

Some employers want return of vo-ed training

By Martha C. White
February 28, 2012

Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum hit on a hot-button issue over the weekend when he called President Barack Obama "a snob" for his views on higher education. "He wants everybody in America to go to college," Santorum said.

The Tea Party may have loved the jab, but Santorum's comment touched on a real issue facing businesses that is rarely discussed in education policy debates: a lack of well-trained high-school graduates ready for the workforce.

[Experts](#) say the problem is the result of a trend that dates to the Reagan era: a well-intentioned push toward more college-prep at the expense of vocational and technical programs in high schools.

"We began to focus on book learning, and 'vocational' became a dirty word," said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Center of Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University.

As a result, although Census data show a record 30.4 percent of U.S. adults now have a bachelor's degree or higher, there's a mismatch between the skills many students acquire in those four years and what employers say they need to fill jobs.

Obama responded to Santorum Monday, at least obliquely, saying, "When I speak about higher education we're not just talking about a four-year degree. We're talking about somebody going to a community college and getting trained for that manufacturing job and is now required to handle a million-dollar piece of equipment."

Drew Greenblatt could use more workers like that. Greenblatt, president of metal fabrication company Marlin Steel Wire Products in Baltimore, said machines in his factory sit idle because even at \$30 an hour, he can't find people to operate them.

"This isn't a theoretical thing," he said. "We're in a position where we need more talent, fast." Without workers to operate his equipment, Greenblatt said he'll lose project bids to foreign competitors.

Reams of data show that workers with [college degrees](#) earn more than those without, but in the short term, it's grim out there even for many college grads. Popular humanities

majors like psychology, marketing and communications just don't deliver in today's job market. Greenblatt said he's currently training an English major to operate equipment. "You don't need a four-year degree to run our sheet metal fabrication robots, but you do need to know geometry, how to read a blueprint [and] how to use a tape measure," he said.

"We have a lot of people who are in high school who could be doing a vocational track, who could be learning these technical skills, but they're not," said Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute.

As recently as the early 1980s, American high school students had the choice of taking college prep or technical classes. This two-track system still thrives in countries like Germany, a country considered a role model by experts who study labor and education issues.

But Germany's success can't be replicated here for a couple of reasons. Reintegrating a technical track into high schools nationwide is culturally unpalatable, Carnevale said. "Politically, it's tough," he said. "The majority of Americans always say everybody doesn't need to go to college. Then you say, 'Do your kids need to go to college?' and they say, 'Yes.'"

Two-year technical schools and a growing number of community [colleges](#) offer education in hands-on fields like health care technology, mechanics or nursing, where job shortages are rife, but students and parents often overlook this option, said John Challenger, CEO of outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. "There's kind of a cult of the four-year college degree. ... It's not right for everybody," he said.

Germany's two-track educational system also works because it's integrated with apprenticeship programs, a rarity in American industry. "A lot of companies that had built up great trade apprenticeship programs dismantled them," Challenger said. "Employers are always looking to get someone else to pay," said Gary Burtless, a senior fellow in economic studies at The Brookings Institution. He said some cities now promise to educate the local workforce, just as they often offer tax breaks as an incentive, to lure companies into building factories or other facilities within their borders. In Charlotte, N.C., manufacturer Siemens opened a factory to produce gas turbines. The company worked with local Central Piedmont Community College to design a curriculum teaching would-be workers how to operate the equipment. Obama touted the partnership last month in his State of the Union address.

Initiatives like this are helping to balance the disconnect between jobs and skills, but experts say kids should get an earlier start learning the skills they're going to be using for the next four decades or so. Waiting until college to learn skills like applied math or

equipment operation, puts many American students at a disadvantage, especially when they may have to shoulder the cost of higher education.

"We know in general that people learn better when learning is applied. For a kid whose prospects going to college are already tough, ... Algebra Two doesn't connect them to the real world," Carnevale said. "[We're] leaving all these kids behind."

Do you think everyone should go to college?