

Colleges not training students for careers that are growing

By Scott Jaschik, [Inside Higher Ed](#)

WASHINGTON — The [United States](#) economy is in serious danger from a growing mismatch between the skills that will be needed for jobs being created and the educational backgrounds (or lack thereof) of would-be workers. That is the conclusion of a [mammoth analysis of jobs data](#) being released today by the [Georgetown University](#) Center on Education and the Workforce.

The new report says that the United States is "on a collision course with the future" since far too few Americans complete college. Specifically, the report says that by 2018, the economy will have jobs for 22 million new workers with college degrees, but, based on current projections, there will be a shortage of 3 million workers who have some postsecondary degree (associate or higher) and of 4.7 million workers who have a postsecondary certificate.

"This shortfall will mean lost economic opportunity for millions of American workers," the report says.

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Colleges may like much of the rhetoric surrounding the report, which will be released officially today at an event scheduled to feature representatives of the Obama administration and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The clear implication of the report is that the United States needs to spend much more on higher education — and in particular on the educations of those who are not on the fast track to earning degrees at elite institutions. But the lead author of the report said in an interview that the report should also shake up colleges — and challenge most of them to be much more career-oriented than they have been and to overhaul the way they educate students, to much more closely align the curriculum with specific jobs.

The colleges that most students attend "need to streamline their programs. so they emphasize employability," said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown Center.

Carnevale acknowledged that such a shift would accept "a dual system" in which a select few receive an "academic" college education and most students receive a college education that is career preparation. "We are all offended by tracking," he said. But the reality, Carnevale said, is that the current system doesn't do a good job with the career-oriented track, in part by letting many of the colleges on that track "aspire to be Harvard." He said that educators have a choice: "to be loyal to the purity of your ideas and refuse to build a selective dual system, or make people better off."

The data in the report trace a long-term shift, from the 1970s to the next decade, in the jobs in the United States for which postsecondary training is needed. In 1973, only 28% of jobs required a postsecondary education, while by 2018, 63% will.

The report also stresses the shift over time in the likelihood that people without postsecondary education can join the middle or upper income classes. In 1970 only 26% of the middle class had postsecondary education, while today, 61% do. Notably, in 1970, it was not only possible but likely that those in upper income levels lacked a college degree — a circumstance that has changed dramatically. In 1970 only 44% of the upper class had postsecondary education, compared to 81% today.

The report proceeds from these broad trends to a wealth of data about states and specific fields, showing that the growth in jobs (until now and for the next decade) will primarily be in fields that require various levels of

college education. And the report suggests that if various players — students, colleges, the government — don't act on that conviction, many Americans will lack good jobs and many key jobs could go unfilled.

Carnevale said that he hopes the message reaches multiple audiences. He said he wants high school students not only to realize the importance of going to college, but also to plan for a career at the time they make their college choices. "It matters a great deal that they go to college and get a credential, but what matters the most now is the occupation that they will pursue," he said.

The key psychological change that is needed, he said, is to move away from "the old model, where you go to college and then go out and find a job" to one in which the college years are explicitly "preparing for an occupation." He said that his recommendations may not apply to the highly competitive colleges whose graduates can still focus on jobs (or graduate education) after they finish a bachelor's degree. "But the world isn't like that anymore" for everyone else, he said.

This doesn't mean that community colleges or state universities should eliminate the liberal arts, he said, but that they should counsel students to pick programs based on careers, track the success of various curriculums in preparing students for jobs, and adjust programs to assure that they are focused on jobs. "It's all about alignment," he said.

And that does mean a clear priority at most colleges for career-oriented programs over all others, Carnevale said. He said that, without major changes in education policy, there is no way the country can meet President Obama's goal of having the United States lead the world by 2020 in the proportion of adults who are college graduates. And that requires honesty, he said, about the fact that the current system is not working

He also said that a serious focus on these issues should lead to a shift in resources — one he said he wasn't sure would take place — from the universities that educate the best prepared to those who educate most of America. That would mean less money for flagships and more for the community colleges and other public institutions. Carnevale said that the institutions that need more are also those that educate larger proportions of minority and low-income students, and that such patterns have led to many a court case when they involve elementary and secondary schools.

While Carnevale's findings are likely to receive plenty of praise today, there are some who are skeptical. A number of economists, including some prominent conservatives, have been gaining attention of late for suggesting that the value of a college education may be overrated. An article in [The New York Times](#), "Plan B: Skip College," has prompted widespread discussion (and much criticism).

But the new analysis from Carnevale's research center may also receive criticism from the left. Amy E. Slaton, associate professor of history and politics at [Drexel University](#), is a scholar of the history of education politics, and she argues that the push for a career orientation to higher education limits the potential for many students. "This approach accepts the notion that you need a tiered education system," she said, "and that seems like a good way of making sure that the least number of people are given a chance to develop their potential to be innovators, to learn creative skill sets."

Slaton said that she agrees that many students benefit from learning job skills and the current system has many flaws. But she said Americans should be wary of a focus that could limit options at the institutions most people attend. "How do you know when you look at people what their potential is?" she asked.