

Too narrow, too soon?

America's misplaced disdain for vocational education.

SARAH ZANDER and Ashley Jacobsen are like many teenage girls. Sarah likes soccer. Ashley was captain of her school's team of cheerleaders this year. They are also earning good money as nursing assistants at a retirement home. Sarah plans to become a registered nurse. Ashley may become a pharmacologist. Their futures look sunny. Yet both are products of what is arguably America's most sneered-at high-school programme: vocational training.

Vocational education has been so disparaged that its few advocates have resorted to giving it a new name: "career and technical education" (CTE). Academic courses that prepare students for getting into universities, by contrast, are seen as the key to higher wages and global prowess. Last month the National Governors Association proposed standards to make students "college and career ready". But a few states, districts and think-tanks favour a radical notion. In America's quest to raise wages and compete internationally, CTE may be not a hindrance but a help.

America has a unique disdain for vocational education. It has supported such training since 1917; money now comes from the Perkins Act, which is reauthorised every six years. However, many Americans hate the idea of schoolchildren setting out on career paths—such predetermination, they think, threatens the ethos of opportunity. As wages have risen for those with college degrees, scepticism of CTE has grown too. By 2005 only one-fifth of high-school students specialised in an industry, compared with one-third in 1982. The share of 17-year-olds aspiring to four-year college, meanwhile, reached 69% in 2003, double the level of 1981. But the fact remains that not every student will graduate from university. This may make politicians uncomfortable, but it is not catastrophic. The Council of Economic Advisers projects faster-growing demand for those with a two-year technical-college degree, or specific training, than for those with a full university degree.

A growing chorus of state and local leaders argues that CTE can help. Rather than pit training against university preparation, they are trying to integrate the two. CTE students may go on to university, to training or directly into work. The Perkins Act nudges such efforts forward, but the big shove comes from beyond Washington. Wisconsin's governor, Jim Doyle, has expanded his state's youth apprentice programme, which provides high-school students such as Sarah and Ashley with jobs. Academic courses are complemented by those at technical colleges.

The most successful model, however, may be "career academies". Started in Philadelphia in 1969, mimicked in California in the 1980s and supported elsewhere by Sandy Weil's National Academy Foundation, these small schools combine academic and technical curriculums and give students work experience. When properly implemented, career academies can produce striking results. The non-partisan MDRC found that college attainment did not rise relative to a control group, but career academies did boost students' earnings by 11%. Among boys, earnings were 17% higher. Young men were more likely to be married.

The challenge is to scale up such programmes. Within a sprawling high school in Chicago, Kevin Rutter runs a small finance academy, teaching students about markets, accounting and personal finance, welcoming executives and helping students find internships. Chicago's schools system this year said it would revamp its CTE system to mimic academies such as Mr Rutter's, merging academic work with training for growth industries. California has pursued similar reforms; CTE's main champion is Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mr Obama should presumably push along such efforts. Last year he asked every American to commit to at least one year of training, whether through a "community college or four-year

school, vocational training or an apprenticeship". However, the governors' new standards still emphasise academic skills. The education secretary's plan to reauthorise No Child Left Behind barely mentions CTE. Advocates hope this will change.

In the meantime, a bold new programme is inching forward. The National Centre on Education and the Economy (NCEE), a think-tank, is developing a test that students may take in their second year of high school. On passing, they could proceed to a community college or stay in high school to apply to a four-year university. Those who fail would take extra courses to help them pass. A pilot programme, supported by the Gates Foundation, will begin in eight states next year. Some parents are already outraged by the imagined spectre of tracking. Marc Tucker, who leads the NCEE, argues that a path to a community college might keep students engaged. Such a system would provide students with more opportunity, not less.

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