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This Way Up: Mobility in America

Economic mobility is alive and well for Americans who pursue technical or practical training

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ANTHONY SOLIS, WELDER | Some welders can earn more than \$100,000 a year. *Eric Kayne for The Wall Street Journal*

Dakota Blazier had made a big decision. Friendly and fresh-faced, from a small town north of Indianapolis, he'd made up his mind: He wasn't going to college.

"I discovered a long time ago," he explained, "I'm not book smart. I don't like sitting still, and I learn better when the problem is practical." But he didn't feel this limited his options – to the contrary. And he was executing a plan as purposeful as that of any of his high-school peers.

It started in his junior year with release time from high school to take a course in basic construction skills at a craft training center run by the Associated Builders and Contractors. The next step was an internship with a local contractor, Gaylor Electric.

This summer, he's at Gaylor full time, earning \$10 an hour plus credits he can apply at the ABC training center, where he intends to return this fall for a four-year apprenticeship. Mr. Blazier, 18, beamed as he explained his plan. This was no fallback, no desperate Hail Mary pass. It was a thoughtful choice – and he was as proud and excited as if he were heading off to the Ivy League.

College-educated Americans tend to know mostly other college-educated Americans and to think that is the norm, if not universal. In fact, just three in 10 Americans age 25 or older have bachelor's degrees. Another 8 percent are high-school dropouts, leaving the overwhelming majority – more than 60 percent – in circumstances something like Mr. Blazier's.

The questions that keep him up at night aren't about inequality: *How rich am I, or, how rich is my neighbor?* What he worries about is the kinds of opportunities open to him. Can he get an education that equips him for a job he wants? Can he find that job and build on it to make a career? His concern is economic mobility.

The changing economy isn't encouraging. New technologies and globalization are driving deep-seated change – and no one knows for sure what it will mean for most Americans. But one thing is certain: The future will put a premium on technical skill. Educators and employers agree: High school is no longer enough.

Americans have a host of postsecondary options other than a four-year degree – associate degrees, occupational certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeships. Many economists are bullish about the prospects of what they call "middle-skilled" workers. In coming years, according to some, at least a third and perhaps closer to half of all U.S. jobs will require more than high school but less than four years of college – and most will involve some sort of technical or practical training.

Will these be just jobs – or real careers? Is the system preparing enough Americans to fill them? Are there adequate opportunities for training? Do we do enough to steer young people toward technical training?

As Mr. Blazier knows, there are plenty of opportunities for people like him to get ahead. Despite our digital-age prejudices against practical skills, Americans are quietly reinventing upward mobility. Consider three often overlooked paths: welder, nurse and franchise manager.

The first requirement of any upward path is entry ramps at the ground level. The Craft Training Center of the Coastal Bend, in Corpus Christi, Texas, teaches welding to 200 high-school students, mostly at-risk youth. When Anthony Solis first heard about the program, he was close to dropping out. He didn't know what welding was but decided to give it a try – at least it would get him out of class a few days a week.

Unlike his father, who didn't need even a high-school diploma to make a decent living on an oil rig, Mr. Solis, now 19, knew he needed some kind of qualification. He found that he liked the hands-on aspect of the training program. Suddenly, math came more easily – he needed it to calculate weight and volumes.

Welding itself was harder, but he learned that he could do well if he tried – something he'd rarely experienced in a classroom. Soon, he was attending not just his for-credit class but also an adult program in the evening, and he returned to the center that summer for a

career-prep course – all of it subsidized by his high school and a local employer group. The second requirement of any good upward path is for training to lead to a job. Mr. Solis's big break came last August, when he and 20 other Coastal Bend students auditioned for JV Industrial, which does high-risk, high-paying maintenance work in oil refineries. JV had never recruited at the Corpus Christi center, and Mr. Solis was so nervous that he was almost ill on the day of the hands-on test. Still, he made the grade and headed off to Houston for more free training – with the possibility of a big job if he finished.

A third requirement of a good career path is that it must be aligned with economic needs. This is where employers like JV can make all the difference. Many high schools and community colleges teach job skills, but too many of them use outmoded techniques and equipment or steer young people to industries that aren't growing. The best way to stay current is to partner with an employer, who can offer advice about what's in demand, help design curricula, lend equipment, even – like JV – provide training.

It isn't always easy to find an industry partner: Training is expensive, and some firms fear that competitors will poach the workers whom they train. But a growing number of farsighted companies – often bigger firms in growing fields such as construction, manufacturing or IT – grasp the mutual benefit. What better way, after all, to attract and retain good employees?

This is especially true in a trade like welding, where demand can sometimes seem insatiable. The average age in the field is 54, and the American Welding Institute predicts openings for more than 400,000 workers by 2024 – welders and others who need welding skills, such as pipe fitters, plumbers and boilermakers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics pegs the average wage at \$36,300 a year, but anecdotal evidence suggests that is the low end of what's possible. JV Industrial says that it pays more like \$75,000, with some employees earning more than \$100,000. In the burgeoning shale industry, in Texas and Appalachia, welders can earn as much as \$7,000 a week.

Like construction, nursing is a time-tested path to the middle class, and it has many of the same hallmarks: easy on-ramps, goal-oriented job training and a series of ascending steps, with industry-certified credentials to guide the way.

The profession is already growing robustly. From 2000 to 2010, the number of registered nurses increased by 24 percent. But the aging of the baby-boom generation will sharpen demand even as it reduces supply: Roughly a third of today's nurses are more than 50 years old.

Consider one microcosm: Orlando, Fla., where there are many different ways into the nursing profession. The University of Central Florida trains only bachelor-degree nurses. You need an outstanding high-school record, there's a long waiting list, and tuition is \$14,000 for in-state students – and more than three times that if you're not from Florida. Two well-equipped, award-winning community colleges – Seminole State and Valencia State – offer associate-degree RN programs, where tuition is \$7,500. Then there is Orlando Tech, a county-run career center, located in an old building in an industrial area near downtown, which trains licensed practical nurses for about \$5,000.

It sounds insidious – a quintessentially inequitable, tracked system, with RNs earning some \$65,000 year and many licensed practical nurses, or LPNs, starting below \$40,000. But appearances can be deceptive. Alongside the three tiers, there are myriad ways that different kinds of students can tap into the programs and transfer among them, building their own upward paths, sometimes over the course of a lifetime.



STEPHANIE RABELLO, REGISTERED NURSE | Working her way from practical nurse to registered nurse to bachelor-degree nurse. *Preston Mack for The Wall Street Journal*

The streamlined route starts in high school: a “dual enrollment” magnet program that allows focused, able students to earn college credit and professional certifications, including as a nursing assistant. Participants who enroll within two years at Seminole or Valencia get advanced placement credit, saving as much as \$1,250. And those who are really in a hurry can matriculate simultaneously at UCF, earning “concurrent” credit for advanced courses taken at community-college prices, then graduate in just three years with a UCF bachelor’s degree.

More often, though, the path up through the system is slow – an intermittent process with many phases. When Stephanie Rabello, 41, graduated from high school in the early 1990s, all she could think about was getting into the nursing profession – the sooner, the better – and she enrolled in a 10-month LPN program at a local career center.

Her LPN license opened several doors: She worked in an elementary school, a nursing home, a rehab hospital, often two jobs at once. But after nearly 20 years as a practical nurse, she decided that she wanted more respect and better compensation. So in 2012, she went back to school at Seminole State, enrolling in a yearlong LPN-to-RN “bridge” program with online classes and convenient clinical rotations that allowed her to continue working while she upgraded.

Sherry Harris, 33, who followed a similar path from LPN to RN, calls it “step-by-step” professional training – the “working-class way in.” Ms. Harris is now taking the next step: an RN-to-BSN program for a bachelor of science degree in nursing.

Ms. Rabello also wants a bachelor’s degree and is hoping to enroll next spring at UCF. But for now, she’s happy where she is. “I used to be a floor nurse,” she said. “When I graduated as an RN, the facility promoted me to unit manager. That’s exactly where I want to be – getting some respect and moving up the ladder.”

At first blush, franchising seems very different from welding and nursing – no technical skills, no required training, no earned industry certifications. But in many ways, it is a looser, market-driven version of the same upward path: Young people start at the bottom of a practical trade and learn by doing.

Looking back, Shana Gonzales, 41, says that she always wanted to be an entrepreneur. She came from a family of modest means: Her father was a coal-miner in Arizona. Her first franchise job, in the early 1990s, was at a Taco Bell, where she worked as a part-time cashier while attending community college.

More than 20 years later, she owns and operates four fast-food restaurants in Atlanta that generate \$3.5 million in annual revenue.

It wasn't an easy path, but it isn't uncommon in the franchise industry. At McDonald's some 60 percent of what the company calls "owner/operators" started as hourly employees, as did 63 percent of the chain's two dozen U.S. regional managers.

Ms. Gonzales's first break came after nine months on the job. She was focused on her college classes and working just to earn some extra cash. But the store manager noticed her: She was responsible, took initiative and seemed curious about how the restaurant operated. Ms. Gonzales agreed to undergo training, then spent 12 weeks studying a textbook and shadowing an assistant manager. This qualified her as a shift manager.

She didn't expect the next promotion either, or the one after that, although by then she'd been working in fast-food outlets for nearly four years. Except for those first 12 weeks, everything she knew about the restaurant business was self-taught. But the third promotion was a big job: general manager, running her own store, with a regular salary and 15 direct reports.

It was then that Ms. Gonzales started to see that the franchise business might be more than just a job – there might be a career in it. By this time, she was working for the Rally's Hamburgers brand, which was purchased that year by a bigger company with a more corporate culture. Ms. Gonzales and other midlevel managers were brought to Tampa periodically for presentations and networking. She still remembers how eye-opening it was.

"The others had all started behind the counter too," she recalls. "But this was the first time I had ever met other people like me – people with the same desire to work hard and give everything they had to the company." By 2003, when she left what was then Checkers Rally's, she was manager of operations for Arizona and California, earning more than \$100,000 a year in salary and bonuses.

Ms. Gonzales's next boss, Aziz Hashim, has his own rags-to-riches story. He started out in what he calls a "lower middle-class" immigrant family in Los Angeles and earned a prestigious degree as an electrical engineer – then quit abruptly to go into the franchise business. Today, his company, NRD Holdings, owns more than 50 franchise outlets, and he is seen as a rising star in the industry.

Still, he explains, neither he nor Ms. Gonzales is an anomaly. "If you work hard in this business," he says, "you can't help but rise. We owners have no choice but to hire from within and train our own managers. No one comes out of school knowing how to run a fast-food restaurant."

The hardest step up the franchising ladder is from management to ownership. Franchising is the safest way to start a small business. Though lesser-known brands can pose risks, most outlets open with a popular product and a proven way of doing business. But it isn't cheap to get started: The initial purchase fee is rarely less than \$100,000 and usually several times that.



SHANA GONZALES, FRANCHISE RESTAURANT OWNER | She started as a cashier at Taco Bell and now owns four restaurants in Atlanta. *Raymond McCreia Jones for The Wall Street Journal*

Mr. Hashim's parents lent him their life savings. His company has a program called "Own It!" to help his top managers make the transition. Ms. Gonzales used his help to buy four Checkers outlets and just this summer finished paying off her loan. Her goal is to buy 10 more stores in the next five years.

Today's conventional wisdom about economic mobility in the U.S. is gloomy and growing gloomier. We're told that good jobs are disappearing, that less educated workers have bad work habits, that the U.S. is falling behind other countries.

What's strange is that this isn't what you hear from many people who are working toward the middle class: people training, saving and in other ways striving to make it, who invariably see more dynamism and possibility. Ms. Gonzales described her path as "opportunity after opportunity. Every time I think about getting out of the business," she says, "something exciting happens – a promotion or a new direction that keeps me engaged."

Who's right? Surely, the answer is up to us – and not just the strivers alone. One place to start would be by showing some respect for practical training. As millions of Americans know, even in a knowledge economy, countless valuable career skills can be learned outside a college classroom.

Ms. Jacoby is the president of Opportunity America, a Washington-based nonprofit group working to promote economic mobility. She is the author of "Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration and the editor of "Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means to Be American."