

# All Good Jobs Don't Require a College Degree...

## But Getting a Good Job without a College Degree Depends a Lot on High School Effort—and the Support a High School Provides

By James E. Rosenbaum

Encouraging students to attend college despite their poor academic preparation is a practice based in part on the premise that all decent jobs require a college education. Although average earnings are higher for those with college degrees (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2002), it is easy to misread these numbers.

**First**, these averages conceal much variation. College degrees do not always have payoffs. And, college degrees are not required to enter many rewarding jobs, including construction trades, clerical and administrative support, auto and airplane mechanics, printing, graphics, financial services, and many government and social services. Union electricians, machinists, tool and die makers, and sheet-metal workers, for instance, have high-demand skills, excellent benefits, good working conditions, and annual salaries that often exceed \$45,000 by age 28 (and are much higher with overtime).

**Second**, researchers who analyze jobs and talk to employers find that while today's typical job requires higher skills than in the past (when many jobs required only physical strength), the skills required for these jobs are strong high school-level skills—math, reading, and writing at a ninth-grade level (Murnane and Levy, 1996), not college-level skills. Similarly, new research on the skills needed for many good jobs (meaning those that pay enough to support a family and have the potential for advancement) are also high school-level skills, such as four years of English and mathematics through Algebra II (American Diploma Project, 2004). Unfortunately, over 40 percent of high-school seniors lack ninth-grade math skills and 60 percent lack ninth-grade reading skills (Murnane and Levy, 1996). So students do not need to go to college to get a good job, but they do need to master high school-level skills. Research shows that greater mastery of these skills in high school leads to higher earnings over time: For youth who get no college degree, a rise of one letter grade in their high school grade point average (from C to B) is associated with a 13 percent earnings gain at age 28! That's almost as much as the pay differential associated with a bachelor's degree, which is just over 14 percent more than students without a college degree (Miller, 1998; Rosenbaum, 2001). Solid high school skills prepare students for entry-level positions and keep the door to promotions open (Rosenbaum, 2001).

**Third**, employers report that for many jobs, non-academic skills (like timeliness, diligence, and social competence) are key (Shapiro and Iannozzi, 1999). Analyses of a national survey indicate that students' educational attainment and earnings nine years after graduating from high school are significantly related to their non-cognitive behaviors in high school—sociability, discipline, leadership, homework time, and attendance—even after controlling for background characteristics and academic achievement (Rosenbaum, 2001). High schools can provide these skills just as well as colleges can.

**Fourth**, for some low-achieving high school students, getting a good job after high school can be more lucrative than trying to earn a college degree. As we saw in the main article, only about 14 percent of students with C averages or lower in high school earn a college degree (B.A. or A.A.). Of these low-GPA high school students, those who do complete a B.A. will typically earn 4.3 percent more than students without a college degree—but this is less than one-third the extra earnings that the typical college graduate enjoys. Those with low high school GPAs who earn an A.A. *will typically earn 7.2 percent less than high school graduates with no college degree* (Rosenbaum, 2001).

So the vast majority of students who don't do well in high school would be better off, in terms of future income, finding a good job than going to college. But their ability to find out about these jobs, prepare for

them, and get placed in them depends a lot on the support they get from their high school. Indeed, vocational teachers report that they are able to help students get jobs, even students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities. They can accomplish this because they provide employers with trusted recommendations about students' social skills and work habits.

Currently, about 9 percent of work-bound high school graduates get jobs after graduation through school-based job placement (mostly from vocational teachers). These students have 17 percent higher earnings by age 28 than students who find their own jobs after high school (Rosenbaum, 2001). Moreover, school-based job placement helps more blacks and females than white males (Rosenbaum 2001), so it helps students who normally have the greatest difficulties in the labor market.

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The true lesson of the new labor market is this: For many of the skilled jobs in the new economy, what students really need is to acquire good work habits and solid high school-level skills. But, employers argue that they cannot trust that the high school diploma certifies knowledge of these high school-level skills. As a result, employers report using *college* degrees to signal that applicants possess *high school* skills. If, instead, the high schools provided trusted signals of high school competencies, the pressure to send all students to college could diminish. And let's not forget that high schools can do a lot to help their non-college bound youth find productive jobs and lead fulfilling lives.

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