

Careers in trades worth a long look

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A study commissioned by the Construction Labor Management Council and recently conducted by NorthStar Economics Inc. found that apprentices pursuing construction careers make a positive impact on the state's economy in many ways. Not only do they cost less to train than a university education costs, but they earn money while they learn. In addition, salaries for journeymen are competitive at the same time jobs can be scarce for university graduates.

Economic benefits to our state aside, the study scratched the surface of an issue that has been the topic of many a conversation among the minivan set: the incredibly high (and rising) cost of higher education.

For parents who can afford to send their child or children to college, the fees can be staggering, even for families who have planned for and saved for decades. Some parents make the tough decision to jeopardize their own financial security so they may send their kids to the schools of their choice, mortgaging their homes and taking on enormous debt.

And those are the fortunate ones. Stories abound of young adults graduating with six-figure student loans to repay, timed right when their salaries are guaranteed to be rock bottom. Add to the student loans the typical credit card debt many students rack up during college (sometimes just to pay for basic necessities), and you've got a recipe for financial disaster.

Adult students

And let's not forget the ever-growing population of adult students who want to change careers. For adults juggling house payments and the cost of kids, adding costly tuition fees to the budget can be overwhelming. Adults who are breadwinners are probably not able to leave the work force entirely, either, to finish school; any continuing education returning students seek usually is squeezed in after work hours.

Compare those scenarios to the experience of apprentices who work for four years to learn a trade. They are paid for the time spent learning, and when they are ready to embark on a career, they will find comfortable wages in a booming industry. There's no need to rack up enormous student loans or credit card bills; it's even possible to make a house payment or pay for day care while learning a trade. Apprentices can start their careers with far less debt (maybe even money in the bank) than university students and a secure skill that can lead to solid employment.

Certainly, the building and construction trades aren't for everyone, but anyone exploring careers might find they're worth a long look.

John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and its Building Advantage campaign.