

THE NUMBERS PROVE IT

American Experiment's much-needed research confirms the enduring value of manufacturing careers in the 21st century. It should yield nation-wide significance.

Frustrated manufacturers in Minnesota have long chafed at the reality that their ability to offer satisfying, well-paid careers is still mostly unrecognized by an informal (and ill-informed) cartel of parents, counselors and teachers who think that seeking anything less than a four-year college degree would constitute as settling for second best.

How about settling for more money?

When Center of the American Experiment released a study this fall entitled, "No Four-Year Degree Required: A look at a selection of in-demand careers in Minnesota," it demonstrated how lifetime earnings of students who follow a two-year degree path can actually *exceed* their four-year counterparts—by as much as 61 percent.

The Center recruited Dr. Amanda Griffith, a labor economist at Wake Forest University. She selected a cross-section of occupations that do not require a four-year degree and estimated the long-term financial rewards for an 18-year-old Minnesotan looking to the future, while also factoring in the costs of post-secondary education.

The only disappointment with the

study is the self-limiting nature of its title. It may have used Minnesota as its data set, but its findings convey nationwide value. To my knowledge, there isn't a similar study anywhere that makes the empirical case so compellingly. There is not a state in the union that wouldn't benefit for this knowledge.

In my experience, manufacturers nationwide have aggressively attempted to show students the opportunities and sophistication in modern manufacturing. They use job fairs, plant tours and classroom visits to showcase their clean, high-tech facilities and dispel the stubborn myths that manufacturing jobs are tedious and dirty, intellectually unchallenging, and without opportunities for advancement and compensation. This study uses hard data to put that notion to rest.

None of Griffith's study—or anything I've ever written—disparages the value of a solid four-year college degree. Hardly. But she makes a valuable point that only 22 percent of jobs in Minnesota require a four-year degree, while the education establishment pushes more than half of high school graduates in that direction.

Griffith computed the cost of education and median hourly wages in each field for workers in the Twin Cities and statewide, using data from the State. Then she calculated a median lifetime earnings profile for each occupation that could be directly compared to the median lifetime earnings of Minnesotans

with four-year college degrees.

The surprising results reveal that numerous occupations that do not require a college degree pay more than the \$25.30 per hour median wage earned by four-year college graduates in Minnesota. For example, Griffith found the estimated median lifetime earnings for CNC machinists beat college graduates by 11 percent.

This information complements data from the National Association of Manufacturers: of the 3.5 million jobs that manufacturers will require by 2025, two million are expected to go unfilled for the lack of qualified applicants. These findings should intrigue policy-makers (of any political persuasion) that the manufacturers who will bring jobs and economic prosperity during that time will reside in states whose companies, educators and policy-makers have already collaborated to solve the skills gap and fill those jobs.

I'm hopeful that this study will be widely circulated so that people will come to recognize the well-paying, secure and challenging careers that are available in modern manufacturing facilities. This includes teachers, guidance counselors and parents. It should also include anyone who cares about the economic vitality of their communities. But none of these people are likely to stumble upon it on their own.

I encourage manufacturers to download it (www.AmericanExperiment.org) and share it widely. There are a lot of young people whose career choices may depend on it. ★



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