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On Their Own: National Study Shows Alarming Lack of Career Guidance for Teens

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Most teenagers are receiving little to no career guidance outside the home and are not pursuing appropriate educational plans for real world career opportunities and business needs, according to a survey of more than 800 high-school juniors and seniors nationwide coordinated by the Ferris State University Career Institute for Education and Workforce Development.

More than half (51 percent) can identify no one in high school who “has been a mentor or especially helpful” in advising them on career or job options. The vast majority (78 percent) credited their parents as the top adult influence, but the amount of time spent discussing careers is minimal (three hours or less in the past few months), even in the home.

“High-school students are making critical decisions about their career paths in a vacuum, unaware of the broad array of educational and employment opportunities available to them,” said Ferris President William Sederburg.

“The bias toward four-year degrees is so pervasive that many students never explore other options. Sixty-eight percent plan to go to a four-year college, though studies show only a fraction of those will graduate with a bachelor’s degree. Forty-one percent attribute a sense of embarrassment to voc-ed training programs. Forty-five percent said pursuing technical training might limit their career options. Clearly, we need to improve the image of post-secondary education and training outside of the traditional four-year college as a legitimate path for a realistic and meaningful career.”

“The survey shows that teens are getting little career counseling about the real world. That’s not surprising with an average of only one career guidance counselor for every 500 high-school students nationwide,” said Phyllis Eisen, vice president of the Manufacturing Institute, the education and research arm of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). “But in order to prepare for good opportunities in high-demand, highly skilled technology and manufacturing occupations, kids really need to begin making the right educational choices in middle school.

According to Eisen, that is why the NAM and the U.S. Dept. of Commerce launched GetTech, a multi-media educational campaign and Web site (www.GetTech.org) to teach middle-school students about the exciting high-tech careers available to them if they study math and science.

“We really need to do a better job guiding students into the high-tech occupations that will help sustain America’s productivity and economic growth in the years ahead,” she said.

Asked about the primary reasons for their career choices, less than 4 percent said “good pay,” and less than 3 percent cited job availability.

“Students’ career choices are most often based on personal interest over career opportunity, and they are not taking the necessary educational steps and acquiring the right skills to pursue good, high-paying jobs in fields with severe worker shortages,” said Bill Gaskin, president of the Precision Metalforming Association Educational Foundation. “The disconnect between the availability of jobs and the careers students choose could have dire consequences for America’s economy as we face a possible shortage of up to 12 million skilled workers in the next 20 years.”

“The sponsoring groups will distribute this study broadly to educators, parents and employers to start a national dialogue about the need to beef up our career guidance system,” said Matt DiIorio, executive director of the Associated Equipment Distributors Foundation. “Our simple goal is to provide a net to students walking the career-decision tightrope.”

The results of the study were announced at a Washington, D.C. press conference Wednesday morning. The survey instrument and complete report are available on-line at www.ferris.edu/careerinstitute. More information about workforce development issues is available from the following sponsoring organizations: the National Association of Manufacturers (www.nam.org/workforce), Precision Metalforming Association Educational Foundation (www.pmaef.org) and Associated Equipment Distributors Foundation (www.aednet.org).