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No college required for high-paying jobs



Reginald Priester II, 20, learned how to use a computer to design metal parts at Edmondson-Westside High. With those skills, he easily found a good job at Marlin Steel Wire Products. (Sun photo by Algeria Perna / October 22, 2007)

Jay Hancock

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Reginald Priester II was going to work in a shoe store for \$6 an hour after he graduated from high school in 2005. Money made college problematic, and any job was looking pretty good. Then he found that the global economy was ready to bid much higher for the drafting and math skills he learned at Edmondson-Westside High.

Today he's a designer for Marlin Steel Wire Products, making close to \$30,000 a year,

plus retirement and health care plans. He figures he can double that in a few years.

This could be you, high school students, if only society were better at allocating talent. For the right people, there still are good factory jobs that don't require a college degree. If you're proficient at math, like machines and don't feel like beginning your career with \$30,000 or \$60,000 in college debt, pay attention. Some vocational career tracks will take you further than you think.

Some manufacturers say they're more desperate than ever for computer-literate machinists and designers. This is the flip side of the continuing decline in Maryland factory employment. It's not just that some plants are closing. The ones that remain can't find the right people to grow.

"No matter what positions we try to advertise for, there are virtually no takers," says Scott MacDonald, owner of Maryland Thermoform Corp. in Baltimore, which makes plastic containers for food, medicine and makeup. "The last guy we got was from Colorado. He found us on the Internet and moved out here."

At some larger companies it's possible to make more than \$100,000 as a machinist supervisor without a four-year college degree, say executives and educators. Maryland Thermoform just lost such an employee who was making \$80,000, MacDonald said. He left to start his own business.

Educators and parents have done a poor job of advertising these careers and preparing students. Plus, industry has "not done a very good job in describing the changes taking place in manufacturing and how cool it really is now," says Stacey Wagner, managing director of the National Association of Manufacturers' Center for Workforce Success.

Now retirements among veteran machinists are accelerating, managers say, which makes the shortage worse even as a cheap dollar and plenty of defense and biotech work improves manufacturers' prospects.

Maryland companies surveyed by the Regional Manufacturing Institute a few months ago said they wanted to hire 130 machinists, says RMI executive director Michael Galiazzo.

One place needed 12. Marlin Steel Wire could hire another designer, two or three welders/prototype makers and a couple of machine programmers tomorrow.

"This is our biggest problem," says Marlin President Drew Greenblatt. "We cannot grow as fast as we want because of this shortage. ... I'd like to clone Reggie."

Reggie Priester liked art, so his mom encouraged him to take drafting. Even as a freshman at Edmondson-Westside he was working with computer-aided design programs under the eye of teacher Paul Shuford.

"Once I got into it I liked it a lot," he says. "I think it's easy." Not all his design

classmates seemed to agree. "A lot of them weren't interested in it after high school."

He graduated in the top 5 percent of his class but didn't start using his skills until another Edmondson-Westside alumnus at Marlin saw him as a prospect.

Since high school he has taken a one-semester drafting course at Baltimore City Community College, but he says it repeated much of what he already knew.

He works a four-day, 40-hour week designing steel hooks and baskets on a computer for Marlin, in Southwest Baltimore.

Orders come in from all over the world. Often customers need Priester to design a caddy to carry an oddly shaped airplane or car part through a washer or factory-assembly machine.

Customers include Toyota, Chrysler and United Airlines. He has to get the part, design a platform and make sure the computerized machines on the Marlin floor can handle the fabrication - often in a matter of hours. Marlin's stock in trade is the custom-made, right-the-first time part, delivered yesterday.

You have to be smart for this kind of work. Algebra II is a must. Many machinist and machine-setup jobs require trigonometry and post-high school knowledge, but not necessarily college. The math, everybody agrees, is a big hurdle.

Edmondson-Westside's Shuford can get only a dozen or so students to try his computerized design course each year.

"It's simply because they're probably afraid of the math that's involved," he says. "It requires a higher level of thinking, and you have to be self-motivated."

But you don't have to be Stephen Hawking. There are good programs that teach this stuff: at Edmondson-Westside, at Sollers Point Technical High School in Dundalk and at the Community College of Baltimore County. More students should pay attention.

"If they like math and they like art or drawing," Priester says, "this is a good career." Good for the employee, the employer and the economy. Check it out.

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