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## Heading back to college, this time to learn a trade

By H.J. Cummins  
Minneapolis) Star Tribune

For all the college graduates whose degrees in Catholic studies or history of medicine haven't attracted a lot of jobs-with-benefits offers, Amy Wolfe has a suggestion: Learn a trade.

That's what Wolfe, a 2003 Southern New Hampshire University graduate in sports management, is doing.

Not happy in her first job out of school in retail sales — "I didn't hate it, but ... " — she left to train as an air traffic controller at the Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). The 27-year-old will graduate in August, employable after just one year's study.

"I'd always had some interest in aviation," said Wolfe. "This seems important and challenging, something not everyone can do. I know there can be times of crazy stress, but it's a satisfying stress, I think."

Upending one role that community and technical colleges used to take, students with four-year degrees are using them to get jobs.

"We have become the new graduate school," said Irene Kovala, interim vice president for academic affairs at MCTC.

What these grads find are one- and two-year programs that qualify them for living-wage jobs such as nursing, graphic arts, home remodeling and repairs, and IT and paralegal work.

Kovala estimated up to 20 percent of the MCTC students have four-year degrees.

"I'd say 60 to 70 percent of my students have a college degree," said Arlynne Wolf, coordinator of the two-semester kitchen and bath design program at Century College at White Bear Lake, Minn. "I have one student with a Ph.D. It blows me away."

One likely appeal: Wolf estimates that nine of every 10 students have jobs by graduation day, with builders, remodelers or home-improvement stores.

Mike McCoy of Minneapolis has a bachelor's degree in Spanish from Ohio State University.

"I went to college because my parents pushed education, but I really didn't know what I wanted to do," said McCoy, 36.



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII / MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

Amy Wolfe, a 2003 college graduate, found her sports-management degree didn't open doors to satisfying work. She left her retail job to attend community college to learn to become an air traffic controller. She will graduate in August after one year of study and expects to find work.

A camera sales job did progress to darkroom work. But the new digital world displaced him, so McCoy trained in MCTC's heating, ventilation and air-conditioning program. He graduated last year. "I was pretty certain I didn't want to go back to college for another four years, because the first time didn't seem to do much for me," McCoy said.

He now works for a residential heating and air-conditioning company.

"Everybody I graduated with, as far as I know, is gainfully employed," McCoy said.

Starting wages are close to \$20 an hour, he said, "and it would be pretty hard to outsource us. I have a lot of friends who work — or I should say did work — at Honeywell, and their jobs are now in India."

When Stephanie Johnson of Apple Valley, Minn., decided to find work after six years at home with children, she surprised herself by choosing a community college.

After earning a political-science degree at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Johnson, 37, found only secretarial or receptionist jobs. Knowing they wouldn't pay enough to cover child care, she sought out the paralegal training.

Already doing contract work at a law firm, she hopes to earn \$45,000 within a couple of years.

Johnson's college degree was not wasted, said DeAnne Brooks, director of support-staff placement at Esquire Group in Minneapolis, which specializes in placing people in legal careers.

The legal world values education, Brooks said, and sees a college degree as a sign of accomplishment and maturity.

But it's the paralegal training that gives people like Johnson the essential skills law firms look for.

"We get a lot of people fresh out of school, and they have no idea what they want to do with their English degree," Brooks said.

"They see one of our ads and they call us up and say, 'I'd love to do that work.'

"Then we say, 'OK, if you don't have any legal experience, we recommend you check into one of the paralegal schools.' "

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