



InverHills
Community College

A MEMBER OF MINNESOTA STATE

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Alumni perspective: Get to college, ignore advice that you don't need degree

By Dane Smith

In the summer of 1973, almost 50 years ago, I found myself in a situation very much like the one facing today's young folks.

Jobs were plentiful and unemployment was near an all-time low. Fresh out of the U.S. Navy and with my high-school diploma and my honorable discharge, I might have gotten a decent job with livable wages at the local 3M plant or another employer in south Washington County. Some of my friends and family members, few of whom had any college experience, encouraged me to just "get a real job" and get on with my life.

Even though I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do for a living, I took a gamble and enrolled at Inver Hills Community College, while working odd jobs part-time. It was one of my best decisions, ever. I found inspirational instructors who encouraged me and nudged me in the right direction. Within just four years I had B.A. in journalism from the University of St. Thomas and had landed a job as a reporter at the Minneapolis Star (later merged into the Star Tribune).

I enjoyed an immensely rewarding 30-year career as a newspaper journalist. That was followed by more than a decade as leader of a think tank that, among other priorities, pushed hard for policies that increase post-secondary completion and that reduce our state's racial disparities in college attainment.

My experience was hardly unique in those days. One of my best Navy buddies acquired no less than three vocational certificates in auto and appliance repair from local technical colleges and also did quite well for himself.

Looking back now, our choices weren't much of a gamble at all. The odds have always favored people with higher education credentials of any kind, whether those are vocational certificates, two- or four-year diplomas, or graduate school and professional degrees.



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According to the latest numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, average weekly income still rises steeply and steadily by education level. The difference between zero college and a two-year degree adds up to a half-million dollars over a 40-year career, and more than a million for a four-year degree.

Research also shows a lot of other things in life improve with education attainment. These include health and wellness, marriageability, and geographic and job mobility options. Throw in a host of societal benefits, from poverty reduction to economic productivity to community engagement and civic health.

Despite these obvious payoffs, recent news headlines tell us that because of rising wages and low unemployment (trust me, this is temporary), too many young Minnesotans are failing to take advantage of the enormous benefits that higher education can provide.

As a result, enrollment has declined at Inver Hills and many campuses in our network of 54 state universities and community and technical colleges, known as Minnesota State. This system, among the finest in the nation, offers an amazing and affordable variety of programs and credentials, often tailored to local employers, and many campuses have received national recognition.

Inver Hills, for instance, was recently named #1 in Minnesota and #5 nationwide for military student success. Dakota County Technical College (DCTC) in Rosemount, has ranked among the top 50 in the nation for “Best Value.”

Just at Inver and DCTC, more than 100 different programs are offered, in addition to the standard two-year associate’s degree that will transfer to any four-year college and save tons of money in the process. Particular strengths at Inver Hills are healthcare, digital technology and paralegal training.

The other good news is that many employers these days are offering reimbursement or other incentives for college credits. And more personal assistance than ever is available for low-income students and young people of color under “Equity by Design” a statewide commitment to closing the racial gaps in higher-ed attainment.

Bottom line, whatever your job situation, you owe it to yourself to check out the options at Minnesota State. A good start would be the “Campuses and Programs” page on the system website. And on Aug. 13 and 17th, Inver Hills will be holding [Easy as 1-2-3 events](#) at the campus. I’ll be there with other alumni to tell you more about one of the very best things you can do for your future: get more education.

Dane Smith, a retired journalist and public policy advocate, graduated from Inver Hills Community College in 1975, from the University of St. Thomas in 1977, and was a Knight Journalism Fellow in 1989-90 at Stanford University. He is a member of the Inver Hills Alumni Board.

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