

An Education Worth Fighting For

Millions of American men and women are being denied access to the kind of higher education that once led to a better job and a better way of life. High tuition costs and exclusionary entrance requirements are only part of the problem.

Irrelevant college curriculums are a big obstacle to acquiring the skills and training that matter in today's increasingly specialized industries. The answer for today's high school graduates and job seekers will not be found in a four-year university program leading to degrees in the arts or sciences.

In a recent address, IAM International President Tom Buffenbarger called for the establishment of high tech institutes, one in each congressional district, specifically designed to serve the real world needs of today's students and workers. "We need to turn our attention to providing solid and sophisticated training for blue-collar workers," said Buffenbarger. "We need the 21st century equivalent of the land grant schools that provided invaluable training for the men and women who became the driving wheels of the Industrial Revolution."

An updated version of the century old concept surfaced in 1985 with a bill called the High Technology Morrill Act. It proposed to dedicate three percent of the rents received from mineral leases to provide grants to establish research and education facilities for scientific, engineering and technical employees. The facilities would also retrain workers requiring more technical skills.

The bill never became law, but the idea deserves fresh attention. Higher education can still be the path to a better life, but it will need to include a curriculum geared to the future rather than the past.

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An Internet Bulletin for IAM Communicators

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