

STUDY ABROAD

Here's why a growing number of GenZs are choosing skilled trades.
Callie Holtermann reports

No college please

LaDonna Glass, 23, had just finished her shift as an electrician apprentice in a veterinary school building across the lot. She snaked conduits among electrical boxes and installed wall sockets in an operating room big enough for a horse.

Glass graduated from high school in 2021 and went straight to Mississippi State University in the US, with the goal of becoming a youth therapist. But the road ahead seemed long and extraordinarily costly, and she began to question whether the investment would pay off. Her older brother had graduated from the same school with a degree in accounting. Afterward, he went to work as a truck driver. "The cost of living is making people realise we don't have four years to sit around and just go to school," she said.

Today's students have watched tuition climb over the course of their lifetimes. Lately, they have had front-row seats to a brutal early-career job market that is being further destabilised by the rise of artificial intelligence.

Rather than despair, a growing number of young people have concluded that skilled trades like welding, plumbing and construction might be a pragmatic way forward. Sure, AI can write an email, the thinking goes. But can it install a sink? How about solder a ball valve?

A majority of high school graduates in the US still head right to college. But trade school enrolment is ticking upward. Apprenticeships and private trade schools have logged increases, too.

Yet, members of this new generation of trade workers say they are encountering pushback of the "we just want what's best for you" variety from family members and friends.

As a high school student in Los Banos, California, Logan Bangert im-



COLLAR CODE: LaDonna Glass decided to pursue an apprenticeship as an electrician after one year of college. The use of "white-collar" and "blue-collar" for working professionals is American in origin. While white-collar was used originally in connection to clerical, administrative and managerial functions, blue-collar was mentioned in contrast as early as 1924. It was possibly used to gesture at the fact that the labouring classes wore a lot of denim as opposed to the white shirts of the managers



agined himself trying out for the football team at Pennsylvania State University. He was accepted but balked at the cost of attendance for out-of-state students: more than \$50,000 per year. "I feel like a lot of people nowadays, they just go to college because their mom told them," Bangert, 18, said.

His mother, a retail worker, just wanted him to do something he liked. At his senior year career fair, he saw a booth for a training programme for wind turbine technicians at Universal Technical Institute in Rancho

Cucamonga in California. The seven-month programme cost around \$21,000, which he paid for with the help of a state grant. He graduated in March.

He now lives in Houston, where he makes \$80,000 to \$90,000 a year repairing the blades of wind turbines. He sees the intense physicality of his job as an advantage in this era of AI disruption.

Money is on all of these young people's minds. Many found the upfront costs of college dizzying and

were reluctant to take on loans that they feared they would be paying off for the rest of their lives. Trade school seemed reasonable by comparison.

To be sure, a college degree remains one of the best ways to increase earning potential in the long run. The median income of a worker with a bachelor's degree is 1.8 times that of one with only a high school diploma.

Ryan Shikhman, 21, is an HVAC technician. Both of Shikhman's parents have undergraduate degrees; his mother is a physician's assistant and his father is an accountant.

Shikhman shadowed an HVAC technician for a few summers in high school and enjoyed the job's mix of plumbing, welding and electrical work. When he signed up for a one-year programme at Eastwick College, a private vocational school in New Jersey, his girlfriend at the time asked him not to tell her parents that he was going to trade school, he said. His colleague Eddie Fawakhrji, 25, said he had run up against similar attitudes.

Shikhman's parents came around after seeing that he was making good money doing a job he enjoys, he said.

He is transparent that the work has its challenges. Temperatures in workspaces can creep above 38°Celsius, and he and Fawakhrji regularly haul 90-kilo units up several flights of stairs.

Both men wonder just how long their bodies will be able to keep up. In the long term, Fawakhrji hopes to transition to starting a real estate business with his brother. Shikhman eventually wants to spend more time on management and less time doing manual labour.

NEW YORK TIMES
NEWS SERVICE

ANDREA MORALES/THE NEW YORK TIMES