

ANOTHER CAREER PATH

As Bill Gates knows, a four-year degree isn't the only road to success

There might have been a time when the term "vocational education" conjured up images of young adults who didn't have the smarts or money for four years of college and therefore walked a "lesser" career path. But that stigma has been eroding for some time, as was made clear by Columbian business writer Courtney Sherwood's Sunday story "Apprentice: Getting paid to learn job. Programs can lead to rewarding careers." Clark College's professional-technical program offers another example why students in families where college has been the expected post-secondary education route might want to think again.

Apprenticeships and other job-training paths begin in high school, with job-shadowing, apprenticeships, the Clark County Skills Center and private sector institutes offering routes to rewarding careers.

The emergence of information technology as a career has contributed to the notion that a college diploma is not a "must" for everyone who is bright and can afford one. Just ask Microsoft's Bill Gates, a Harvard dropout.

But more typical and eye-opening to local students and their parents might be the 300 Clark County residents enrolled in paid apprenticeship programs averaging \$10 per hour to learn a trade that might pay them three times that while college-student peers are paying to get college educations.

"Apprenticeships are a super training model, and they are going to be even more important in the coming years due to the aging of the work force," said Scott Bailey of the state Employment Security Department.

Forbes Magazine a few years ago wrote about non-college career paths and identified "Five rea-

sons to skip college:"

- You'll be gaining four working years.

- You won't necessarily earn less money.

- You could probably make more money if you invest the college costs that you won't pay.

- You don't need to be in a classroom to learn.

- Plenty of others did fine, including many in high-tech fields.

Clark College's technical-professional programs are home to about 25 percent of the school's 11,500 students. The

courses, mostly two-year and mostly nontransferable to a four-year college, include graphic arts, culinary arts, computer programming, small-business management, pharmacy technician, accounting, emer-

gency medical technician, auto and diesel technician, legal office assistant, dental hygiene, nursing and more. "It's not the vocational school of your grandpa's day," says Alice Phillips, Clark's WorkForce Education director.

But even if an old voc-ed stigma is headed for deserved oblivion, there's another problem, says Dennis Kampe, director of the Clark College Skills Center for high school students. Enrollment there is about 750, down from 800 or more in past years. Kampe attributes that to the WASL test. More students are taking courses aimed at preparing them for the test, he said, and can't make room in their schedules for the three periods a day that Skills Center programs require. He'd like to see academic credit given for some voc-ed courses that he says incorporate various academic skills such as math and English.

"The need for more people in information technology and other occupations," he said, "will not go away."

TO LEARN MORE:

- Log onto www.clark.edu and click on "Programs@clark" on left.

- www.lni.wa.gov/TradesLicensing/Apprenticeship.

- Southwest Washington regional apprenticeships program, 360-575-6927.