

# A Call to Parents

A Family's Guide to High School & College Success

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of special interest to... **EDUCATORS**



## Learning and Earning in America

*The relationship between a college education and a higher income is not only well known, it has become an article of faith. Students, parents, and educators alike take it absolutely for granted that getting a college degree—no matter what type—will result in both a good education and a good job. This belief is so deeply embedded that it feeds another unspoken assumption: that there will be a college-level job for every college graduate. Or even that producing more college graduates will somehow produce more college-level jobs for them to fill.*

*Is it true? In a word: No. The sad truth is that jobs simply aren't where we want them to be, where we hope they will be, where we actively pretend they will be. So how can we help our students prepare for the real future? We can give them real hope and real advice by sharing the real facts about living, working, and earning in America.*

### Why aren't the jobs where we want them to be?

—Because where we want them to be is unrealistic. And why is that? —Because we watch too much TV, that's why! Television shows tend to feature professionals working in just a few types of careers: business executives, athletes, entertainers, lawyers, doctors, and nurses, with a few police officers, private eyes, cowboys, and criminals thrown in.

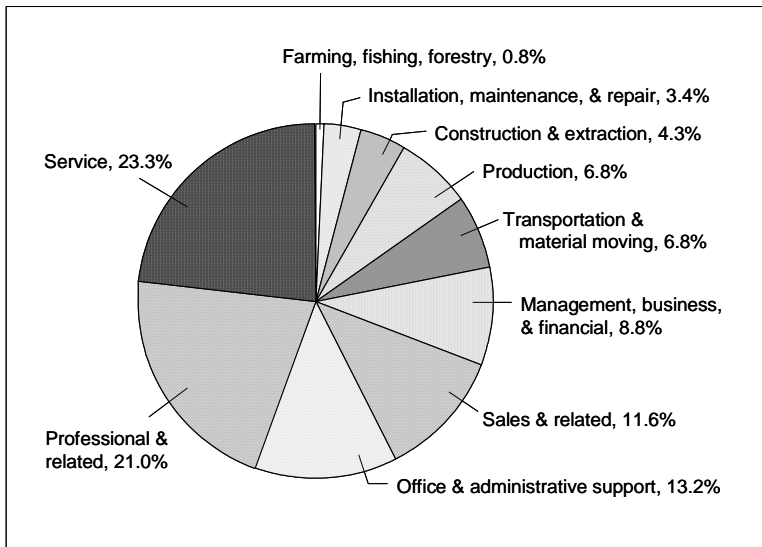
But—as you know!—TV shows are designed to entertain us, not to inform us. Nevertheless, after years of absorbing those images, many of us have the impression that TV-type jobs employ many, many people. And our students, who have absorbed those media images in staggering quantities and who haven't experienced working-world reality yet, expect to get TV-type jobs themselves.

For example, a surprisingly high percentage of students say that they hope to become doctors or lawyers. In a recent study, 10 percent of the teenagers polled said they **expected** to become doctors and 7 percent **expected** to become lawyers. (M. Csikzentmihalyi & B. Schneider, *Becoming Adult: How Teenagers Prepare for the World of Work*, 2000, p. 45). **In reality, physicians and lawyers together make up just about 1 percent of the whole civilian workforce.**

What do these statistics mean for our students? It's a simple story: There are thousands and thousands more young people who say they want to be doctors and lawyers than the world of work has places for. As concerned adults we need to ask ourselves: will this really work?!

If our students are all thinking of "TV type jobs," then they are missing out on many opportunities. If we can help students think more specifically about their personal interests and innate abilities and more broadly about the scope of jobs that relate to those interests and abilities, we'll be doing our job—we'll be helping our students become happy, successful adults, resilient adults.

**Projected job openings, 2000-2010,  
by occupational group as % of total**



Based on *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Winter 2001-02, p. 12

## Where will the jobs *really* be?

The pie chart at the top of this page shows job openings that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) expects to see in the near future, broken out by occupational sectors. This shows where our students can realistically expect to find jobs waiting for them when they finish high school and college.

The most substantial employment growth is likely to come in the service and professional sectors. That's no surprise, since these are the categories where the most jobs are right now. Office and administrative support and sales will make up the next tier of opportunity for our students. Job opportunities in the other sectors are likely to be scarcer.

## What education and training will those jobs *really* call for?

As educators we naturally rejoice at the improvement in the percentage of students finishing high school, entering college, and completing two-year and four-year degrees. That looks like success! But is it really?

Actually, earning a plain-label liberal arts degree probably isn't the best way to go, these days. Students who hope to get good, high-paying jobs will do much better to work toward *focused* college degrees—that is, a

degree that clearly prepares them for a professional specialty, a degree that comes with a career plan attached. That's what will really open the doors for jobs in the future.

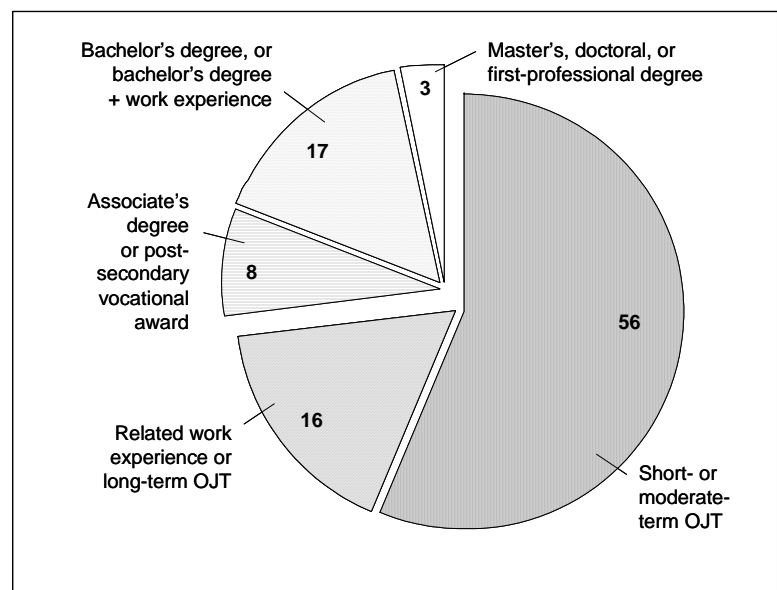
At this point, though, we have to step back for another reality check. How many jobs really require a four-year degree right now, much less a master's or a doctorate? Not all that many, it turns out.

The pie-chart below shows the break-down. Again according to the BLS, occupations that generally call for postsecondary education account for about 28 percent of all jobs. Only 20 percent of the jobs actually require a B.A. or B.S., and a mere 3 percent require a master's degree or beyond.

What this break-down really tells us is that a full 72 percent of all jobs require some kind of work experience or on-the-job training (OJT) but do *not* require a college diploma, neither a two-year associate's degree nor a four-year bachelor's.

And remember, this chart groups occupations by what they require, not by the educational level reached by the people currently working in them. It doesn't show all the "underemployed" former English majors in the workforce.

**Employment by education/training requirements, 2000 (by %)**



Based on *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Winter 2001-02, p. 12

## What jobs will be out there for college graduates?

OK, wait a minute (I hear you say). On the first page, we noted the huge proportion of high school students who expect to go to college and then to go into “professional” jobs. So what kinds of jobs can college-bound students realistically expect to find?

While the “TV-type jobs,” as we’ve seen, are just a tiny segment of the real working world, the category “managerial and professional specialties” is very extensive. In fact, that category has the longest list of job varieties and the largest group of currently-employed people (roughly 30 percent) in the U.S. Census Bureau’s Statistical Abstract.

The managerial/professional cluster is expected to have the most newly-created jobs during the next five years, and it includes most of the jobs that require a four-year college degree or higher. These are the jobs our college-bound students are most likely to enter.

Table 1 below shows the top ten sub-categories under the managerial/professional heading. Look who’s at the head of the list—teachers, with 13 percent of the positions and almost 4 percent of all civilian employees!

### 1. Detail of Employment in Managerial and Professional Specialty Category, 2000

Occupational sub-category	% of mgr / prof category	% of all civilian workforce
Teachers: pre-school through HS	13.09%	3.96%
Management-related occupations (accountants, auditors, etc.)	12.06%	3.65%
Health: assessment & treatment (nurses, tech specialists, etc.)	7.25%	2.19%
Writers, artists, entertainers, athletes	5.97%	1.80%
Engineers (all subfields)	5.12%	1.55%
Mathematical & computer scientists	5.07%	1.53%
Social, recreational, religious workers	3.65%	1.10%
Health: diagnosing (physicians, dentists)	2.54%	0.77%
Teachers: college & university	2.35%	0.71%
Lawyers & judges	2.26%	0.68%

based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001* (U.S. Census Bureau), table 593.

Notice too that most of the jobs in this sector call for a focused bachelor’s degree as opposed to a traditional liberal arts major. Of these ten, six

clearly require college study with a specific technical focus (management, health assessment/treatment, engineers, math & computer scientists, health diagnosing, lawyers/judges).

## Why don’t we earn what we think we should earn?

—Again, it’s because our concept of what we expect to earn is skewed out of whack, and the “TV jobs” and media hype are the culprits. In most TV shows and advertising we see, everyone seems well-paid and well-off, even rich. We have absorbed those images as our mental picture of ‘normal,’ so we figure that we should be well-off too.

Reality-check time: Many of us have skewed perceptions of how much people earn. Here’s a recent breakdown on household income (remember, this frequently includes two earners).

### 2. Average Household Earnings, all U.S., 1999

Income Range	% of Households
less than \$10,000	5.8%
\$10,000 - 14,999	4.8%
\$15,000 - 24,999	12.0%
\$25,000 - 34,999	11.9%
\$35,000 - 49,999	16.5%
\$50,000 - 74,999	21.2%
\$75,000 and higher	27.9%

based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001* (U.S. Census Bureau), table 671.

Our ideas of how much people are worth—our individual wealth—are also skewed, in the opposite direction, as Table 3 shows.

### 3. Perception of Household Earnings and Wealth, all U.S. Householders 35 and Older

	public perception	reality
Salary of \$1 million/year	15%	4%
Net worth of \$100,000+	36%	56%

*Washington Post*, July 27, 2001

That is, most people think that 15% of American households earn a million dollars a year, but only 4% really do. We strongly *overestimate* the percentage of people who earn at that level. On the other hand, we strongly *underestimate* the percentage of households with net worth of more than \$100,000. More than half of us actually have that much accumulated wealth—which doesn’t include our wages or salaries but does include the value of

our houses (the part we've paid off so far!), cars, furnishings, savings/retirement accounts, etc.

The lesson to share with our students is: Salary level, especially *starting* salary level, isn't everything. What they do with the salary over time is far more significant. Careful savings, home ownership, and the quiet miracle of compound interest can mean a lot more for financial security in the long run. In our current culture, this message is a "hard sell," but it's one of *the* most important lessons for students as they prepare themselves for adult life.

## What you and I can do to make a difference

Virginia Woolf once said that "The art of good writing has for its background some fierce attachment to an idea." When it comes to education and careers, my fierce attachment to an idea is that the policy of promoting "going to college" as the one-size-fits-all goal—without promoting *focus* and without acknowledging students' individuality—is unfair, unwise, and economically unsound.

It's *unfair* because it pays attention to the brightest and richest students and often ignores those at risk of dropping out of high school (23 percent), or those who do finish high school but don't go on to any postsecondary education (36 percent). Instead of talking up college as the *goal* in itself, we should talk up education as the *means* to each student's goal. If we could promote students' goals over institutional goals, then each student and each goal would be valuable and worthwhile, and all students would be given equal attention.

It's *unwise* because society cannot fulfill its promise that all college graduates will get a college-level job and (as if by definition!) have a good life. No degree can keep that promise. We need to teach students that a good life combines all of these elements: a good, loving character; a passion for their work; strong basic skills; and the specific degree or certificate required by their chosen field.

It's economically *unsound* because while there will be good jobs available in the future, most of them will require both a good basic education—that is, good basic skills—and a specific, *focused* degree or training program. We seem to have confused

"education" and "training," using them to mean the same thing. They are different, and we need both to get the full return on investment in this economy.

So what can we do? We can help students take the following steps to reduce the high costs and high risks of education after high school:

1. Help them identify their inborn talents, skills, and interests by watching what gives them joy. Show them how those talents connect to community needs and introduce them to mentors with a similar drive to fix, create, improve, build, conserve... whatever it is that the student cares deeply about.
2. Help them focus on developing strong basic skills, especially in English and Math in the middle and high school grades. Don't just focus on grades; focus on developing real skills. One-third of all students entering college drop out in their first year, and only half ever complete a degree. The major reason seems to be high grades but low skills and a lack of motivation to persist. You've got to have the drive and you've got to have the basic skills.
3. Encourage them to use all the college-in-the-high-school programs to cut the costs of further training and to start skill-building for their field. Make sure that the programs or courses fit the student's own talents, skills, and interests. For example, Advanced Placement classes might sound good, but a strong background in a technical field might be more advantageous, depending on that individual student's skills and interests.

The moral of the story told in these pages is simple: there will be good jobs out there, just not where we think they will be. We can't help our students find them until we know about them ourselves.

For our students to become happy, successful, and resilient adults, we need to help them identify who they are; how they can connect to the rest of the world; what career paths match up to their interests and passions; and what basic skills and focused education and training they'll need to get where they want to go. Focus. Skills. Motivation. These are the best gifts we can give to the next generation.

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