

Value of a degree

More education usually pays off

By LaRaye Brown

laraye.brown@clarionledger.com

Some Mississippi graduates who recently picked up their college diplomas may have barely earned the 2.0 grade-point average needed to earn their degree. Others left college without ever earning a diploma.

The next step: Landing a job.

While most agree that having a college degree and a good GPA are keys to getting prized jobs, those who didn't fare as well shouldn't give up. Jobs are available, though it might take some specialty training.

"Are they as competitive as someone who has above a 3.0, or can they go to work for some of the Fortune 500 companies? The answer to both is 'yes,' but it's much, much more difficult to get through the screening process," said Rusty Anderson, director of career services at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Jon Turner, a managing partner with Smith, Turner and Reeves, a CPA firm in Jackson, said his company doesn't hire candidates who have GPAs of less than 2.8. The first round of interviews begins with those who have a 3.5 GPA or higher.

"You might go down and look at somebody with a 3.0 to 3.5 that has very strong interpersonal skills or was very active in extracurricular activities, volunteer organizations or worked their way through college," Turner said.

The graduate with the higher GPA could earn \$2,000 a year more, just because companies are sometimes competing to hire them.

"It might warrant higher offers and starting bonuses and that type of thing," Turner said.

Dropping out of college limits options.

"A lot of doors will just be shut," Anderson said. "Those companies that come to our career fairs and those that are recruiting on campus, they require students to be completing a degree."

While exiting college early may create a roadblock, students can still earn money in other areas.

"Everybody doesn't have to have a four-year degree to do excellent in life and make good money," said Bob Mullins, Nissan senior manager for training and organizational development. "Some of us are technically oriented."

If those technical-minded people sign on to work at the Nissan plant in Canton, they could earn between \$14.15 and \$21 per hour for entry-level jobs in production or maintenance. After five years, those employees can earn between \$24.47 and \$28.49 an hour.

Rachel Whatley, branch director of the WIN Job Center in Jackson, said students opting out of college or those who leave without degrees may find better job opportunities and higher starting salaries if they are willing to undergo specific job training.

"We have many occupations that may require a certificate, or maybe they have to obtain a license," Whatley said.

After earning a commercial license, truck drivers can earn \$40,000 to \$45,000 a year. After earning additional training and getting a certificate, pharmacy technicians and those who collect blood for medical tests can both start out earning between \$8 to \$9 an hour.

Construction workers, welders and trim carpenters can start off earning \$10 to \$14. Those with computer training can work in office support jobs and earn \$22,000 to \$24,000 annually.

Since June, the Jackson WIN Job Center has gotten 1,706 listings, a figure that can vary from year to year. Whatley estimates about 35 to 40 percent of jobs listed at her center do not require a college degree.

Cliff Mitchell, general sales manager at Watson Quality Ford in Jackson, said he has a mix of employees. Some have college degrees. Some dropped out. Others never went.

His employees' salaries depend on their jobs and their performance. Some mechanics earn more than \$100,000 a year, but they had to undergo special training. Depending on how many cars they sell, some salesmen earn \$50,000 and up.

"I value education," said Mitchell, who has a business degree. "Every day I use some of the stuff I learned in college ... but there are some things colleges can't teach. People skills. People buy from people."

Enter Inez Walden.

She grew up in a poor family and got pregnant at 14. College wasn't an option, but she didn't let not having a degree close the door to success. Now 38, she has been at Watson Quality Ford for six years, and every month she's rated the top saleswoman. She makes more than six figures, but she still regrets not going to college.

"If I get out of the car business, I would have nothing else that I could lean on," she said. "It's hard to make that kind of money unless you've got a college degree."
