

Column: College Community Connection

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An Alternative to the Traditional Four-Year Plan

By Dr. Al Roberts

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that the number of bachelor degrees conferred in the U.S. has increased by 125% since the early 1970s. A large part of the reason is the encouragement high school students receive from parents and guidance counselors to pursue a college education.

Getting a bachelor's or advanced academic or professional degree is good advice for many students, but like a lot of other things, one size does not fit all. Going to a four-year college without a clear plan is an increasingly expensive proposition, and students' choices can dramatically impact the financial rewards associated with degree attainment. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce studied the difference in potential income based on a student's major. Results were made available in a May 2011 publication, "What's It Worth? The Economic Value of College Majors." Findings demonstrated that bachelor degree holders who were employed full time earned annual salaries that ranged from \$29,000 for students who had majored in Counseling Psychology to \$120,000 for Petroleum Engineers.

In writing "High-Paying Jobs Go Begging while High School Grads Line Up for Bachelor's Degrees," for the *Hechinger Report* in April 2018, higher-education editor Jon Marcus reported, "The financial return from a bachelor's degree is softening, even as the price—and the average debt into which it plunges students—keeps going up."

At the same time, because so many young people are encouraged to pursue four-year degrees, employers now face shortages of qualified applicants for skilled jobs in professions such as nursing, welding, power line work, industrial maintenance, automotive repair, and advanced manufacturing. Compounding the situation is the fact that in many skilled trades, craft workers are older than their counterparts in other fields. Anticipated retirements are expected to exacerbate worker shortages.

Community colleges stand poised to provide a solution. Marcus's research revealed that, "A shortage of workers is pushing wages higher in the skilled trades." He added, "It's not that finding a job in the trades, or even manufacturing, means needing no education after high school. Most regulators and employers require certificates, certifications, or associate degrees. But those cost less and take less time than earning a bachelor's degree."

The potential rewards are significant. An updated report issued last year from The Center on Education and the Workforce last year, stated "There are 30 million good jobs in the United States today that pay without a BA (bachelor's degree). These good jobs have median earnings of \$55,000 annually."

For more information about the variety of opportunities afforded by a community college education, please visit [southside.edu](http://southside.edu) or call SVCC at 434-949-1000. Counselors can answer your questions about career pathways and programs designed to help you reach your goals.

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at [al.roberts@southside.edu](mailto:al.roberts@southside.edu).