

OPINION

Skilled labor jobs vital to Flathead's economy

With a growing need for workers in skilled trades such as welding, heavy-equipment operation, plumbing and electrical work, it was great to learn about a recent collaboration among local educators and business advocates that allowed high school students to get some hands-on experience in a number of trade jobs.

The Flathead High School Career Center and Kalispell Chamber of Commerce teamed up with Flathead Valley Community College's Occupational Trades Department to offer Flathead High sophomores, juniors and seniors the opportunity to explore trade jobs that ranged from oper-

INTER LAKE EDITORIAL

ating plasma cutters to trying their hand at Computer Numerical Control machines. The event was dubbed "Pursuing the Trades," and included stops at Weyerhaeuser, Applied Materials, Central Heating, Cooling, Plumbing and Electrical, and a Terry Homes build site.

There certainly is still value in a college education for a number of employment opportunities, but there can be equal opportunity these days in manufacturing or trade positions that often pay some of the highest wages in the state. As Kate Lufkin

with the Kalispell Chamber noted, "a blue collar job is not gross and dirty and dangerous anymore."

Trade workers typically spend less time in school, with most positions requiring a minimum of a high-school diploma or GED equivalency, and maximum of a two-year associate degree, many of which are available through FVCC. That means trade workers tend to accrue less debt than their university-going counterparts.

If you've tried to hire skilled labor such as a plumber or electrician lately, you perhaps

have seen firsthand how difficult it can be to find someone to do the work. As the Flathead's economy continues to grow at a healthy pace, employers have sounded the alarm about how hard it is to find skilled laborers.

"Pursuing the Trades" was an excellent event, and we hope the event can be expanded to include all of the valley's high schools. There's talk of including middle school students in these kind of events. The more we can open students' minds to what's possible in the workforce, the better it is not only for potential employees but also the businesses that continue to be our economic backbone.