

## The Great Correction, between choosing a trade or higher education, is in motion

by Salena Zito, National Political Reporter | July 17, 2023

**CINCINNATI, Ohio** — It is just days before Kayla Hill is graduating from one of the four sprawling facilities that make up the Great Oaks Career Campuses — and the [Pendleton neighborhood](#) native has a broad smile on her face as she puts the finishing touches on the pitch of a roof which she is working on in her carpentry [class](#).

The day after [graduation](#), the 17-year-old said she already had a well-paying job waiting for her at Johnson Construction Company. “I was always drawn to carpentry watching my dad fix things around the house, so I followed him around and started asking him questions all of the time,” she said, adding, “When I found out I could go to school for this and get a job if I applied myself, I was so happy to be able to do what I love and get paid for it.”

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Several classrooms away, sparks are flying as both Emma Ashcraft and Brianna Anderson, wearing their welding helmets, put the final touches on the individual projects they have been working on for their final in their welding class. Both are seniors and both took up welding in their pursuit of very different careers.



Kayla Hill, a senior at Great Oaks Career Campus at Diamond Oakes, graduated in June and took a job with Johnson Construction in her hometown of Cincinnati.

*(Salena Zito)*

Anderson is set on working with her hands. "I am lined up with a pipe fitting job, and with that career choice I will travel the United States, and to be honest, I cannot wait to get my life started," she said.

Ashcraft said she has known since she was in middle school what she wanted to do. Still, it was when she saw what Anderson was doing, making airplane parts, that she said she knew learning how to weld would only enhance her goals.

"I have been interested in aerospace engineering since seventh grade, when I came here and saw that Brianna was welding airplane parts and helicopter parts, I wanted to learn that skill so I could be the one who designed those things," she said.

Anderson is heading off to the University of Cincinnati this fall for aerospace engineering. She said the experiences here will give her an edge in

application: “I came in here not knowing anything about welding, and now I was able to build a whole model of a helicopter.”

Hill, Ashcraft, and Anderson were just three of the scores of students I met here at the Diamond branch of the Great Oaks Career Campuses that provides hands-on, practical learning for high school students beginning in 10th grade. More than 36 public school districts feed into the four campuses located in Hamilton and Warren counties, with students having over 30 career options that range from graphic arts to surgical technician to advanced manufacturing.



Brianna Anderson (left) and Emma Ashcraft are taking their welding skills in different directions; one is seeking a degree in aerospace engineering the other is off to be a pipefitter.

*(Salena Zito)*

If you want to be a plumber, auto mechanic, carpenter, hairdresser, or welder, this school will help you reach that goal. In fact, students who attend Great Oaks will earn professional credentials by the time they graduate from high school, with many of them walking into fields that start in the six figures.

Eight years ago, everyone from guidance counselors to parents was pushing students into higher education choices and neglecting to at least give them the option to look at a trade school or a community college, often because there was a stigma attached to vocational trades.

Our culture did a pretty good job of reflecting dismissiveness and misconceptions about the trades — offering few role models or success stories as examples of achieving the American dream by using one's hands for a living.

One of the few people who have elevated the working man and woman in the past 20 years has been Mike Rowe, whose *Dirty Jobs* TV show began when his mother called him and suggested it'd be great if his 90-year-old grandfather would see him actually "doing something on television that actually looked like work."

At the time, he was working as a reporter for a television show in San Francisco.

Rowe said the next day, he was in a sewer doing a report shoulder to shoulder with a sewer inspector. The concept of showcasing the everyman who makes our lives better had never been done before and, to everyone's surprise, including Rowe's, it became wildly successful.

Why? In part because there were a significant number of people watching at home who saw themselves or their parents in the segments. Remember, only 34% of Americans have a college degree.

For the past 50 years, college and university attendance has been held up as the only path to success by educators and parents alike, especially parents who attended college, so much so that the trade classes were rarely mentioned to students as a post-high school option.

That resistance to giving children an option in vocational education in the 1980s and '90s came home to roost in the past decades when the inevitable, steep decline of available skilled workers and tradespeople hit home.

But there has been a cultural shift in the past few years that is turning that resistance to trade schools on its head. At least part of that has to do with the out-of-control costs of attending a university and the debt that follows you decades after graduation, but it also has to do with how political college campuses have become.

A new poll from Gallup has found that confidence in higher education has plunged in the past eight years. Enrollments have dropped at the same time that tuition has risen and universities have become stridently politicized in the classrooms.

The June survey showed a mere 36% of Americans have either “quite a lot” or a “great deal” of confidence in higher education, which is down from 57% just eight years ago.

Conversely, while nearly every sector of higher education has been hit with enrollment declines, trade school programs are booming, research from the [National Student Clearinghouse found](#).

Construction, culinary, mechanic trade programs, and surgical technician programs all experienced increases in enrollment between spring 2021 and 2022, the study showed, with construction trade programs experiencing the largest enrollment increase at a whopping 19.3 percentage points year over year.

There were also significant increases in mechanic programs and culinary ones, to name just a few.

The ignorance of the education system for decades has been that trade jobs lack relevance in society. However, it seems as though it's pretty relevant to a homeowner to be able to call a plumber if a toilet is clogged, or if a business is experiencing a backup septic system, or a church basement is flooded.

No trade schools means no plumbers, no plumbers means no ability to fix the complicated systems that keep our homes and businesses functioning. The same goes with an HVAC technician: Who exactly did these decision-makers think would keep your furnace operating in the winter and air conditioning humming in the summer?

Unlikely it was someone with a degree in French literature or women's studies.

Hill said she is very happy with her choice, “I get to walk out of high school with a skill and start my career. I don't think enough high students know that is an option and that is a shame.”