

Explain This

WHY DO PARENTS DISLIKE TWO-YEAR DEGREES?

It turns out, they don't.

Most manufacturers will tell you that more students don't enroll in tech schools because parents want them to attend universities. We convened a diverse cross section of them to talk about it. Their responses surprised even us.

Small and medium-sized manufacturers are all fairly tense about where they are going to find the next generation of employees to operate their increasingly sophisticated operations. Some blame teachers and counselors for not telling students about the opportunities in tech fields. Others blame parents for all wanting to push their kids into getting four-year degrees.

What do you say to that?

- I've said for a long time that the average percentage of the population with a college degree is about 25 percent, it may be a little higher in Minnesota. Yet, high schools send darn near 100 percent of their kids on to college. That tells you what? That 75 percent quit. I think it's a huge problem. I think the high schools don't track kids; they don't even offer information about options other than college because they want to say 98 percent of our kids go on to college.
- We actually hired an outside company to do our own assessments for a career path for NAME versus relying on the assessments at school.
- I have a daughter who did well in high school and goes to an all-women's liberal arts college in Boston. I also have a son who would come home and say the school wanted him to take a four-year path. He heard someone from DCTC (Dakota County Technical College) talk about some other career paths and was super charged up about that. We then heard about Iowa Central, and some pretty phenomenal programs. It is a two-year campus, but it has a four-year feel. He can live on a campus. I don't blame the high school. Sometimes

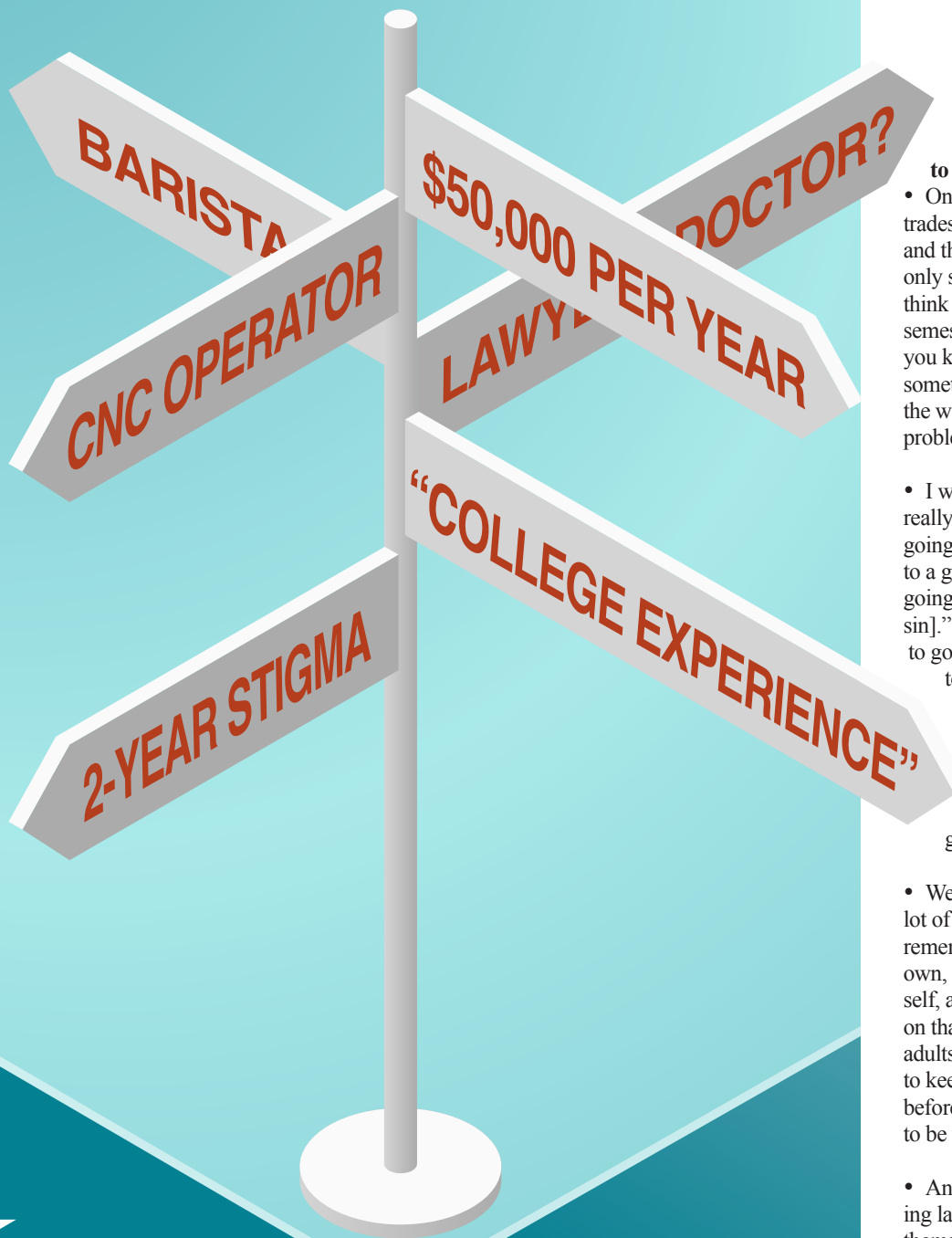
you just also have to listen to your children.

- My husband went to a two-year school, so he's been pushing my son to consider that route. But he wants to go to a four-year college. And he's going to be just fine.

Is there a sense among some parents that going after a two-year degree is somehow "settling"?

- Absolutely.
- I always thought it would be great for me to have gone to a two-year school, take some business classes and then get trained on top of that. So, I'd have the business acumen along with running a small business, that type of thing. But a lot of times that combination isn't there, and a person with a small business or a manufacturing business just can't run it right.
- Some of it is messaging. I've got a unique perspective in that I do about 100 senior interviews at Lakeville South every year, asking things like, "What do you plan to do after you graduate?" And, "Where do you see yourself in five to 10 years?" I only have about 10 to 12 minutes to give feedback. You can see right away whether there's a good connection between the courses they've taken and where they're heading. You can see if they haven't spent much time on the career piece. You can see that some don't have a plan for next year, and they're not going to be successful.

From the perspective of manufacturers, do students have much exposure to a manufacturing lab, or something we used



to call shop class?

- One of the issues with high schools and trades classes is these classes are electives, and the way the hours work out, there are only so many electives to go around. I think students can choose two electives per semester, and among them are gym, band, you know some of the fun things. And so, sometimes those electives get chosen over the welding elective, and I think that's the problem.

- I want to go back to the last question really quick. You know, March Madness is going around, right? In Wisconsin, you go to a grad party and somebody says, "I'm going to Wisconsin [University of Wisconsin]." And you're like, "Oh, yeah, you have to go check out this place, and you have to go do this, and it's all about the experience." And then somebody else says, "Well I'm going to be a diesel mechanic and by the time I'm 19 I'm going to make \$40 an hour." And you say, "Well, good luck with that."

- Well, and that's what we talked about. A lot of us who have four-year degrees, we remember those friendships, living on your own, independence, learning about yourself, and we don't want our kids to miss out on that. I don't want them to have to be full adults right away, you know? I want them to keep learning and do what they love, before the time comes when you're going to be working the rest of your life.

- Another benefit of having a manufacturing lab at a high school is that the teachers themselves are advocates for those kinds of jobs.

There is a study out there that concludes that the number of unfilled jobs in Minnesota is going to jump from 60,000 to as much as 280,000 in the next five years. That's going to create a lot of job opportunities in manufacturing.

- You asked earlier about the status of a four-year degree. I look around this table and it is likely that everybody has at least one college degree, probably some of us have more than one, and we're having a conversation about career paths for all kids, not just kids like ours. I think about some of the kids in my husband's class who don't even have homes. They don't know

where their next meal is coming from. And where's their guidance coming from? A big challenge for high schools is their guidance counselors have 700 children apiece that they're supposed to provide guidance to. And, of course, their frame of reference is a four-year college. Their teachers' frame of reference is a four-year college. Everybody who influences them talks about a four-year college. And how do you get those people to think differently?

- And this high school doesn't want to lose the funding for the student. So they don't even tell the kids that these opportunities are available to them, when there are hands-on opportunities out there.

- Any kind of resource that can be provided to high school guidance counselors, something they can hand out when they're meeting with 400 students at a time, would be helpful. Here are some career opportu-

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nities. I think it would be great if districts offered Career 101 when kids got into middle school, Career 102 when they were freshmen, and Career 103 when they got to be sophomores. And I think it's a shift in everybody's mindset because all of this is being decided by people who have four-year degrees or more.

- Burnsville High School has done some phenomenal things with partnerships with business communities. They have an auto dealer who actually has a garage and works with the kids. They have a credit union that has a location in the school. They have a fab lab, they have lots of business partnerships. It was so eye-opening to me. Every student should try these opportunities.

- Students develop an interest and passion in things they're good at. I think if we looked at it from the kids' perspective, we might look at it differently. Just providing information is one thing, but the coach-

ing and the counseling, saying, "What do you like to do? What are you good at?" Sometimes, it's the things outside of school where I see kids' passions, in things that aren't offered in school.

- There are a lot who have fallen between the cracks. I think that's where we're failing as parents and schools, if we're not getting them to a different place as a collective whole, as a village.

- One small tweak could be done fairly easily. Lakeville South seniors are required to do a job shadow. But it's required during their senior year and they have a deadline of March 1st. I'm thinking that is so late in their life to be considering a job shadow. If my son would have had that as an eighth grader or a ninth grader, he would already have had opportunities to see a couple different things and be more invested.

A school administrator told us that he thinks up to 50 percent of graduating seniors in his area have no idea what they are going to do after graduation. Who is responsible for this?

- Students and parents spend a lot of time planning visits to college campuses. Why not make it an opportunity to visit a manufacturing company and see what kinds of opportunities are there?

- One other thing might be for students to get jobs when they're sophomores in high school, help them start on their career pathways while learning?

- They don't work because of activities and the demands of extracurricular activities.

- I think high school kids aren't aware of the opportunities out there. We need career fairs at high schools and private investment in programs at high schools. I know when Farmington built their new high school, they significantly downsized the hands-on programs. The shop doesn't even have a single welding station in it. It has one table saw and it's so inadequate.

- It's a challenge for schools because those classes are expensive. They take up lots of space, lots of equipment, and equipment changes all the time. I think that anything the private sector can do to educate high school students or middle school students is going to help them make decisions about their future that

might not include a four-year track.

In Alexandria and Fergus Falls, the local manufacturing community donated equipment for those manufacturing labs. And they supplied people to teach, not just to teach students but to teach the teachers. Do you sense there is room for collaboration like that between education and manufacturers? Manufacturers would do just about anything right now, I think.

- Absolutely.

- I think there needs to be structural change. The senior interview, the job shadowing, and the career jamboree haven't been successful. Kids are just filling out pieces of paper and copying off each other to get done. It's not structural change, it's a one-day event. And how many kids change their mind or get exposed to what they want to do? I'm guessing the latter is a really small number.

So what kind of information motivates students when they're thinking about their career choices? Is it the fun factor? Is it money?

- Do they have a clue?

- I think it's, again, connecting what they're good at and their passions with a job, looking at what that translates into. If you kept talking to kids long enough, you'd find out what they do outside of school that they like to do. Maybe they don't do extracurricular activities, or they don't do sports at all. But there's something out there. There's something out there that you can see they are passionate about. Or maybe it's graphics ... or maybe it is gaming. So, it's graphics or game design, there's something that's out there for them.

There was a study earlier this year that showed how two-year degrees can be more lucrative than a four-year college degree, sometimes remarkably so, if you factor in the cost of a four-year degree.

- I don't think a lot of parents know that.

- In the last 15 years, we've seen this unbelievable amount of debt. Because that's what you're supposed to do, go to a four-year college and get a four-year degree in a field that isn't hiring like history or philosophy, whatever. They end up with this tremendous amount of debt, and no real skills behind it. My wife and I both have four-year degrees, but just because

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we did it doesn’t mean my kids should. I think it’d be wonderful to hear about these hands-on experiences for half the price and for double the pay, that when you graduate, you can go do this. I’d be like, “I didn’t know you could do that.”

- I don’t think it’s being communicated, either.
- My daughter’s a sixth grader and industrial tech is an offering for an elective next year. So, I said to her, “Why don’t you pick that?” “I don’t want to do that.” I asked, “Did they talk to you about what it is?” “Well, no. I just don’t want to do that.” It’s hands-on experience, though.
- We do that with our kids for sports and food, right? You have to try it once and if you don’t like it, then we’ll talk.
- That way, you know what you like and also what you don’t like.
- It would be interesting to have this kind of a conversation with kids in their 20s who are struggling to find their path. And you could ask them some of these questions that you’re asking us because I think of my son, my youngest one and his buddies, all of whom have floundered, and wonder what would have helped them when they were in high school? They’re close enough to it that they could probably remember and tell you. I don’t know. I don’t have those answers.
- But they would have those answers.
- Because they all went to college but if they had other information, then maybe they wouldn’t have chosen that path.
- Right. What would have influenced them to make a different decision? I don’t know. That’s a question for those kids.
- And they need to think about how much college costs. Parents are terrible at math.

When it comes to, “Here’s your \$1,200 a month student loan repayment for the next 20 years, have a nice day.” But they have a degree that pays them 12 bucks an hour. Wait a minute. Who did the math on this one? Some of those mechanical exercises at the high school level would be helpful, where people actually start to think, “How much money do I need to live on?”

- I went to Mankato because ... I have no idea why I picked it. And I picked human resource management because a business degree was the easiest and I thought, if I learn to lead people, that’s what you want to do in business. I wish my parents would have sat down and asked, “OK, what are your goals? What kind of house do you want to live in? Where do you want to live, what do you want to do?” I think that’s the only answer.
- I think more so than teachers. I think they have enough trouble just teaching right now.
- To a large class. I don’t know that it would be successful if you put it on the schools. Focus more on the parents.

Is it because that’s the life experience of those counselors?

- There aren’t a lot of counselors that have manufacturing experience.
- Or they’re being pushed. Do the schools want a high percentage of their graduating students going to a four-year college? Does it look better? Do they get more money?
- And then you have schools saying, “You can go to a four-year college. You can make big money.” And you said only 25 percent are actually getting a job in what they went to college for.
- Look at the kids they’re interviewing. I would say 30 percent or more don’t have an engaged parent or parents.
- So, when you say put it back on the parents, there is no parent to put it back on. They are overcoming their family situation every day. There are some amazing stories that some of the deans know about. I don’t think we can just say the parents are the answer, either. We’ve got a more diverse population, more diverse than in this room, less engaged parents than in this room, so it does take a village. Actually, if that’s the group you turn as a percentage, then I think

those jobs will be filled.

- It’s a diverse population because there is either single or no parent involvement. OK? Where are they going to get the exposure? And some are amazing and they’re probably going to get scholarships because somebody spent enough time with them to reach out to some school or some person to make a connection that is going to change their life. They are the first one in their family to get more schooling, whether it’s college or a two-year school, and be successful.

Manufacturing executives also like to talk about what they describe as a lack of soft skills in younger workers. Alarm clock issues. Common courtesy. Do you see that among your kids and your kids’ friends?

- I’m an HR person. It’s crazy. First thing out of their mouth is: “How much paid time off do I get?” I’m like, “What?” It’s crazy. The thing that I think manufacturers have been working hard on is trying to adapt to the millennials (Generation Y) by having them work vampire hours that go later in the day, into the evening. Especially the kids who just cannot get up. I’ve got a vampire engineer. He comes to work at 11 o’clock and he’s there till 8 o’clock at night. There’s not a lot of staff when he’s there but the people are on the production floor. Kids today, they march to their own drum. It is difficult, I have to admit.
- You are looking for people you can count on to show up or be respectful to each other, or who wouldn’t ask, “Where’s my promotion?” after the first three weeks.
- I have a farmer that I’ve had for 38 years and he’s still there 38 years later.
- I think manufacturing has a public image problem. The four-year institutions have worked long and hard at selling themselves and at propping up their public image and talking about how people with four-year college degrees earn so much more over their lifetimes, and we’ve all bought into it. And they’ve spent a lot of years doing that. So, I suspect that the manufacturing industry has some work to do on its public image, and there are ways to accomplish that: by talking to kids and talking to them through the kinds of media that they consume when they consume it. And it takes people a lot younger than us to figure that out. ■