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More college-educated jump tracks to become skilled manual laborers

Ward 8 residents face hard road to economic recovery

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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 electricien.

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 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."