vocational school also holds vocational value. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that the unemployment rate for twentysomething graduates of vocational schools and community colleges was only 2.1%, compared to 15.3% for four-year college alumni.

Trade schools are a crucial resource

I’ve owned and operated trade schools for 40-plus years. If I’ve learned anything in the private, post-secondary education sector, it’s that the estimated 8,000 vocational colleges across the country are not only essential to the American economy but also increasingly important.

Many vocational fields now face worsening personnel shortages, primarily due to an aging workforce and declining birth rates. Along with jobs in construction and manufacturing, supply is falling short of demand for welders, electricians, mechanics, machinists, and plumbers. Opportunities for nurses, sonographers, veterinary technicians, and surgical technicians are also increasing. Schools like ours help fulfill those needs. These hands-on jobs also come with a built-in advantage – they're essentially AI-proof.

Vocational colleges have other competitive advantages over universities. They're significantly more affordable, typically about one-fourth the cost. They require less time to earn a degree, generally two years, and even as little as 10 months for a diploma, rather than four years. Graduates enter the workplace sooner, kick-starting their careers with solid wages and long-term job security, thereby bringing a faster return on their educational investment.

A bootstrap strategy is at play here, too. Our students, like those at other vocational colleges, may never have had the opportunity to attend college. They're generally from low-income families, raised by single parents and are first-generation college students. In more than a few cases, they've overcome hardships from teen pregnancy and drug abuse to PTSD from military deployment and homelessness.

Our faculty and staff routinely go above and beyond the call of duty, both inside and outside the classroom, to keep students on track. We'll call you at home if you're absent. We'll guide you through the most intimate personal and family crises. Our teachers will, if need be, even kneel and pray alongside you. We are relentless in our effort to help our students overcome the challenges they face. Vocational schools give future generations an opportunity to gain self-respect and contribute substantially to local economies and the national GDP. They're good for students, good for business and good for communities all across America.

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