

1 Are We Showing Students All Their Options?

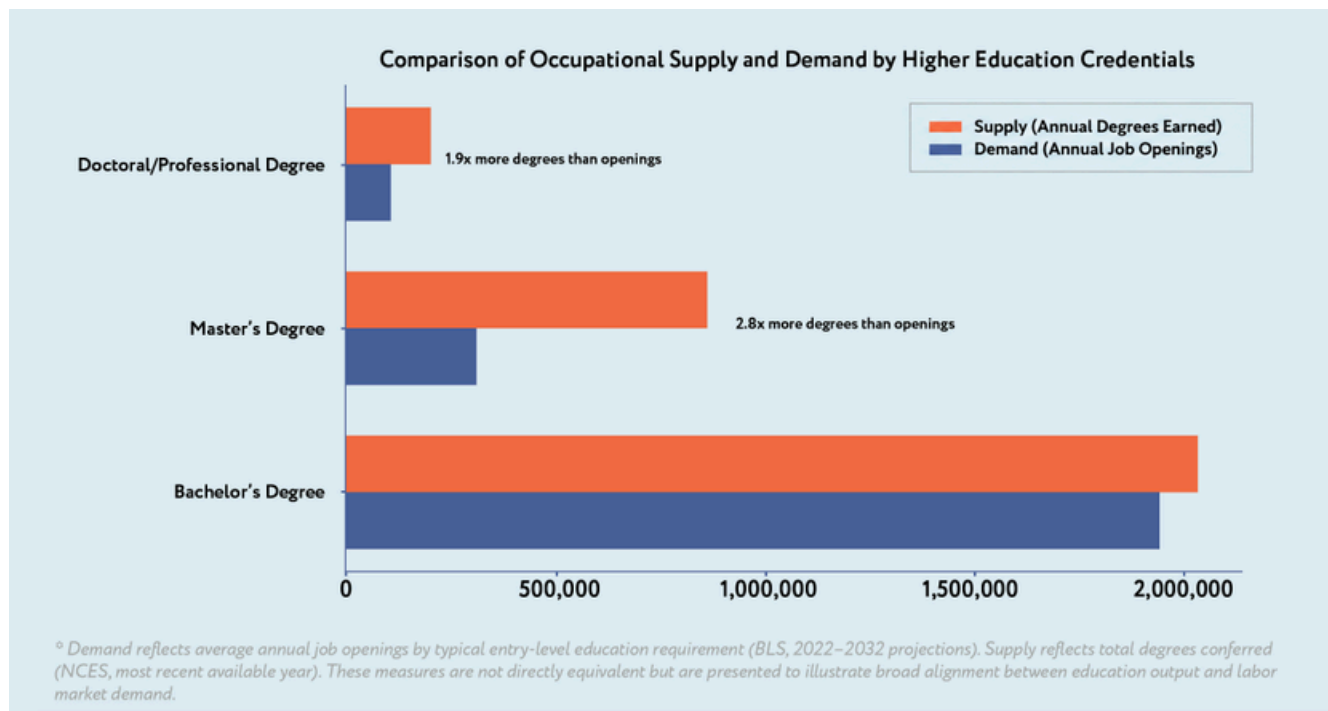
Rethinking How We Prepare Young People for Life After High School

The widespread assumption that a successful career requires a four-year degree does not align with the realities of today's labor market.

Our analysis suggests that only about 42% of jobs will require a bachelor's degree or higher by 2031. At the same time, the number of people with four-year degrees already significantly outpaces demand in some fields. This mismatch is particularly pronounced at the graduate level, where the number of degree holders substantially exceeds the number of job openings requiring those credentials.

The result is a disconnect between the educational pathways young people are often encouraged to pursue and the credentials the labor market actually demands.

Only 13%
of Gen Z students
feel prepared to make
postsecondary decisions.



This does not diminish the value of higher education . . . instead, it underscores the need to give students a more complete picture of the opportunities available to them.

Career and technical education, industry credentials, apprenticeships and other work-based learning pathways can lead to well-paying, sustainable careers, often without requiring a four-year degree.

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~75%

prefer hands-on,
career-connected learning

>50%

are open to alternatives
to a four-year degree

33%

prefer programs that
take two years or less

Career and technical occupations are often less visible to students than traditional university pathways and are frequently introduced too late in the career decision-making process. As a result, many young people do not seriously consider construction, apprenticeship or other craft training pathways until after pursuing college or employment options that may not align with their interests or the labor-market opportunities.

This matters because parents and other trusted adults remain among the strongest influences on students' career decisions. Many families, however, have limited familiarity with construction careers, industry credentials, apprenticeship and work-based learning pathways. **Without better information, students may never seriously consider opportunities that could align with their interests, abilities and career goals.**

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

- Establish and strengthen career awareness and education opportunities in our nation.
- Reestablish the nation's commitment to the equal dignity of all workers by communicating the full range of career and education pathways to students . . . and their parents.

Student Perceptions of Postsecondary Education Pathways (Gen Z)

Source: ECMC Group, Question the Quo Education Pulse Survey (2023).

Perception	Percent (%)
Believe education after high school is necessary	65%
Worry about how they will pay for college	62%
Open to alternatives to a four-year degree	>50%
Prefer programs that take two years or less	~33%
Prefer hands-on, career-connected learning	~75%+
Feel prepared to make postsecondary decisions	13%

Read all 7 recommendations in the 2026 update to Restoring the Dignity of Work
Find the full report at www.NCCER.org/research/