



Why I Skipped College to Be an HVAC Tech

I'm thinking about a mortgage rather than student loans.

By Cole Kelley

June 16, 2024 at 3:49 pm ET



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

When I was in elementary and middle school, my teachers encouraged students to become doctors, lawyers, professors, architects—all the academic-intensive professions. They sold me on studying engineering. I've always liked building things with my hands, not sitting in an office developing plans or considering theories. So I decided to become an HVAC technician. I do what I love—and I've found that I can make a more than livable wage.

I'm not alone in this turn away from university schooling. There's increasing [skepticism](#) about the financial return of a college education, and enrollment in vocational-focused community colleges rose 16% last year.

This month, after I picked up my high-school diploma, I walked directly into a union apprenticeship that promises five years of tailored instruction. I'm earning nearly four times the federal minimum wage, and the union is even paying for me to earn professional licenses that demonstrate advanced skills.

Today's work differs from old blue-collar jobs. On job sites these days the laptop is the most important tool, as technology has transformed the trade disciplines. Artificial intelligence might be changing everything from electrical circuitry to electric-car repair, but a highly trained person still needs to crawl under the house or the hood to do the work.

On an HVAC job, I balance hands-on labor and intellectual challenges in everything from mapping out installations to problem-solving when something goes wrong. A healthy economy needs people to do these jobs. Massachusetts, my home state, faced a shortage of around 160,000 skilled workers in 2022.

I decided on HVAC in part because I was looking to use my skills in healthcare. Growing up, I spent too much time in hospitals suffering from headaches. I didn't want to be a doctor—with eight years of education after high school and hundreds of thousands of tuition dollars—but I could see myself on the complex engineering side of hospital work, where heating, ventilation and air conditioning are crucial.

Knowing what I wanted to do, I attended a technical high school, supported by the national SkillsUSA curriculum and competition. From my first minutes on campus, I knew I'd found my place. I finished the freshman curriculum in two weeks and checked off the sophomore assignments before that first January.

In my junior year, I designed my own curriculum, which involved building a chiller and hydronic heating system to manage temperatures in a small facility. During senior year, I spent alternating weeks at a pharmaceutical manufacturer that produced a drug for rare genetic diseases, where I was responsible for maintaining purified water systems, ventilation and compressed gas systems for clean rooms.

As I start my career, I'm considering how I can become a homeowner before I'm 25. My college-bound friends will follow years behind, as they spend large chunks of their paychecks on school debt. When I start house-hunting, I'll probably look for a fixer-upper. I know people with the skills to make it a showplace.

Mr. Kelley is a graduate of Shawsheen Valley Technical High School in Billerica, Mass.