

‘Higher education’: A system insider questions the name

Career Planning

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Let’s be honest, the term “higher education” is a misleading and hierarchical label that elevates traditional college pathways over equally valid trade and career pathways, and that educators and society must redefine education to recognize multiple, equally valuable routes to expertise and success.

And, so, I want to begin with my truth.

I say that intentionally because I believe that context matters, especially when challenging a system many of us have spent our lives being a part of, and in my case, deeply believing in.

My entire professional career is rooted in education: I have a background in special education and have spent decades working in classrooms, school buildings, and district offices. Now, I work as an educational consultant whose supports public school districts all over the country and I am an adjunct faculty member teaching doctoral-level courses.

Perhaps most relevant to this conversation is that I have earned bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. I am, without question, a product of our current American higher education system. Which is precisely why what I’m about to say feels, even to me, like I’m pushing against my own foundation.

In some ways I feel like my lived experience is colliding with my professional experience. It is this collision that has forced me to reconsider something that I have long taken for granted: the way we define (and value) ‘higher education’.

The distinction between “higher education” and career or trade pathways is a socially constructed hierarchy. It’s not a reflection of rigor, value, or potential for success and that this language has shaped funding, access, and societal perceptions in ways that disadvantage non-college routes.

It’s not about rigor or intelligence

Why does this matter to me?

Because I am also the parent of a 17-year-old. Like so many families we are working through the last two years of high school and navigating one of the questions that defines late adolescence:

What do you want to do with the rest of your life?

Oh, to be 17 again! Except, in this case, my son already knows the answer to that question—beyond a shadow of a doubt. He wants to become a marine mechanic. Not vaguely. Not hypothetically. Specifically.

He wants to work on both inboard engines (the ones that power catamarans and yachts) and outboard motors—the ones you see perched on the backs of boats. He knows where he wants to go to school and has opened his own college savings fund so he can contribute to tuition.

And yet, despite his clarity, I found myself hesitating. Not because I doubt his ability and certainly not because I question the legitimacy of the career, but because I have been conditioned by the very system that shaped me to view his path as something other than higher education.

Teacher pipelines: [Why colleges of education must now co-own teacher outcomes](#)

This hesitation has forced me to sit with (and work through with the writing of this article) an uncomfortable question: Why do we delineate so sharply between college and career pathways in the first place?

At its core, the distinction is not about rigor or intelligence: it's about classification. When we use the term higher education we are typically referring to degree-granting institutions—academic spaces (colleges and universities) that offer associate's, bachelor's, and advanced degrees.

These institutions pride themselves on having long-standing academic traditions that are rooted in theory, research and intellectual growth. In contrast, trade school (and apprenticeship programs) are typically categorized as career or technical education. They are designed to develop a specific set of job-ready skills.

How 'higher education' shapes perceptions

One could argue that these trade or vocational schools operate in closer alignment with industry standards than academia. We know that both pathways happen after high school and both require structure, discipline, and the reinforcement of a chosen area of expertise.

Yet, we label one "higher" and the other something else entirely. And, that label carries weight. We must dismantle this hierarchy and adopt a more inclusive definition of education that equally values academic, technical, and workforce-based learning pathways.

That is the very reason public education is under continued scrutiny. With labor shortages and cataclysmic labor shifts, in a modern economy we have to make rational decisions that upend hierarchies.

Colleges and universities often receive more funding (both federal and private) and have greater access to financial aid systems. The label "higher education" (versus trade or vocational school) can influence the social perception by reinforcing the idea that a four-year degree is the default (or even superior?) choice for success after high school.

This label may also impact a student's decision-making process; students may be subtly—or not so subtly—guided toward college, regardless of their interests, strengths, or career goals. This has over time, created a type of hierarchy for both institutions and a student's identity.

Our system has intentionally, or not, declared that one type of learning environment is “better” than another. But, here is the reality I am beginning to understand first, as a parent, and then, as an educator: The label “higher education” is less about level and more about type of learning system.

This label reflects whether the learning is housed within an academic institution or embedded within a workforce-driven model. It is telling us how the learning is organized, not how valuable it is. The label has shaped access to status and opportunity in profound ways. Yet, it does not determine professional success.

Better than a hierarchy

In the [age of AI](#) (which I have written about here) we are seeing evidence that the need for skilled laborers (formerly thought of as blue-collar workers) is in high demand. However, skilled trades are experiencing significant labor shortages which drive up wages and demand.

Apprenticeship models allow individuals to “earn while they learn,” often avoiding the student debt that burdens so many college graduates. Meanwhile, some degree holders struggle with underemployment, navigating a job market that does not always align with their schooling.

And still, the narrative persists: College is “higher.” Everything else is... something else.

As I sit with my son (and daughter) I am realizing that my job as a mother is not to force him into the system that I know best. Rather, I need to take off my professional educator's hat and help him pursue the path that supports and reinforces his passion and goals.

This realization has forced me to push back—not against education itself, but against the narrow way in which we have defined it. If we as educators (at any, and all, schools) are serious about preparing our students for the future, I believe that we must reconsider not only the pathways we offer, but the language in which we use to describe them.

Because when we label one pathway as “higher,” we imply that others are lower. And that is not just inaccurate, it is limiting. Our students deserve better than a hierarchy of options.

They deserve a system that recognizes multiple forms of expertise, multiple routes to success, and multiple definitions of what it means to be educated.