

Workin' for a Living

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West Virginia has many opportunities for careers without four-year degrees.

Story by Ann Ali

The fabric of West Virginia's work force is made from many threads, and they've come a long way from the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker.

According to WORKFORCE West Virginia, among the 47 most in-demand occupations in the state, only five require bachelor's degrees, which shows that while higher education may be working on "bucks for brains," blue-collar workers with apprenticeships, certificates and two-year degrees are flexing their muscles, too.

"So many times we push our sons and daughters to get that four-year degree, but there are some great jobs in the guild trades," said Kim Harbour with the West Virginia Department of Commerce, which oversees the WORKFORCE West Virginia program. "The Region 1 Workforce Investment Board has an ad for 63 jobs, and they're all welders."

Big Variety

From learning new techniques and technology as a locksmith to nuclear medicine technology, abbreviated education can have big payoffs.

At West Virginia State Community and Technical College, nuclear medicine technology is a two-year associate's degree with an average starting salary in the Kanawha Valley of \$29,000 to \$41,000 per year, and the national starting salary is \$49,000 to \$67,000 per year, according to Laura McCullough, the school's vice president for work force and economic development.

The paramedical specialty uses small, sufficient amounts of radioactive materials to diagnose and treat disease.

"It's not a new program at all, but it's regionally recognized," McCullough said. "Our graduates get hired over other hospitals' graduates. Our people are really good."

The energy industry helped create the Appalachian Basin Oil and Gas Training Center at Pierpont Community and Technical College at Fairmont State University.

The floorhand training program is a five-day, 40-hour course (or three-day, 24-hour course for company-sponsored, experienced workers), and the U.S. Department of Labor ranked the job as the nation's highest-paid blue-collar job in the nation.

"I guess it's good, clean, fun, but it's a laboring job -- one that is required to make and break the connections when they're drilling those wells, and it also can be quite important," said Paul Schreffler, director of economic development and work force education at Pierpont. "People are aware of jobs in the coal industry or jobs in the timber or jobs in manufacturing, but this one is kind of under the radar.

"Now, with the energy industry being as important as it is, that cycle has really changed."

Construction Booming

A lot of careers are part of a chain reaction, as members of the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Council currently are seeing.

"Our membership is increasing, and it didn't really surprise us," said Roy Smith, secretary/treasurer of the council. "There's been a huge increase in anything that's energy-related; all the major powerhouses are expanding or updating or something of that sort. They're building windmills here and there in the mountainous regions; there's a lot of hydro-electric facilities that have been built and are planned to be built. And as far as construction goes, we've had a really big uptick in that."

Smith said he sometimes hesitates to refer to them as jobs because of the commitment the professions and the training takes. He prefers to call them careers.

"We put so much investment into a person -- schooling of any sort is not free, and it takes a lot of resources to hire instructors and have facilities and work out the accommodations necessary to train people."

Smith said his 20,000 members are dues-paying members of local unions, nearly all of whom have family health insurance coverage, benefits and pensions, and those members are ironworkers, plumbers and pipe fitters, roofers, laborers, boilermakers, bricklayers, insulators, carpenters and millwrights, cement finishers, painters, heavy equipment operators, electricians and teamsters.

And not one of them is uneducated.

Smith said he still battles a prejudice against the construction industry, and said there are degrees associated with those careers.

"I don't want our people to go to college to get a degree that relates to someone else's field," he said. "We try to encourage them to be better at what they do, ... but when you have children, you have these visions in your mind that you want them to go on to higher education, which is a great thing, but not all people are cut out for that or meant for that."

Smith said when he was doing an electrician's apprenticeship, he worked on a job eight hours a day and then attended class two nights a week, so he learned hands-on techniques during the day and the theory in a classroom.

"Many trades go five years, a few are two, but the majority of them I'd say are in the three to four range," he said. "For me, when I went through the school part of my apprenticeship, it was relevant to something, and so many school classes -- for high school students in particular -- they don't see the relevance of learning things and wonder where do I ever apply this. Well, everything you're learning in the apprenticeship is what you need to use every day."

What's It Take?

Just as not everyone is cut out for law school and the bar exam, not everyone is cut out for West Virginia's guild trades, no matter how much it pays.

"I just think it's a little bit of a different person these trades appeal to," Smith said. "You have to enjoy using not only your education, but you have to enjoy building things and seeing at the end of the day what you've accomplished.

"You want to see a nice highway or nice building as part of your reward as well."

Sharon Wagoner, executive director of Advantage Valley Community College Network and work force development coordinator with the West Virginia Community and Technical College System, said the CTCs did surveys with businesses and industries to find out what programs need potential employees.

Those surveys helped launch diesel technology classes at the Community and Technical College at West Virginia University Institute of Technology, utility workers at Blue Ridge Community and Technical College and floorhand training at Pierpont.

"The surveys have helped us to find out what business and industry are needing, and then we work with them and they help us develop the program," Wagoner said. "One of the things we will be doing is marketing so the adult learners out there will know that something is there."

Wagoner said CTCs try to develop a "career ladder," so when students start building skill sets, they can begin at a career's entry levels and, with additional skills, move up to certificates, then associate's degrees and into the industry.

West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission Chairman Brian Noland said CTCs have the mission of meeting immediate work force needs, and they're flexible enough to meet employee needs for new businesses right away.

"If we are going to have an immediate impact on work force needs in our state, that impact will most likely be best achieved through community colleges," Noland said. "I think we still have a ways to go even just to let people know that college is possible. ...

"If we all remain focused on our missions, it's going to be a very different West Virginia in about 10 years."

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