



Workforce Development Must Encompass the Spectrum of Professions

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[U.S. Air Force photo / Senior Airman Derek VanHorn](#)

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The state cuts to higher education [proposed by the governor this month](#) have generated a lot of discussion about how they might affect four-year degree programs in the state and, eventually, the state's future prosperity. As I've written before, a good education can often lead to personal financial security, and certainly funding reductions to four-year programs may affect whether some students enroll in those programs.

But if the conversation about workforce development ends there, then it will have covered only the "seen" impact of public policy. Instead, policymakers should also consider the unseen consequences of oversubsidizing fields offered through our higher education system and neglecting other possible workforce investments. As [the cargo-cultification](#) of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) jobs has escalated in public policy circles in recent years, workforce development policy has increasingly emphasized professions requiring at least a bachelor's degree, while other quality jobs that don't require that version of education have been neglected—or even [denigrated](#).

Mike Rowe of Dirty Jobs fame, who's become a fierce public proponent of jobs of all stripes, may

have put it best [in this response to a detractor last year](#) :

To be clear—I strongly support education in all its forms. I have a college degree, and as I've said many times, it's served me well. But I believe society is making a terrible mistake by promoting college at the expense of all other forms of education. For instance, the surgeon you reference (who I would indeed prefer to have graduated from an accredited university) will never make it to the hospital to successfully remove my appendix without a functional infrastructure, which depends almost entirely upon an army of skilled tradespeople. And yet, our society clearly values the surgeon far more than mechanic who keeps her car running, or the contractor who put in the roads that allows her to drive to the emergency room.

We need people with formal higher educations. We also need people in professions that don't require such degrees. The perception—often promoted by four-year institutions seeking tax dollars—that high paying jobs require degrees is plainly wrong.

It certainly [remains true](#) that four-year degree holders tend to make more than those who don't hold such a degree, but while the average salary might be higher, there is a lot of variance in those numbers when you get down to the individual level. I have countless friends in their early 30s with undergraduate and graduate degrees who are scraping by under the twin pressures of loan payments and compressed salaries in both STEM and non-STEM professions. At the same time, I also know countless blue-collar professionals in their early 20s who have been catapulted into life's comforts with a rising middle class salary thanks to professions like construction that, especially now, have tons of jobs but hardly enough trained professionals to fill them. ([We've talked about this issue before.](#))

Policymakers who believe in limited government need to reassess what the state spends its money on—what the state subsidizes directly and indirectly—and this is as true in the realm of workforce development as it is in other parts of the budget. Surely, STEM industries and other higher education programs deserve attention, but policymakers should exercise considerable caution in treating those jobs as talismanic rather than as components in a much larger, and much more diverse, state jobs portfolio.

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