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Apprenticeships Becoming More Popular

June 15, 2010

Even though college enrollment is surging across the country, not everyone is jumping on the bandwagon: A growing number of people are opting to instead study trades through apprenticeships.

"A lot of people are bored in high school," noted Robert Lerman, an economics professor who was quoted by [Voice of America](#). "They leave high school because they are bored. They want to do something besides sit in a classroom."

He added that a college education is not necessarily appropriate for everyone. "A large number of young people would learn much better through a combination of work place learning and academic learning but tied to particular objectives," he told Voice of America.

[The Washington Post](#) reports on the similar phenomenon of students who have already earned college degrees and then embark on apprenticeships to become [plumbers](#), [electricians](#), [auto mechanics](#) or [carpenters](#).

"I have friends my age who are just deciding to go to graduate school," said Adam Osielski, who just completed an apprenticeship program to become an electrician. He told the Post that he chose his blue-collar profession instead of enrolling in law school after graduating college with a degree in theology. "I'm glad to be already working and developing a career," he said.

The Post notes that apprentice programs in the Washington, DC area typically last five years and are seeing a surge in applications. Close to 4,000 people applied for 300 slots at plumbers and pipe fitters school, and an apprenticeship program run by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 26 in Lanham, Maryland, attracted 2,500 applicants for 100 slots.

Such trades can earn respectable salaries which are often close to or exceeding those earned by college graduates. In [Forbes'](#) list of best-paying blue-collar jobs, [elevator installers and repairers](#) rank at the top with an average salary of \$67,950, with the top 10 percent earning just under six figures. Forbes notes that according to Robert Caporale, editor of Elevator World magazine, the profession requires an apprenticeship of at least four years.

Other professions on the list that require apprenticeship training or associate degrees from community college include [oil and gas rotary drill operators](#), and [petroleum pump operators](#). Both jobs earn salaries that average in the mid- to upper-fifties.

Those who complete apprenticeships say that work can be found even during a recession. "The good thing with trade is more than likely you're always going to have a job," said Travis Strawderman, who is in an apprentice program run by the Plumbers and Steamfitters Union in the state of Maryland and was interviewed by Voice of America. "And as soon as you get out of the apprenticeship they're going to put you to work."

Compiled by Yaffa Klugerman

Sources:

"America's Best-Paying Blue-Collar Jobs," *Forbes*, June 11, 2010, Susan Adams

"More College-Educated Jump Tracks to Become Skilled Manual Laborers," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2010, Carol Morello

"US Economists Say University Not Only Way to Success," *Voice of America*, June 14, 2010, Elizabeth Lee



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Careers

America's Best-Paying Blue-Collar Jobs

Susan Adams, 06.11.10, 03:17 PM EDT

Here's where you can earn the most without a suit and tie.



In Pictures: America's Best-Paying Blue-Collar Jobs

The [oil industry](#) may be a magnet for controversy in the U.S. right now, with crude continuing to gush from BP's ruined deep water well in the Gulf of Mexico, but according to Labor Department statistics, oil workers are among the best-paid blue-collar employees there are.

Two oil-related positions make our ranking of the top 10 best-paying blue-collar jobs. Oil and gas rotary drill operators pull down an average of \$59,560 a year, with the top 10% earning more than \$89,100. Petroleum pump system and refinery operators make just a little less, averaging \$56,990. The top 10% of them earn \$78,020.

In Pictures: America's Best-Paying Blue-Collar Jobs

To compile our list, we combed through data gathered annually by the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), a division of the Labor Department. The BLS culls its information from surveys it mails to businesses, and it releases its Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates Data in May. The figures are for 2009.

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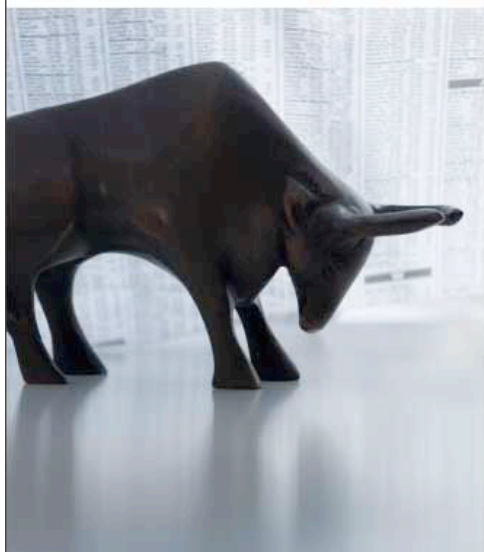
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What defines a blue-collar job? *The American Heritage Dictionary* says, "Of or relating to wage earners, especially as a class, whose jobs are performed in work

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clothes and often involve manual labor." We took that definition and excluded work that is largely managerial or supervisory.

Some of the professions on our list require extensive training and apprenticeships that can last as long as four years. For instance, rotary drill operators in the oil

industry don't need college degrees, but they either have associate degrees from [community college](#) or do apprenticeship training with companies that operate drilling rigs, like the now notorious [Transocean](#) ([RIG - news - people](#)). The apprenticeships last six to 12 months, says Richard Ranger, a senior policy adviser at the American Petroleum Institute in Washington. The same goes for petroleum pump system operators, he adds.

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To become an elevator installer or repairer takes an apprenticeship of at least four years, says Robert Caporale, the editor of *Elevator World* magazine. The training also involves evening classes and examinations.

The National Association of Elevator Contractors offers a program that includes distance learning and on-the-job training, lasts four years and costs a total of \$16,000.

"We used to be called a bastard trade," says Richard Kennedy, the association's president-elect, "because you need to know a little bit of so many disciplines." He explains: "You need to know mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, structural engineering. You have to be extremely proficient at electricity, at computerized controls. You have to be a plumber, a welder, a carpenter." That makes it unsurprising that elevator installers are at the very top of our list, earning an average salary of \$67,950. The top 10% of them earn more than \$98,190.

Other jobs on the list include repairers at power substations, who have an average annual salary of \$67,700, and boilermakers, who make \$56,680. Transportation inspectors, who earn an average of \$61,110, are also on the tally. The top

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10% of them draw six-figure salaries. Commercial divers, who pull in an average of \$58,060, don't literally have blue collars, of course--unless they wear blue wetsuits.



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The Washington Post

More college-educated jump tracks to become skilled manual laborers

By Carol Morello
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, June 15, 2010; B01

Armed with a bachelor's degree in theology from Notre Dame, Adam Osielski was pondering a route well traveled: law school.

He watched his friends work long hours as paralegals while studying law and weighed the all-encompassing commitment. That was five years ago. Today, Osielski, 29, is a journeyman electrician rather than a law firm associate. Or, as Osielski might say with his minor in French, an ?lectricien.

In a region in which [47 percent of Washington area residents have a college degree](#), the highest rate in the nation, Osielski is among a small but apparently growing number of the college-educated who are taking up the trades.

They started out studying aerospace engineering, creative writing and urban planning. But somewhere on the path to accumulating academic credentials, they decided that working with their hands sounded more pleasant -- and lucrative -- than a lot of white-collar work. So bye-bye to term papers and graduate theses, and hello to apprenticeships to become plumbers, electricians, auto mechanics and carpenters.

For Osielski, the attraction was natural. After graduating from Notre Dame, he spent two years in Haiti working with a charity building schools, but he wasn't allowed to do the one task that seemed most intriguing: wiring the electricity.

When he returned from Haiti, he began working as a furniture mover in the District to pay the bills and discovered the satisfaction that comes with an empty truck at the end of a day. A legal career seemed too much like drudgery.

"I have friends my age who are just deciding to go to graduate school," said Osielski, who graduated this month from an apprenticeship program run by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 26 in Lanham. "I'm glad to be already working

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and developing a career."

The college drumbeat

Economists and labor scholars say the rocky economy has been a boon for trade schools. But they also point to policymakers, guidance counselors and parents who don't value the trades and overvalue college as the gateway to success. As a result, American students come to trade apprenticeships relatively late, often after they've already tried college. The average age of the beginning apprentice in the United States is 25; in Germany, 18.

"It's hard to get high school counselors to point anyone but their not-very-good students, or the ones in trouble, toward construction," said Dale Belman, a labor economist at Michigan State University. "Counselors want everyone to go to college. So now we're getting more of the college-educated going into the trades."

Jarrad Taylor, for one, always assumed while growing up in Pennsylvania that he would attend college. An honors student in high school, it's what his guidance counselors advised him to do. It's what his mother and father, who was a machinist and welder, wanted for him.

So he attended Penn State for two years, taking courses in engineering and creative writing. Then he went looking for a summer job. A family friend who is a plumber needed an assistant for a job in the Washington area, and Taylor's parents urged him to go.

"My parents told him to work the hell out of me so I'd run back to college," said Taylor, now 30. "Seven years later, here I am."

Taylor was accepted into an apprentice program run by unions for plumbers, pipe fitters and sprinkler installers. He now works for a mid-size construction firm in Maryland and vacations in Europe.

Apprentices start out getting paid half the scale for experienced workers, with raises every six months. Ultimately, many make as much or more as they would in jobs requiring a college degree. Licensed journeymen can expect to be paid \$65,000 to \$85,000 a year, depending on overtime.

Local apprentice programs, which typically last five years, are swamped with applicants nowadays. The electricians' union program, for example, has 2,500 applications for 100 slots. And nearly 4,000 want to get one of the 300 slots at plumbers and pipe fitters school.

The number of openings varies each year depending on the amount of work contractors expect, so virtually all apprentices are working full-time. The recession didn't change that, although it did affect the demand for some journeymen.

These will not be the people you call to fix a clogged toilet or plaster a hole in the drywall. Most gravitate to commercial construction, where digital equipment has made the ability to decipher technical manuals and complicated building codes crucial. Many aspire to be foremen or own their own business.

Nationwide, 550,000 people are enrolled in registered apprenticeship programs, according to the Labor Department, and the number of students in unregistered programs might be almost as high.

But determining how many went to college is difficult. Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys from 2009 show that more than 7 percent of workers in the construction trade have at least a bachelor's degree, up from less than 6 percent in 1990 and 2000. The surveys are small, though, and not statistically reliable.

In the early 1970s, Robert Glover, an economics professor at the University of Texas, studied apprenticeship programs in nine cities. He found that 27 percent of journeymen in six construction trades had at least 13 years of schooling. Among the tradesmen he interviewed was an electrician with a bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering and a bricklayer who was listening to classical music on the radio.

"It woke me up," he said. "There is a strong anti-manual-work bias in this country. I fell prey to it, too."

Blue-collar pride

Brian Jones, 30, sometimes feels it. Originally from southern Virginia, he studied physics on an academic scholarship to McDaniel College in Westminster, Md., hoping to get a job as an engineer with NASA or an aviation company after he graduated in 2002. He watched friends with lower grades land jobs through family contacts, but he couldn't find one. Then a friend suggested that he could make as much money as an electrician.

He just finished his third year as an apprentice.

"It's not the same as a job with, say, Lockheed, with a lot of office politics," he said. "In the electrical trade, your knowledge and actions speak for themselves. The only downside is the prestige. If you say you work for a multinational, half-trillion-dollar

company, versus, 'I'm an electrician,' it doesn't have the same ring."

That doesn't matter to Rateeluck Puvapiromquan, 30, the daughter of two teachers who immigrated to Baltimore from Thailand. She decided to become an electrician when the only jobs she found after graduating from St. Mary's College in 2001 with a degree in the philosophy of religion were in coffee shops and hotels. Her friends, who have gone on to get master's degrees or doctorates, are proud of her.

"They tell me they're intrigued, amazed and proud they know a woman electrician," she said. "I don't understand the idea that if you go to college, manual labor is beneath you. The critical thinking and communication skills I learned in college are absolutely crucial to getting our work done. It's critical thinking, not just, 'I lift heavy objects.' "

But Taylor, the Penn State dropout, admits that it was hard on him when his friends graduated and he didn't.

"When people asked me what I do, I'd say, 'I'm a plumber.' " He cups his mouth with his hand and bows his head while he whispers this.

"Now I'm proud of it. Most of my friends from college are in IT. And I have more discretionary income than all of them."

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US Economists Say University Not Only Way to Success

Elizabeth Lee | Washington, DC 14 June 2010



The apprentice program run by the Plumbers and Steamfitters Union in the state of Maryland, Travis Strawderman and other students make money while they learn

There's a widespread perception in the United States that a university degree is the key to success. But a growing number of educators now say there other possibilities, especially for students might not succeed at the university level.

This is not a traditional classroom. At the apprentice program run by the [Plumbers and Steamfitters Union](#) in the state of Maryland, Travis Strawderman and other students make money while they learn. "It's completely changed my life around," he said. "I've been able to pay off all my debts. I can say I'm actually responsible enough to have my own family."

Strawderman's five-year program teaches him technical skills free of charge. He says

he considered university, but it didn't interest him.

Economics Professor Robert Lerman says Strawderman is not alone. "A lot of people are bored in high school," Lerman stated. "They leave high school because they are bored. They want to do something besides sit in a classroom."

Lerman says the education system in the United States is too focused on pushing students to attend university. "What we're doing now is we're saying unless you learn in this way you don't really have the option for a rewarding career," he said.

But Chad Aldeman, an analyst for the think tank Education Sector, says studies show the longer students stay in school the better chance they have at having a high paying and stable career. "If you only are a high school graduate your wages are going to drop over your lifetime -- as opposed to a college degree," he said. The college degree "is really an insurance policy against unemployment and against low wages."

But not everyone who goes to university is successful. A 2007 report by the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) finds only 54 percent of the people who enter university in the U.S. get a degree. That's one of the lowest among developed countries, where the average is 71 percent.

"A large number of young people would learn much better through a combination of work place learning and academic learning but tied to particular objectives," Lerman said.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says that of the 30 occupations projected to have the largest growth, more than half of them require on the job training and not a university degree.

Al Clinedinst is the training director of Travis Strawderman's apprentice program. "It's extremely competitive. We take the best out of the group that apply that year. Sometimes there are as many as 1,700 people that apply for 100 spots," he said.

When students are accepted into the apprenticeship program, the school helps them to find full time jobs with contractors. They work during the day and attend classes at night, two to three times a week.

"They earn a wage while they are out there learning and in many cases the wages are higher than most entry level jobs in the market place," Lakin explained.


Steven Lakin, vice president of the Mechanical Contractors Association of Maryland, says companies within his organization employ the students and graduates of this apprenticeship program. When the students graduate they can earn \$36 an hour.

"The good thing with trade is more than likely you're always going to have a job and as soon as you get out of the apprenticeship they're going to put you to work," Strawderman said.

For Strawderman, who recently married, this apprenticeship gives him a sense of achievement, knowing that he can provide for his family and enjoy his job.

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