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| **15583, Greg Edinger** |
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Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the first day of the new school year, for us anyway. This gives us plenty of time to prepare before we are overrun with new students. I’d like to talk to you about the importance of career and technical education. In today’s world there is such an emphasis on students pursuing a college degree that many think it is an either/or proposition. Students are taught they can either pursue a college degree or pursue technical training. But, that is not always the case. It is our job to present our students with all the options available to them and that includes both skilled, technical training and college degree programs. It is important that we understand, and then present to them, that one is not better or higher than the other. Both are valuable and necessary in the workforce and in our society, and it’s not unheard of for students to choose both paths.

Educators are expected to prepare students so that when they graduate high school they are ready to be successful in whatever career option they choose. It is imperative, then, that we are knowledgeable in what skills are needed for various occupations and how students can earn those skills. It’s also important that we assist them in making wise choices. To do that we have to know what jobs are available in today’s workforce and what skills are needed to do those jobs. Not every job requires a college degree and not every job that requires a college degree pays the highest salary. We can’t just make a list of the current “hot jobs” and steer our students toward them. We need to consider our students and their skills and talents as well as their future desires and plans. That’s why we have “guidance counselors”, not talent scouts employed by the school system. Our goal is to look out for what is best for our students first and foremost.

There is always a big push for students to earn a college degree. Popular T.V. shows like Grey’s Anatomy, and Law and Order, make having a college degree very prestigious. Shows like American Idol and pro sports make pure talent oriented careers glamorous. But, the only show that makes skilled trades look glamorous is HGTV, but only if you’re one of the hosts of the show teaching watchers how to do things. Even on those shows they only show a small margin of the work that goes into each skilled trade job that is shown on the show. And, there are only a small margin of skilled trades shown as they apply to whatever subject the show highlights, such as remodeling your home or “flipping” properties. This still doesn’t show a practical, every day use for such a career.

In fact, there is a much higher demand for skilled trade careers than there are for college degree careers. The glamorous jobs highlighted only make up about 5-10% of the job market. Society as a whole couldn’t survive without the skilled trade careers, yet they are viewed as the lesser job or career path.

Surveys by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that by 2010 there will be almost 2.3 million unfilled jobs in various skilled trades. (See more at: http://www.techschool.com/blog/articles/professional-school-workers#sthash.sq6fPnfv.dpuf)

As our population grows, think about who will build the necessary housing, along with all the utilities we take for granted. What about American’s dependence on each of us owning our own automobile? Who do we think builds those vehicles? What about in a winter blizzard or a summer heat wave? Or what about a tornado or hurricane? Who is it that gets our utilities and technology functioning again? Who makes sure we have electricity or running water?

And, speaking of technology, who do we call when the electricity goes out thus shutting down our beloved technologies, our computers, our IPADs, our cell phones or the internet in general? Who do we look to when we need our identities protected against hackers? Who do we look to for new inventions as technology runs ahead of us? And, for that matter, who do we depend upon when older technology breaks down or stops working? Many of the older technologies are still very viable, but they were invented and perfected by the Baby Boomer generation who is now retiring in droves as they all reach retirement age. Some will continue to work in various capacities, but not all. Someone needs to know how to operate and repair all the wonderful inventions they created. We also need to recognize there are the physical skilled trades such as construction, electrician, plumbing, etc. and then there are the technology trades such as computer engineers, software developers, graphic designers, etc. Two very different types of careers, but both skilled trades.

Another area of skilled trades that many don’t automatically think of is health care. As our population ages there is a greater demand for those trained as medical assistants, technicians and other skilled jobs in medical care. Specialized Trade schools can provide the needed job specific training in 1 – 2 years in most cases and only teach the skills needed for the job. They don’t include liberal arts courses or any course that isn’t needed on the job.

Employers are hungry for job applicants who have the needed job specific training and/or experience so they can hit the ground running the day they are hired, instead of the employer needed to take several months to train them for the available position. Many applicants have a college education, but don’t have the necessary skills for the jobs that need filled. “A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau in 2004 proves this growing preference for technical and vocational school graduates. It reports that nearly one-third of the fastest growing occupations will require an associate degree or a post-secondary vocational certificate!” (See more at: <http://www.techschool.com/blog/articles/professional-school-workers#sthash.sq6fPnfv.dpuf>)

In an article at USA Today it states, “Skilled trade employers are fighting against the stigmas of their industry, a problem they say is hampering their ability to meet an increased need for welders, construction workers and other tradesmen. The stereotypes revolve around the idea that the jobs, many of which don't require a four-year college degree, are less valuable than those that do.”

We need to work together and make sure our students are aware of all career paths available to them and not judge them by superficial measurements such as their GPA or whether they are “good with their hands”, etc. I know one guidance counselor who told two students to go to career technical school and advised them they wouldn’t make it in college because of low ACT scores. Those students, however, went on to college and graduated with masters degrees. Another guidance counselor told a student who had a high GPA and ACT score that she should not go to career tech school because she was too smart. She decided to do both career tech and college and was very successful at both.

I know of young man who attended an inner city school. His teachers saw that all his standardized test scores were in the highest percentiles, so they insisted on putting him in college prep coursework and tried to convince him to go to college. But, they didn’t consider the student’s preferences or future plans. He didn’t like school and had no plans to go to a four year college. That young man, due to some other issues, quit school, passed his GED at age 17, then he got a job at a local computer company when he turned 18. While there, he used his own time and learned how to build computers, studied and earned his MCSE certification when he was 21 and became a supervisor at 22. In the years since he went to a community college, earned his Associate Degree in Applied Science and has built a very good career, earning a six figure salary as a computer engineer.

In contrast, this man’s younger sister decided on her college, her major and the choir she would sing with by the age of ten. When she graduated high school she went to that college, obtained her degree and now teaches music in a studio. These two people grew up in the same home, and shared much in common, even share many of the same skills and talents. Yet, they chose opposing educational choices and careers. By parents and teachers encouraging them to seek their own futures they both have successful careers that they love, one in a technical field with technical training and the other in an artistic field with a college degree.

In light of these examples, let us consider all possibilities when we are guiding our students and not judge a book by its cover. A student is more than just their test scores or whether they are a hands-on person or book worm.

As educators you will wear many hats, teacher, mentor, guidance counselor, career guide, etc. Sometimes you may even be a shoulder to lean on. Don’t ever underestimate the effect you will have on your students and their future. Many may not realize the effect you have on them until many years down the line, when they remember something you told them, a story you shared from your own life about making decisions, or just that you took them seriously about a dream they have when the rest of the world is telling them to do the exact opposite.

You may have a student that comes from a family where everyone graduated from college with advanced degrees, but that student wants to do something totally different, like run their own home remodeling business, design their own new invention for the home or car, or even invent the next, great technological tool for Apple, Inc. or Microsoft, Inc. You never know when you might have the next genius who starts his/her own business in their garage or basement and that business sweeps the world. You’ll be able to tell the world that you knew them when, and you helped to form that young mind into the success they became.

But, even if you don’t teach the world’s next young Edison, or Wright or Gates, or whoever, every student is chock full of potential. Your impact as a teacher and counselor will affect their entire life. Some years down the road you may get a letter in the mail from a student thanking you for encouraging them and believing in them when everyone else was just telling them what they had to do.

Each one of you here today has the potential to make a huge difference in the life of your students. The important thing to remember is not to try to fit them into a box or to stereotype them. You may have a female student who is greatest car mechanic around or a male student who interior designer. You may have a student with the highest SAT score in the school, but whose greatest desire is to be the best welder there’s ever been. You may have a student whose test scores may not be the highest, but their practical application of knowledge far surpasses students who aced the same test. It’s one thing to pass a test with a 100% score, but it’s quite different to know how to put that knowledge to practical use. As I said previously, we can’t judge a book by its cover. We have to get to know the whole student, not just look at their test scores or their aptitude percentages.

As in these stories I’ve shared with you, and many more if you sought for them, the student’s plans and goals are equally important. There are more things to consider than test scores. There are jobs sitting unfilled for lack of trained, skilled workers that would provide a solid income and career choice for those workers. It is our job as educators to make sure that our students have all the information they require to make the most informed choices for themselves for their future careers. Yes, we can inform them of their college opportunities. But, we must equally inform them of their technical and skilled trade career opportunities. Only, when we have properly informed our students can we say that we have properly prepared them to go out into the world to build a successful career and a successful life.

One last thought I’d like to leave with you. Think back to your teachers and guidance counselors. Who had the greatest impact on you and your life? Who do you feel best prepared you for your life today? What about them caused that impact? What about them makes you remember them positively today? We all have at least one like that. Find that person in your past and try to emulate their impact on you when you teach your students. That will be the greatest compliment you can give them, to pass on the encouragement they gave you to the next generation of students.

Thank you

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