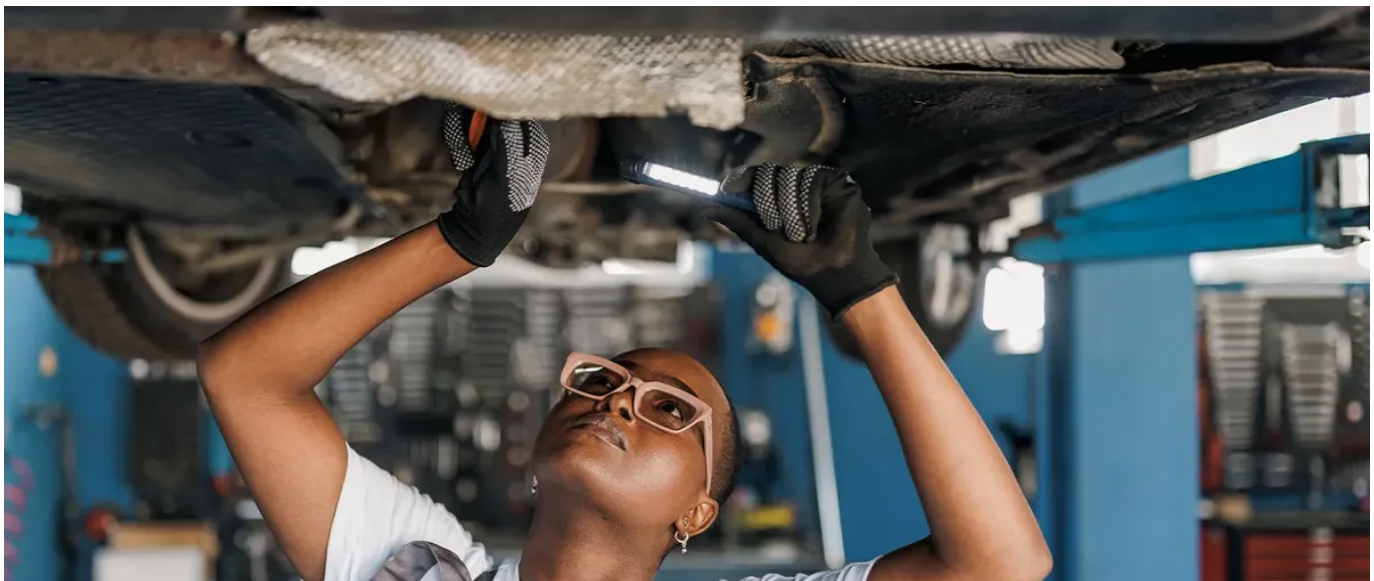


Gen Z heads to trade school as college costs rise

Students are turning to vocational programs that can offer less debt and more job security

By **DORI ZINN**

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Female auto mechanic working on a vehicle (Getty Images/RealPeopleGroup)

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Cody Forst has been a fleet mechanic for Jensen Precast in Phoenix, Arizona, for a few months. Forst, 21, works on trucks and equipment for 40 to 50 hours a week. He's always loved working and wrenching on his own vehicles but felt limited by his career choices.

“I enrolled in Glendale Community College [after high school] and took classes there,” he said. “I wasn’t happy with how the college curriculum was laid out. I felt stuck and was not happy with my decision to go to college.”

On the last day of the semester, he toured the Arizona Automotive Institute. In August, he graduated from its year-long Diesel Heavy Truck Program.

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“[I] fell in love with the hands-on aspect of learning how semi trucks and heavy equipment work,” he said. “So ultimately, I made the decision to follow my passion.”

Trade, vocational programs booming

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the number of students enrolled in community colleges with a vocational focus continues to climb. In the last year, enrollment has increased more than 17%. From 2021 to 2024, more than 129,000 students enrolled in a community college with vocational programs.

The mounting cost of traditional college could be a reason. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an on-campus student's average price for a public, four-year college degree was \$27,100 for the 2022-2023 school year. At the end of four years, the same student will have paid \$108,400 for their education if there haven't been any changes to tuition, fees, room, board or other costs. Tuition increases by about 8% per year, according to Finaid.

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Trade and vocational programs vary widely in cost. The National Center for Education Statistics says the average

tuition at two-year institutions ranges from \$4,000 per year at public institutions to \$19,500 at private ones. The Arizona Automotive Institute program cost Forst \$24,500. His parents put \$10,000 towards his education, and rather than take out traditional student loans, Forst now pays \$732 every month, interest-free, to AAI. He says he has about \$5,000 left until his loan is paid off.

“I didn’t receive any scholarships or grants along the way, so I am paying completely out of pocket,” he says. “My scenario is not the same as everyone's. A lot of my classmates had help with grants and some had help from other sources to pay for their school.”

Trades offer job security, less debt

In McAllen, Texas, Juan Castillo, 25, attended South Texas Vocational Technical Institute, where he completed the HVAC program in August. The cost was about \$14,000, but his financial aid covered half of that.

“Money was never a factor,” he said. “I knew what I wanted to do. The great thing about this school was how they bought all the necessary tools for the HVAC [program]. What’s left of my student loan is \$7,000, which I’ve been paying off with every paycheck.”

While trades might not seem glamorous, they’re almost always in demand.

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Think about what’s around your home

and community: air conditioning, lights, plumbing, appliances, and even how your home was built in the first place. Those jobs are always going to be needed.

While not fully recession-proof, trade jobs tend to have fewer layoffs than other industries. You’re four times more likely to face a layoff in a high-paying profession like tech or business than you are in building, manufacturing and similar jobs,

based on data from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

Earning a lot of money, especially after racking up a lot of college debt, sounds enticing. But [according to Crunchbase](#), more than 191,000 workers faced layoffs from tech companies in 2023 and into 2024. Many prefer the job security that trades give them.

While Forst and Castillo tried traditional college before enrolling in trade schools, Castillo wishes he had entered his program much sooner.

“If there's one thing I would do differently, it would be going to trade school after high school,” he said. “I dropped out of community college due to not knowing what I wanted out of life and here I am today, enjoying what I do. I would say that you should try new things and take the risk.”

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By **DORI ZINN**

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