

We must embrace multiple pathways to success

By ANNE KRESS

As hundreds of thousands of U.S. college graduates walk across the stage to receive their hard-earned degrees or certificates this month, many will think of the next step in their journey.

For those seeking to enter the workforce, some majors may attract more job offers or higher salaries than others. In Greater Rochester, graduates in advanced manufacturing, automotive technology and hospitality—primarily holders of associate degrees and certificates—are a hot commodity.

In this decade when many jobs in the country do not require a bachelor's degree, it is time we start recognizing that career success can be launched from many different places: an associate, bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree; an apprenticeship; or some other kind of workforce training. As a society, we must embrace the fact that there are multiple pathways to success after college and one is as valid as the next. We need to reject old value judgments and look at the facts.

The problem with the "one road to success" mentality is apparent in the current employment picture nationally and regionally, showing a mismatch of graduates' skills and the many positions available in fast-growing industries, such as health care and information technology. Case in point: Some 400 manufacturing positions are open in Greater Rochester as employers struggle to find qualified workers.

Many well-paid jobs go unfilled year after year because too few young people are aware of or encouraged to pursue middle-skill careers. These are jobs that require some postsecondary education but less than a bachelor's degree and pay a family-sustaining wage, ranging from \$35,000 to \$95,000 annually.

The skills gap is real and should concern not only colleges but also K-12 schools, parents, employers and community members. At stake is the future of employers striving to maintain their global competitiveness, of communities focused on helping move the economy forward and of all hardworking people aspiring to achieve economic independence.

To improve the employment picture, bold actions must be taken to correct the disconnect between education and the workforce.

At a recent conference that brought national education experts and local community leaders to Monroe Community College to address the skills gap, several common themes emerged as central to any long-term strategy:

- Increased emphasis on career guidance starting in elementary schools; and involving parents and school counselors throughout students' educational experience. Strategies include recruiting employers to serve as mentors and engaging parents and school counselors in conversations to guide students in making informed choices on their majors and learning opportunities.

- Creation of multiple pathways that lead to successful entry into the workplace for all young people. An example is P-TECH Rochester, a new program that will allow Rochester city high school students to earn a college degree from MCC at no cost, graduate with career training in information technology and be first in line for job interviews with area employers.

- Collaborations between education and industry to develop more effective career pathways, such as designing curricula and credentials and promoting career readiness.

- Increased opportunities for relevant workplace learning so that students can discover and develop their potential and learn about different career options. Employers also benefit from these programs by being exposed to a potential talent pool.

By engaging students in self-discovery and career exploration at an early age, supporting them in devising their individual pathways throughout their educational careers and connecting them to internships, we will give them a greater chance of achieving their personal goals for work and life—a greater chance of achieving their personal definition of success.

It takes an entire community to close the skills gap, increase economic mobility and strengthen the local economy. Embracing multiple pathways to success is a critical step to transforming the job picture.

Anne Kress is president of Monroe Community College.



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