

NEWS BREAK

Article: **For the first time in 50 years, college grads are losing their edge**

Section: **BUSINESS, C11**

Sunday's News Break selects an article from **Sunday, February 22, 2026**, of The Seattle Times print replica for an in-depth reading of the news. Read the selected article and answer the attached study questions.

Feel free to adapt this lesson for your students. For instance, some educators may assign this as a homework task, while others might facilitate the reading and discussion of questions within small groups or larger class discussions.

****Please take a moment to review all NIE content before classroom use to ensure it is suitable for your students.****

Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1

- Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2

- Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

Learning Objectives:

After reading the article, students will be able to evaluate the shifting value of a four-year college degree compared to technical and trade education in an AI-driven economy.

Rather than seeing college as the only path to success, the article encourages a more nuanced look at how "blue-collar" and "white-collar" roles are swapping places in terms of stability and demand.

Pre-Reading Discussion:



- What do you think the article will be about, using this picture?
- Are there any clues? What can you infer?

Vocabulary Building:

Read this sentence, what do you think the highlighted words mean using *context clues*? A **context clue** is a word or words that are hints and refers to the sources of information outside of words that readers may use to predict the meaning of the word.

Now, with the stability of **white-collar** work in question as U.S. companies embrace artificial intelligence, federal data suggests that's beginning to change.

White-collar Guess:

White-collar Definition:

Comprehension Questions:

1. For nearly 50 years, research has shown that having a bachelor's degree or higher led to better employment prospects, from _____ to greater _____.
2. The unemployment gap between workers with bachelor's degrees and those with occupational associate's degrees — such as plumbers, electricians and pipe fitters — flipped in _____, leaving trade workers with a slight edge for six months out of the past year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
3. It's the first-time trade workers have had a leg up since the BLS started tracking this data in the _____.
4. This shift coincides with a broad reassessment of what the best career paths are in today's labor market, which economists have called one of the most vexing in generations — especially for whom?
5. What 2 things are prompting young people to consider alternative routes to economic prosperity?

6. Community colleges and blue-collar employers are trying to harness the rising interest in _____, amping up recruiting efforts aimed at young people.
7. The center's "Future of Good Jobs" report predicts that "economic opportunity will increasingly favor workers with higher levels of _____ and _____" in the next five years.
8. It puts the median pay of a "good job" at \$_____.
9. The last time workers with a high school education dominated the U.S. economy was in the _____, Strohl explained, when a decades-long manufacturing boom was winding down and computers had yet to transform the workplace.
10. The total average balance for U.S. student loan borrowers is estimated to be more than \$_____, according to the Education Data Initiative.
11. Anthropic's Dario Amodei has said he thinks AI will wipe out about _____ of entry-level white-collar roles in the next five years.

Class Discussion Questions:

- What surprised (or stood out to) you in the article?
- At first, I thought _____, but now I think _____?

Deeper-Dive "Connect & Explain" comprehension questions for small groups, entire classes or journal entries and/ or essay prompts for extended enrichment:

1. For 50 years, a degree was seen as "career insurance." Based on the data about the narrowing unemployment gap, is a degree still "insurance," or has it become a "luxury good"? Explain your reasoning using the 2025 BLS data from the text.
2. The article mentions a "stigma" (a mark of disgrace or being "less than") previously attached to blue-collar work. Why do you think society valued "turning a spreadsheet" over "turning a wrench"? How does the current \$48/hr wage for elevator repairperson challenge that old status symbol?
3. Caleb Clement says, *"I'm doing something new... I'm working with my hands, but I'm also working with my mind."* Does this "middle way" (high-tech blue-collar) appeal to you more or less than a traditional office job? Why?
4. The average student debt is \$42,600. If someone handed you that much money today on the condition that you *cannot* go to a 4-year college, what trade, certification, or business would you invest it in to ensure you're making \$82,000 (a "good job") by 2031?
5. Analyze the role of community colleges and dual-enrollment programs as described in the text. How do these institutions bridge the gap between "overdoing college for all" and providing "viable alternative pathways"? Argue about whether your own school district should prioritize vocational

training over AP/College Prep courses based on the current labor shortages in manufacturing and healthcare.

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