

## The good life - without college

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**Readability:** >12 grade level (Lexile: 1410L)

The college admission letters have arrived. Some students got their first choice, some their second. But some area business owners think there's a choice that many young people haven't considered.

Don't go to college.

Or, at least, don't go to a four-year college. Instead, local businesses owners want high school students to consider heading right into a career. Administrators from two of the top industries in this area - manufacturing and health care - say students can enter the workforce immediately, get trained and educated as they move up in the company and land high-paying jobs, just like the people who go the four-year college route.

It's not a path for everybody, they say. But neither is four years in college.

The career-first path still leads to secondary education, but it is admittedly a different kind of education, one more grounded in the world of work rather than the world of academia.

High schools around the state are trying to meet the needs of all their students - those who want to go to college, those who want to start their careers and those who aren't sure what they want.

Some people say Michigan's schools are wrestling with a curriculum that doesn't give them the flexibility they need to meet each student's needs. Supporters of the Michigan Merit Curriculum, which took effect in 2006, say its higher standards will allow Michigan's students to be competitive in an increasingly global market.

Decades ago, a person could graduate with a high school diploma and enter into a stable career that provided enough money to feed a family.

These days, "those jobs have gone away," said Charlie Owens, state director for the National Federation of Independent Business. "There are jobs for those folks, but they're not well paid. They're not jobs that you can raise a family on."

There has to be some form of secondary education, whether it be a bachelor's degree, an associate degree or a combination of education in a vocational-technical program and on-the-job training.

Owens said the issue is that a four-year college degree is often presented as the best path for students, while other paths are given less attention.

He said there's a lot of hype behind the idea that a bachelor's is every high school graduate's best option.

"I hold the education community to task for what I believe is false advertising," Owens said. Students are told, "If you get a four-year degree you will get a good-paying job.' That has never been true.

"You have folks graduating with degrees where there is very little prospect of good jobs," Owens said. They're told to follow their interests, even when those interests lead them to a degree in 16th-century English poetry. If that's your passion, "that's great. You go. But don't complain when you graduate with that degree and your job prospects are slim."

Matching 'widgets'

Most English majors do eventually get jobs and do just fine, said Corey Carolla, director of business and industry at Kinexus in Benton Harbor, formerly known as Michigan Works.

But while some teach or work in the literary field, often they end up in a completely different area, Carolla said.

That's the traditional way education has worked. A student graduates from high school, pursues his or her interests in college, decides on a possible career choice and then, degree in hand, looks for a job.

But there's another way, Carolla said. You can find a job - and then get educated to fit that job.

Carolla said he thinks of students as widgets being assembled for a market.

In traditional education, the widgets are assembled and then sent into the market to search for a customer.

In the career-first path, the customer directs the assembly, and each widget is perfectly matched to the customer.

High schools and community colleges are working with the owners of local businesses to develop curricula around what those businesses need, Carolla said. Those schools are thinking creatively while working within the Michigan Merit Curriculum, Carolla said.

#### Niles New Tech

One of those schools is Niles New Tech Entrepreneurial Academy, which is part of the Niles school district. The program, which has about 220 students in ninth and 10th grades, operates out of a wing in Niles High School. Next year the program will also teach 11th-grade students.

Jerry Holtgren, the program's director, said a big reason why the Niles program was started is the concentration of factories in the area.

The program works with 35 local businesses to create projects for the students.

"Our goal is to have them college- and career-ready. That's two different things," Holtgren said. "We really feel like we're serving both tracks."

At New Tech the students work in groups. For a class called American Studies they researched the Industrial Revolution, trying to determine why the economy grew so quickly, and then applied those lessons to the question of how to bring more businesses to Niles. The students worked with the Southwest Michigan Economic Growth Alliance to create commercials for the organization's website that were meant to draw business owners to the area.

Lessons tied to a real-world deadline and real-life bosses helped hold students' attention, Holtgren said.

"If there's a business person asking you to do it, there's a relevance to it," he said. "We see a real high level of engagement."

The core curriculum is still covered, but the question, "Why are we learning this?" - which so many teachers have heard before - is gone.

"And that's really nice," Holtgren said. "The motivation changes. It's not an external motivation, it's an intrinsic one."

The New Tech program is just one track that the Niles school district offers. There's also a traditional high school track and, next year, a vocational or career technology education, or CTE, program will be offered.

Holtgren said the New Tech and CTE programs will meet the state's core requirements, but the Michigan Merit Curriculum has some requirements that make it tough to cover both the core classes and the career-oriented classes.

"They put so many of these requirements in there that make it tough to get students into the CTE program in high school," Holtgren said. "That kind of treats kids as one-size-fits-all."

Holtgren said he understands the value of the MMC requirements such as two years of a foreign language, but says some students may want to focus on other things.

## Michigan Merit Curriculum

Before the MMC took effect in April 2006, the only credit required by the state was a semester of civics. Then the Michigan Legislature enacted the MMC, an extensive set of graduation requirements including English, biology, physical education, performing arts and advanced math.

Two pieces of legislation, House Bills 4465 and 4466, have been put forward that would get rid of the foreign language requirement and change the way credits can be earned in health, physical education, performing arts, science, math and career and technical education. For example, HB 4466 would add agricultural science to the list of eligible science courses.

"Students should be allowed to substitute vocational-technology and career classes for some of the classes in the curriculum that are more geared toward college prep," said Owens of the National Federation of Independent Business, which supports the changes.

Factories have a need for qualified employees that isn't being met because vocational-technology programs are being phased out, Owens said.

Owens used the example of one of the NFIB's members who was trying to fill two open positions - one for an entry-level information technology job and the second for a metal fabricating job. The IT position, which paid \$30,000, received hundreds of applications. The metal fabricating job, which paid upwards of \$60,000, received two, and both applicants were unqualified.

"There is a snobbish, pedantic attitude from the education bureaucracy that if you don't go to college you're looked down upon," Owens said. "Everyone's told to go into IT. But here you can't fill a job that pays twice as much."

Carolla of Kinexus said that many area manufacturers look for new employees who are right out of high school, and therefore those potential employees need to begin in high school the basic training they'll need for their jobs.

Jan Ellis, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Education, said it's possible to do that and meet the MMC requirements. School districts have to meet the requirements, but there's a lot of flexibility how and when they meet them, she said.

For example, language requirements could be filled in elementary school, when students are better able to learn a new language anyway, Ellis said.

"It does take outside-the-box thinking to incorporate these requirements in," Ellis said, but there are school districts around the state that are successful incorporating career technical education and the MMC.

When the students in Michigan's schools graduate, they won't just be competing for Michigan jobs. They'll be competing globally. The state needs to consider that when it makes its requirements, Ellis said.

Ellis said the department is a strong supporter of career and technology programs.

"Our goal is not to deny students that, it's to ensure they get the same foundation that all students need," Ellis said.

## Two equal paths

As high schools work to balance career and college requirements, there's a problem of public opinion that supporters of the career-first option must deal with, too, said Patrick McQuone, administrator at Lakeland's Continuing Care Center.

"Too often we think of the straight academic path as the only one, and that's a disservice," McQuone said. "It's equally as good for some people to consider getting a certification or associate degree and using them as stepping stones. You pick up experience and better-paying jobs."

As an example, McQuone pointed to the nursing assistants who start work at the center, where they can quickly figure out if they enjoy the job. They can go on to become licensed practical nurses, and with that experience and improved income they're likely able to afford to become a registered nurse or get a baccalaureate degree in nursing, McQuone

said.

"They have, in my opinion, a better resume than a four-year college student because they've worked in real-world situations. They've actually worked the job," McQuone said.

Several of the administrative nurses working at the center got their start as nurses' aides and worked their way into their current positions, he said.

In almost any trade, and certainly in health care and manufacturing, "you likely could find a career path that allows smaller steps gaining experience, and they'll get you to the exact same place," he said.

The career-first path isn't better than a bachelor's degree, McQuone said. "But you can over-rely on a four-year degree, and there's a danger in that."

McQuone said he started college not knowing what he wanted to do. He got a degree in business but decided to go to work as a nurse's aide.

"I found out I had an aptitude. My employer was good to me," he said. He got certified and then licensed as an administrator.

"It's a path my school never explored with me," McQuone said. A bachelor's degree "became the promised pathway. It's a great pathway, it is. It's just not the only one, and we shouldn't overlook that there are other pathways that produce fantastic employees and great professionals."

Carolla of Kinexus said that for students making the choice between the two paths, it comes down to a matter of interest and location.

If a student wants to stay in this area, one of the best options is in health care or manufacturing, he said.

But when he talks with high school students, the most common answer to "what do you want to be?" is "forensic scientist."

"They all want to be what's on TV," Carolla said.

Becoming a forensic scientist is certainly achievable, though it would likely mean moving away from home because there are only two forensic scientists in the nearest five counties, Carolla said. But there are 85 computer numerical control machinists in the same area.

Part of Carolla's job at Kinexus is exposing students to the high-paying jobs in their backyards and disproving myths about some of the area industries.

The perception of manufacturing is that it's a dying industry and what's left of it is being automated or is headed overseas, Carolla said. But that's not true for Michigan or for Berrien County.

#### Manufacturing resurgence

Bill Mach, owner of Mach Mold, is well aware of those perceptions.

"For many, many years the media talked about the decline of manufacturing and how there's no future in manufacturing. 'It's an information society, we don't need manufacturing anymore,'" Mach said. But as manufacturing failed either to leave the state or become entirely automated, "I think there's a resurgence of interest.

"Manufacturing is alive and well and it isn't going away. There are good jobs to be had," Mach said. "These are things that shouldn't be ignored by someone looking for a job or career."

But many of those jobs require fairly specific education.

In college, "you may learn many good things, but for many jobs the education in college doesn't match the skills in the workplace," Mach said.

To solve that particular problem, manufacturers have teamed with community colleges to offer on-the-job training in conjunction with college classes.

Some Mach workers went to college, but most were hired right out of high school, Mach said.

Mach paired with Lake Michigan College to create a customized apprenticeship program. The program has to follow a basic federal outline of the core curriculum for an apprenticeship.

"And then we take a look at what is particular to our operation and we add classes that help people to better fit our industry," Mach said.

LMC works with more than 30 local companies in its apprenticeship program, said Ken Flowers, LMC's program coordinator and instructor.

The companies do on-the-job training and then the apprentices head to LMC for 35-37 credit hours, Flowers said.

Apprenticeships can make for long days. Some students start work at 7 a.m. and don't finish classes until 10 p.m., though some courses have online classes and that "makes it more flexible for them," Flowers said.

The companies pay for the apprentices' time and schooling. If the apprentices also take some general education credits, they can end their apprenticeship with an associate degree, Flowers said.

The employers' investment "shows the companies are investing in you, so you're going to stay with that company because you have that loyalty," Flowers said. "The companies that have strong apprenticeships have done really well. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that they bring up their own people."

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