



ADVANCE EDUCATION

BEYOND DEGREES

THE ERA OF SKILLS-BASED LEARNING

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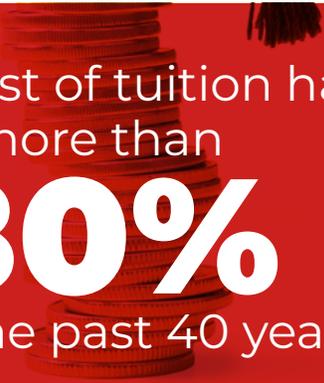
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INTRODUCTION

There's a quiet revolution underway in American education. While headlines tend to focus on elite universities and student loan debt, something more grounded, more practical is happening in real time: community colleges and vocational schools are experiencing a renaissance. Driven by affordability, flexibility, and real-world outcomes, these institutions are becoming the preferred choice for a generation that values skills over status.



The cost of tuition has risen more than
180%
over the past 40 years

WHY THE SHIFT?

For decades, the four-year college degree was considered the default ticket to success. But a new generation of learners is challenging that assumption. The cost of tuition has climbed more than **180% over the past 40 years**, while wages for many recent graduates have barely budged. Faced with a high-cost, low-yield equation, students and increasingly, their parents are seeking faster, more affordable, and more direct paths to good jobs.

This audience isn't simply made up of those priced out of a university education. It includes motivated, career-focused individuals who are intentionally bypassing the traditional route. They want programs that provide in-demand skills, industry-recognized credentials, and a clear line of sight to employment often in less time and with far less debt than a bachelor's degree.

Meanwhile, the job market itself has evolved. Employers in fields like health-care, IT, advanced manufacturing, construction, and clean energy are struggling to find qualified workers. Many of these roles don't require a four-year degree they require hands-on training, technical know-how, and proof of competence. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, prompting millions to reassess their careers and seek out education that could deliver stability, adaptability, and results.

THE APPEAL OF VOCATIONAL AND TWO-YEAR PROGRAMS

There are several compelling reasons why vocational schools and community colleges are gaining popularity:

AFFORDABILITY

The average cost of a community college is a fraction of a traditional university. Students can often graduate debt-free or with minimal loans.

FLEXIBILITY

With evening, weekend, and online classes, these institutions cater to working adults, parents, and nontraditional students.

JOB READINESS

Programs are designed in collaboration with local employers, ensuring that graduates have the skills that are actually in demand.

STACKABLE CREDENTIALS

Students can earn certificates and microcredentials that lead to immediate employment, and then “stack” those toward an associate degree or beyond.

PATHWAYS TO FOUR-YEAR DEGREES

For those who do want to pursue a bachelor’s degree, many community colleges offer seamless transfer options to state universities.



THE DATA BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

Recent data underscores this shift. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, [enrollment in vocational and certificate programs has grown steadily in the past five years](#), while traditional four-year institutions have seen slight declines.

The number of students aged 18–20 pursuing certificates increased by 11% year-over-year. And the global alternative credentials market is projected to grow from \$18.83 billion in 2024 to nearly \$70 billion by 2032, a compound annual growth rate of nearly 18%.

These numbers aren't just statistics; they reflect a mindset shift among young adults who want practical, marketable skills and a faster route to financial stability. In fact, in our latest parent/student survey, parents are considering vocational schools at a rate twice as high as their children, highlighting a growing parental push toward practical, career-focused education options.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR EDUCATION MARKETERS

For education marketers, this shift is both a wake-up call and an opportunity. The audiences are changing, and so must the messaging. Here are key strategies marketers should consider:

LEAD WITH OUTCOMES

Today's learners want to know what they'll be able to do with their education, not just what they'll know. Highlight job placement rates, average starting salaries, and alumni success stories.

TELL THE STUDENT STORY

Put a face to the transformation. Showcase real students balancing work and education, making career pivots, or supporting their families through new credentials. Authentic, documentary-style storytelling builds trust and drives interest.

EMPHASIZE FLEXIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

Many prospective students are working adults or parents. Your messaging should reassure them that they can fit education into their lives and do so without incurring crippling debt.

PROMOTE PARTNERSHIPS

Highlight collaborations with local employers, tech companies, or health systems. These give your institution credibility and help students see a direct pathway from classroom to career.

MAKE MICROCREDENTIALS FRONT AND CENTER

As demand grows, microcredentials, certificates, and stackable credentials should feature prominently in your program marketing. Educate your audience on what these are and why they matter.

USE PLATFORM-NATIVE CREATIVE

Meet students where they are especially on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Invest in short-form video that shows hands-on training, student life, or day-in-the-life of a trade professional.

AVOID JARGON

Keep messaging clear and action-oriented. Replace "education speak" with plain language that speaks to the aspirations and challenges of today's learners. This not only helps attract potential students but is vital to attracting large language models like Chat GPT to choose your school as the answer.

THIS IS A MOMENT TO REDEFINE THE STORY AROUND EDUCATION.

Marketers who lean into this narrative shift, who position their institutions as *agile, affordable, and outcomes-driven* will not only resonate more with today's students but also drive real enrollment growth.

REAL-WORLD SUCCESS STORIES

This trend is playing out across the country. In Michigan, Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC) leveraged the state's Michigan Reconnect program to increase enrollment and brand recognition among adult learners. With a comprehensive marketing strategy focused on branding, engagement, and conversion—spanning paid social, search, OTT, YouTube, and content marketing—KVCC became the most frequently cited institution among Michigan Reconnect applicants.

As of September 2024, Kalamazoo, Van Buren, and Allegan counties were the highest feeders for Reconnect students attending KVCC. The campaign not only exceeded enrollment goals but also strengthened KVCC's reputation as a regional leader in two-year

education, proving that strategic marketing can directly influence educational access and impact.

In another example, a community college aimed to boost awareness and enrollment in its Culinary Arts program. Leveraging content-rich storytelling, paid media, and video strategy, the campaign celebrated student success and highlighted the hands-on, industry-driven aspects of the curriculum. The result: a measurable increase in program inquiries, a significant bump in local awareness, and strong alignment with the college's broader workforce development goals.

DISMANTLING THE STIGMA

For too long, vocational education has been stigmatized as a fallback option rather than a first-choice pathway. But that narrative is changing. Today's students recognize that a \$10,000 welding certification that leads to a \$70,000 job is not just practical, it's smart. Social media platforms, workforce influencers, and TikTok creators are playing a surprising role in this shift, showcasing the day-to-day reality (and satisfaction) of skilled trades.

Parents and counselors are coming around too. As they witness peers struggle with student debt and underemployment, they're more open to alternative pathways that offer a quicker return on investment.

MARKETING TAKEAWAYS: SHIFTING THE PERCEPTION

Education marketers have a powerful role to play in this cultural reset. Here's how to further dismantle the stigma and [position your programs as aspirational](#):

HIGHLIGHT RESPECT AND PRESTIGE

Frame skilled trades as professions of purpose and pride. Borrow from the language of entrepreneurship, craftsmanship, and innovation. Use messaging that elevates rather than apologizes.

DEPLOY ALUMNI AS ADVOCATES

Feature recent graduates who are thriving—not just financially, but in terms of job satisfaction, purpose, and career growth. Real people in real careers make the message relatable.

COUNTER THE MYTH OF THE “FALLBACK PLAN”

Use data and stories to reframe vocational pathways as first-choice options. Compare cost vs. earnings in your advertising. Showcase multiple entry points for success.

CELEBRATE THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Give visibility to the tools, gear, and environments your students will experience. Whether it's a CNC machine or a surgical lab, these are symbols of competence and professional identity.

TARGET PARENTS AND COUNSELORS

[Don't just market to students](#), address the influencers.

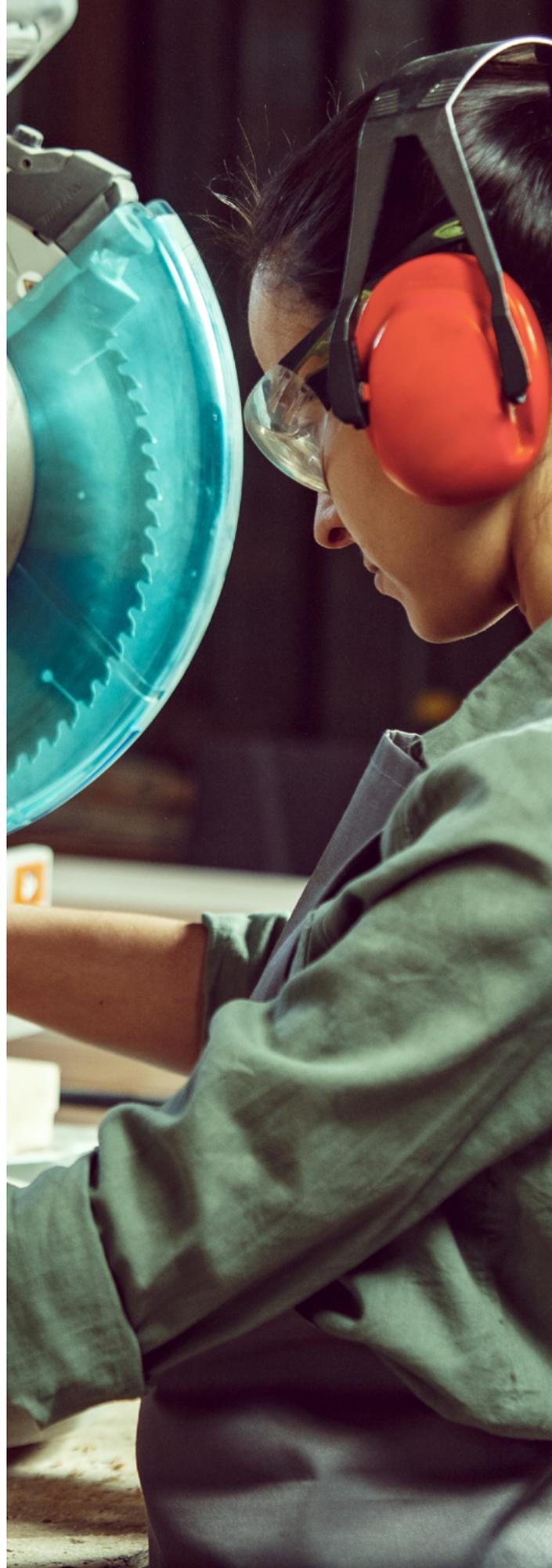
By changing the narrative, marketers can help drive a new era of respect for technical careers—one that aligns with today's economic needs and tomorrow's innovation.



THE FUTURE OF WORKFORCE EDUCATION

As automation, AI, and technology continue to reshape the labor market, the need for continuous upskilling will only grow. But there's an interesting twist in this new chapter: when computers first entered the workplace decades ago, it was the skilled trades—mechanics, drafters, factory technicians—who were told to adapt or be left behind. Today, it's the opposite. It's the white-collar creative and knowledge-based roles that are now vulnerable to disruption by generative AI, automation, and machine learning.

The AI isn't coming for plumbers, electricians, or construction workers. It's coming for coders, content writers, paralegals, and even some aspects of marketing and teaching. Skilled trades that require physical presence, hands-on execution, and local expertise remain largely insulated from large-scale automation for now.





WHAT EDUCATION MARKETERS SHOULD DO

This shift is a huge opportunity for education marketers to reframe the value proposition of vocational and community college programs:

FLIP THE RISK NARRATIVE

Position skilled trades not as fallback careers, but as future-proof careers. Make the case that hands-on, physical professions are among the most stable and resilient in the face of automation.

BUILD URGENCY FOR THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

Speak directly to people in vulnerable sectors graphic design, journalism, entry-level finance and offer upskilling into trades as a smart pivot, not a step down.

USE AI TO MARKET TRADES

Ironically, marketers can use AI-generated video, voiceovers, and personalized targeting to showcase trades as jobs AI can't replace. The medium becomes the message.

FEATURE THE REAL ECONOMY

Show the growth in construction, renewable energy, HVAC, and infrastructure. When paired with policy and investment trends (like federal funding for green jobs or EV infrastructure), these data points become a powerful narrative about long-term demand.

SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF SECURITY

Today's learners want security as much as they want success. Frame skilled trades as a hedge against economic uncertainty, not just an affordable path.

TARGET WITH PRECISION - USE DATA TO REACH THE RIGHT PROSPECTS, IN THE RIGHT CHANNELS

Smart education marketers leverage data to segment audiences—career changers, recent high school grads, veterans—and meet them where they are most likely to engage. Pair the right message with the right medium, whether that's YouTube for younger audiences, programmatic display for intent-driven job seekers, or paid search for those actively researching next steps. This kind of targeting doesn't just drive more inquiries, it drives the right ones.

See how an Advance Education client has boosted qualified leads and enrollment with a data-informed, cross-channel campaign:

[Read the case study](#)

Expect to see more hybrid programs that blend in-person technical training with online theory. Expect more partnerships between industry and education. And expect students to increasingly think in terms of “what do I need to learn to do this job” rather than “what degree should I get?”



CONCLUSION: THE RENAISSANCE IS REAL

Community colleges and vocational schools are not playing catch-up. They're leading the charge into a new era of education, one that is skills-first, inclusive, and deeply connected to the real economy.

For education marketers, this is the moment to step up and lead the narrative. Reimagine your campaigns, not around traditional academic prestige, but around job-readiness, economic resilience, and future-proof careers. Lean into outcome-based storytelling, short-form video, and employer partnerships. Help learners and their families see the trades as smart, respected, and stable choices in an uncertain world.

This isn't just a shift in student interest, it's a structural evolution. The brands that adapt their messaging now will earn trust, enrollment, and long-term loyalty.

We are, without question, entering the golden age of skills-based education. Let's help people see it for what it is and bring them along for the ride.

LET'S CHAT!

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