

# PERSONNEL NOTEBOOK

**For Your Most Important Resource—The Human Resource**

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## **COLLEGE vs. BLUE COLLAR Is College Really The Best?**

In a recent tour of a building project, a carpenter was describing how the project was advancing. In the discussion he disclosed that he was, for many years, a Wall Street stockbroker. He made a lot of money, a lot of money.

But as he stated, "I not only didn't have the time to spend it, but I got absolutely no satisfaction being another money handler." "Over the course of six years, I almost lost my family through neglect and suffered from many stress-related illnesses." "Ultimately," he said, "I found myself asking, 'Is that all there is?'"

He withdrew into a seclusion of many months and decided to start over in something in which he always had a desire and ability--building things, carpentry, something in which he takes pride, something he can point to and tell his children, "Dad did that!" He made that change and became a carpenter. He said he was bringing in his eldest daughter as an apprentice. He also said, most people today would think that the drop in income would be too severe to allow her this luxury. But that's not true he said. "I've found that the colleges are selling a very lopsided view of the economics of college versus no college--income. When you look at the actual results, college may not look as attractive as training," he said.

Did he waste years of his life in the wrong occupation? Most of us would say no, he did quite well during those years. He, however, would disagree. He feels that they were wasted years that he regrets. He then said something that I have often heard paraphrased many times over the years. He

said, "The best thing I can wish for my best friend is that when he gets up in the morning, he just can't wait to get to work." "And the worst thing I could wish on my worst enemy is that when he gets up in the morning he just can't stand the thought of going to that damn job one more day!"

Are there any answers for the rest of us in this experience? That may be, but clearly it leads us to ask at least one big question--college versus training. Is college always the best way? Let's take another look.

First, before we deal with this analysis, let me say that if someone is reading this that is planning on going to college for any legitimate reason, don't let me talk you out of it! If your reason for going to college is that the work or career you want to pursue requires college, by all means you should go. If you merely have a desire to study or learn, then you should go! If you don't know what you want but feel that it's going to be academically demanding, then you should go! But if you are going to college because your sister did, or your parents want you to or the money is available so why not use it or the social life and spring breaks look like fun, then maybe you should think this through. In high school, teachers seem to separate those with creativity or intelligence as college material and those without as "trade school" or "industrial" candidates. Crafts people will tell you, "You don't build Golden Gate bridges, cathedrals and modern skyscrapers with dummies."

The cost of college is skyrocketing. Much faster than the cost of living, much faster than the standard of living. Harvard University announced that over the next 20 years the cost for their standard four-year program could reach \$223,000! Many of us could say that that is almost as much as our fathers made in their lifetimes!

There is a growing demand to investigate these costs. Indicators of overstaffing, over budgeting, over paying, inefficiencies, and non-accountability throughout the academic system are now being questioned. Professors who get paid enormous amounts to teach but then spend all their time performing research contracts and never teach. Their students and assistants do it for them! Professors may require three books at \$65.00 each for the course, when in reality two of them were written by the professor and are not used in the course. The issue of "tenure," guaranteed employment for life, is still in there. There are clear signs of useless or frivolous courses of little academic or professional value. Entire four year programs of little or no employment value and too much school time concentrated on ideology and politics and very little to do with the career chosen by the student.

Such concerns are triggered by analytical observations. One of the most critical is that approximately 85% of all college graduates who graduate with a degree in anything will ever work a day in the area of their degree!

How do the schools respond to the rising costs? A wide variety of programs include to start paying for the college education upon the birth of the intended student 18 years in advance! Employers providing benefits to pay for college costs! Students then picking up the burden through no or low interest student loans, plus scholarships, graduates agreeing to work in undesirable jobs to pay off the loan, and employers paying off college loans as hiring bonuses. Just in time for the employee to start the process all over by starting the college payments on their first baby. And the results: Employers surveyed nationwide say over and over again that they are

unhappy with the quality of students they are hiring. They come into the job market with few if any employable skills, poor work habits and bad attitudes employers then send the degreed new hires out for training in basics. Further problems include that the surging number of college students results in secretarial and assistant-level positions now requiring college degrees!

Okay, so college may be priced too high and not delivering a quality end result. But what possible financial advantages does skill or craft training offer, and is the end product any better?

Well, from the viewpoint of the craft trainers, the apprenticeship and internship programs may not be second best!

Let's compare the training path chosen by our carpenter's daughter and the experience of an average college student.

The college student upon leaving high school at 18 years of age, enters college and spends four years in preparation (or training). Their average cost for the four years would range from \$40,000-\$60,000. During that time little or no income would be generated except for summer and part time jobs at approximately \$2,000 per year. Upon graduation, the graduate would earn \$20,000-\$35,000 per year on average (engineers might earn as much as \$35,000-\$50,000 while liberal arts grads may earn only \$15,000-\$30,000). After several years of experience, they might, if they're productive and successful, reach \$60,000-\$70,000 by age 30. The average grad could continue with normal increases for another 30 years of work. Let's hope it's in a work life they love.

The carpenter's daughter on the other hand enters carpenters apprenticeship training which includes four years of academics (math, architecture, estimating, blueprints, land engineering, supervision, management, etc.) totaling approximately 640 classroom hours. She will also work full time at the craft (or over 8,000 hours of OJT). Based on the 2002 wage rate for journeymen

of \$25.80 per hour and using that rate for the next four years, she will start at approximately \$15.00 per hour (60% of the journeyman's pay) or \$32,200 for the first year. During the second year, she will earn \$18.06 per hour (70% of the journeyman's rate) or \$37,565 for the second year. During the third year, she will earn \$20.64 per hour (80% of the journeyman's pay) or \$48,300 for the fourth year.

So during the training or preparation period of four years, our carpenter apprentice would earn:

1st year	\$32,200
2nd year	\$37,565
3rd year	\$42,900
4th year	<u>\$48,300</u>
Total:	\$160,965

And at the completion of her four years, she would now be earning \$25.80 per hour (100% of journeyman's rate) or \$53,665 per year.

In addition, she would now have a diploma from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training entitling her to preferential hiring (by regulation) on federal contracts.

But more important, she now has four years of experience and is in high demand for supervisory positions. Most of which start at \$29.67 per hour or \$61,714 per year.

She is also crosstrained in many other fields including, estimating, civil engineering, craft instructor and many more.

So, after four years of schooling we can make the following comparison:

	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Earnings</u>	<u>Experi- ence</u>	<u>Potential</u>
Carpenter Apprentice	\$0	\$160,965	4 yrs.	Unlimited
College Student	\$50,000	\$8,000	0	Unlimited

Our average college student could, after five or six years of experience, level off to a regular \$50,000 to \$70,000 annual income. An aggressive, successful graduate professional has no limit. They could become an executive, a vice president, president or business owner.

Our carpenter apprentice could level off to a regular \$60,000 annual income. An aggressive, successful quality craftsman has no limit. She could become a professional estimator, a building and land developer, a contractor, or business owner.

But how long will it take the average college grad to recoup the \$50,000 cost of their education and to catch up with the lost \$152,965 in earnings (a deficit of \$202,965)? Based on a 30 year work life at that point, the college grad would have to earn at least \$6,700 per year more than the carpenter for 30 years just to break even!

Can it be done? Of course it can.

But when the average carpenter graduate is compared to the average college graduate, there is not a lot of difference between their annual earnings. For many college graduates they may find that they may never make up the \$202,965 deficit existing upon graduation.

It's true that many college graduates particularly lawyers, doctors and engineers, will make more than that and that some construction craftsmen lose time due to weather, etc. But the average college student today is a liberal arts major looking for an office environment career and will never make up that deficit. Most will never even match the carpenter graduate's annual earnings.

And today there is much less or no time loss due to weather, etc., by graduate craftsmen. They are in demand. There is more time lost by non-trained construction workers in their first few years on the job, but not much by apprentices.

So, free training, high earnings during training, four years of experience, high demand and unlimited future is not necessarily second best.

And on balance, four years of academic study, the social relationships, the prestige and college diploma and a high income is the American ideal.

Which is best? In fact, those details don't begin to point to the answer. The answer is for each individual. What do you want to do in your lifetime? What life do you want to live? Paint the picture of what you think the ideal life is like. A) What do you like? What basic aptitudes do you have as opposed to, B) What do you not like? What basic aptitudes do you not have? Steer away from all careers and job clusters that are heavy with "Bs." Look toward all career and job clusters that are heavy with "As." For example, do you like working outside more or inside, with people or alone? Do you like working at a desk with computers and books, or do you like working with wood or on machines with hand tools? Do you like working with plants or animals or do you do well with people in social groups? Do you want to see the end result of your work? Do you want others to see it as well? Can you deal with physical effort or would you rather deal with political conflict? Do you like communicating over thinking alone, doing a wide variety of things or one thing to completion, writing, drawing, gardening, etc.?

What natural aptitudes do you possess? Are you good at math, at physical endeavors, fixing bicycles, writing stories, telling jokes, doing research, solving problems, analyzing information? As a rule, you will almost certainly be more successful with those things you like and are good at than at those things you dislike and don't do as well.

And whether you want to be a lawyer, an accountant, a biologist, a carpenter, electrician,

heavy equipment operator, or a landscape architect, I'm sure you've heard it before, but if not, hear it here, "Pursue the work you love, the money will follow."

But just to add a little support to the craftspeople, the craftsman's credo is, "If you work with your hands, you're a laborer. If you work with your hands and your head, you're a productive worker. If you work with your hands, your head, and your heart, you're a craftsman."

It's not necessarily second best!

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