Want the American Dream? Don’t Go to College

I know all about the American dream, because in college I read The Great Gatsby for three different classes. (See, I’ve already proven the point of my headline, because how often have I used that knowledge in life after college?)

There are two types of jobs in this world: jobs where you shower before going, and jobs where you shower after you get home. Somewhere along the line we decided that the former were “good” jobs and the latter were “bad” jobs. High schools started pushing everyone into college-prep classes and suddenly, we’re living in a world devoid of plumbers. But when a pipe bursts in our basement and begins spewing water all over our piles of clothes that we promised ourselves we’ll fit into again someday, we can discuss how it makes us feel with the proper angst and punctuation.

Mike Rowe (whose last name just happens to be the same as the acronym for Results Oriented Work Environment, so you know I love him), the host of the TV show Dirty Jobs, was in Washington last week to discuss the non-college path. The Washington Examiner reported:

“I don’t think the country is going to fall back in love with manufacturing, and I don’t think these policies are going to change, until or unless we reignite a fundamental relationship with dirt, work, and the business of making things, as opposed to the business of buying them,” Rowe said.

He said one of the reasons this is occurring is because community colleges and vocational education have taken the backseat to four-year college degrees.

“It’s not happening because people hate community colleges, it’s not happening because people hate the trades, it’s happening because we’re promoting a very specific kind of education at the expense of the others,” he said.

Think about it for a minute. If you have talents that include manual dexterity and the desire not to be micro-managed, to set your own hours, or to just not sit in a cube all day, there are some “dirty jobs” that might be right up your alley. They’re more plentiful than most desk jobs, they often pay better, and you won’t have onerous student loans getting between you and your dream house (or boat or ski cabin, or whatever it is you dream about).

On Glenn Reynolds’s blog Instapundit, a plumber reported the following:

“I am a very smart woman from a book-smart but not blue-collar family and I am a plumber. I sought this job out about five years ago, and I think that I love my job more than almost anyone I know. I need a combination of mechanical intelligence (Obvious), social intelligence (you have to communicate with customers), and independence ( I am an employee of a medium-sized company but am on my own in the field (though I can call if I run into trouble)). I know that there is not an infinite demand for everyone in the U.S. to repair their neighbors house problems but [dang], the high efficiency natural gas boilers come with computer controls and a 100 page manual. No-one should be ashamed to be the one who can come and make someone’s life better (If my grammar or spelling is off, I never claimed to have verbal intelligence.)”

A technical-school instructor blogs that enrollment at his school is up. He argues:

“My school (three campuses) serves an entire county, and sixteen sending schools, with career education. The $8,000 it costs to give a high school senior nine months of training with us is hands down the best value in education available. Our ‘product’, a technical education, stands shoulder to shoulder with post secondary education costing $40,000 per class seat per year. I know this, as I serve on an industry team that evaluates these schools for certification.”

Of course, technical schools and blue collar work aren’t for everyone. But, neither are a university degree and the cube life that follows. If you’re after the American dream, don’t forget to look at an alternative path. It can get you there as well.

Lucas, Suzanne. “Want the American Dream? Don’t Go to College.” CBS News. CBS News, 05 Oct. 2010. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/want-the-american-dream-dont-go-to-college/>.