

The false promises of worker retraining

When Travis Busch graduated from high school in Jefferson, Iowa, in 1999, he followed many of his classmates on the well-plotted and well-trod path to college. Busch took classes at Iowa Central Community College during the day and worked part-time at night on the floor of a local factory that made stock tanks for horse and cattle farms. But after a year and a half in college, he dropped out to work full time.

"I didn't want to go to college in the first place," he said. "I was already making money. I didn't see why I needed it."

Fast-forward to January 2017. The factory where Busch worked was sold to a company that moved its operations to Kentucky and laid off the workers in Iowa. Before he lost his job, Busch met with local workforce officials who presented him three options: apply for an apprenticeship, go back to college, or try his luck on the job market with only a high-school diploma.

"I had a long conversation with my wife and decided that I didn't want just a job, but I wanted a career," Busch said. "I wanted to go somewhere where I wouldn't have that feeling they are going to lay me off. I wanted job security."

For Busch that job security would come from installing and repairing heating and air-conditioning systems. But on the day he went to sign up for the HVAC program at Des Moines Area Community College, the coordinator he was scheduled to meet with wasn't there...

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