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The Make It Movement Wants You to Learn a Trade and Love What You Do

Can skilled jobs and career education change Texas culture?

BY BRANT BINGAMON, DECEMBER 27, 2019, NEWS

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The way Spence tells it, he and his partners didn't understand what they'd done at first. But eventually it became clear: Instead of shaming the citizens of the state into stopping their littering ways, they challenged their pride in Texas. Within three years, litter along roadways fell by 70%. Today, "Don't mess with Texas" is something we say at any hint of disrespect for our state. Maybe the slogan is only 34 years old, but it feels like we've been saying it since the Battle of the Alamo.

"So that was the inspiration for what we're trying to do now," Spence said, transitioning into a description of the "Make It Movement," his new mission encouraging Texans to find jobs they love. "Maybe instead of trying to legislate it or politicize it, we could use marketing, over time, as a force for good, to change the culture of 'us versus them' to more of a high-performing culture of 'us.' First step, I think, is the skilled worker area. Because no one says, 'I'm against that.'"

At its heart, the Make It Movement is a campaign promoting two-year degrees and career education so young people can enter well-paying jobs quickly and with little debt. But it's a lot more than that to Spence. As he conceives of it, the movement encourages young and old alike to ask an existential question – "What do I love to do?" – and then to find practical ways to turn the answer into a profession. He wants people to respect all labor and to feel good about their work. And when these lessons are learned on a wide scale, Spence thinks it could help heal the divisions in modern society and bring back a sense of civility last felt long ago.

Many Workers Left Behind

Make It addresses two interrelated developments that have hurt the middle class in recent decades: the decline of career education – once called "vocational education" – and the rise of school debt.

In the generation that came of age after World War II, mechanics, carpenters, and other tradespeople went directly from high school to jobs that paid so well that one worker could support a whole family. These tradesmen enjoyed positions of respect; their work had dignity. At the same time, the country viewed a college-educated workforce as a benefit not just to the individual but to society at large. Government grants and low tuition at state universities made college affordable.

But as the middle class began contracting in the late 1970s, so did its support for higher education. Grants began shrinking and tuition rose. Simultaneously, a shift in public opinion caused an erosion of respect for tradespeople and vocational education. The shop classes taught in high schools became associated with a practice known as "tracking": Students thought to have lower aptitudes were steered into these classes. Critics of tracking charged that vocational education was an instrument of racial discrimination and a dumping ground for students with behavioral issues. Educators turned away from the programs in the 1980s and 1990s.

This philosophy reached its logical conclusion with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which mandated that all students be held to the same academic standards. All students got the same classes and were tested regularly to ensure their uniform advancement, with the goal that all should attend four-year universities.

Today, 70% of young people begin four-year degrees, but almost half don't complete them. A third of those who graduate work in jobs that require only a high school diploma. And college debt sits at \$1.5 trillion, more than any other form of debt save mortgages. The average borrower owes \$37,000.

At ACC, Jobs of the Future

To revitalize career education, Make It is partnering with educators across the state. Dr. Richard Rhodes is one of these. As president and CEO of Austin Community College, he's been advocating for career education for years. ACC has a dozen campuses around Central Texas and an annual enrollment of 70,000 students. Many of its programs fit Make It's vision of empowering people to follow their dreams to well-paying jobs. "We're seeing greater emphasis on career and technical education, more so than I think we've ever seen before," Rhodes said, "in the introduction of Career Academies, P-TECHs, and a greater focus on jobs of the future. And we're working collaboratively in the development of those programs."

One of the newer programs Rhodes mentions – P-TECH – has caught the attention of educators statewide. P-TECH stands for "Pathways in Technology Early College High School." It's a six-year program where students take courses in high school and community college and then do job shadowing and mentorship on an industry provider's job site. When they finish their six years, many students move immediately into lucrative IT jobs, finding themselves in their early 20s with an annual salary of \$80,000 or more. Others continue their learning at a four-year university and wind up making even more.

"These students aren't guaranteed a job, but they're guaranteed an interview," Rhodes said. "But I'll tell you, the good thing about internships and job shadowing and mentoring is you know exactly who that person is before you hire them, and in cases like this, they're getting the best of the best."

ACC collaborates with 13 high schools and industry providers in its P-TECH programs, including IBM, Dynamic Manufacturing Solutions (now Ultra Clean Technology Austin), and the Governor's Consortium. But P-TECH is just the tip of the iceberg. ACC is also heavily invested in dual credit programs, career academies, and early college high schools. Students in early college high schools can get half the credits necessary for a four-year degree by the time they finish high school. Students in career academies can move directly from high school into jobs paying \$60,000 a year or more. In addition, most of these programs are geared toward underserved populations. They're the opportunities Roy Spence is eager to tell the world about.

Coaching Students Into Careers

Another partner working closely with Make It is the data-crunching nonprofit E3 Alliance. The E3 – Education Equals Economics – Alliance is the top data collector on public education in Texas. E3 shares its findings with schools, businesses, government agencies, and providers of student services to help students succeed. Susan Dawson, the president and executive director of E3, likes to say they're a "cradle to career" organization, but, like Rhodes, she has a special interest in smoothing the transition for students moving from high school to college.

Speaking with the precision one would expect from an expert on data, Dawson explains her current concern about enrollment in Central Texas colleges and universities. "The one metric that has not improved but in fact has consistently dropped for the last six years is postsecondary enrollment. It's a huge concern because we have other data that shows that if you don't have some kind of postsecondary credential within six years of when you graduate high school in Central Texas, you have just a 12 percent likelihood of having a living-wage job."

Dawson has total recall for data like this. She can tell you off the top of her head that two-thirds of all new jobs require some kind of degree or certification. She can list the many middle-wage jobs that can be had with a two-year degree, including dental hygienist (median annual salary: \$78,000), electrical engineering technician (median annual salary: \$61,000), and web developer (median annual salary: \$69,000).

One of the messages Dawson and Make It are trumpeting is the need for career coaches in high schools. As Dawson explains, high schools already have counselors, but their workloads average 500 students per counselor. "So while they want to help students understand what careers are out there and what college expectations are, they're also scheduling standardized tests and dealing with mental health and behavioral health issues, and disciplinary referrals, and all sorts of other things."

Change is on the horizon though. This year, the Texas Workforce Commission began funding what they call a "workforce specialist grant." These grants, currently in five school districts in Central Texas, put career counselors in high schools and middle schools. The concept could go statewide with money allocated by House Bill 3, the education bill passed this spring, which includes a provision called "College, Career, and Military Readiness Plans." Dawson said, "If a student by the fall after graduation enrolls in an institution of higher education, enters the military, or receives a career certification from a list that [the Texas Education Agency] manages – if a student

hits any of those three – then every low-income student who does that brings back \$5,000 to the district. Any non-low-income student brings back \$3,000. So you can imagine those dollars add up quickly. It's an incentive to bring just that kind of person into your school – a career counselor."

Dawson says the proposals by Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren to make community college free are great. But things like career coaching are even more important. "The bottom line is that many, many students can access community college essentially free anyway. Because if you're eligible for a Pell Grant, for instance, that more than pays for the cost of community college. The bigger thing is not just the finances but again that coaching, access to finances, support, so you know how to access getting into college in the first place."

"She Likes to Drive a Truck"

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Five minutes after meeting him, you've learned a lot about the origins of GSD&M. Five minutes more, and you've learned things about Bill Clinton, George Bush (both of them), Herb Kelleher, Willie Nelson, and Spence's parents and sisters. One story blends seamlessly into the next. And of course he's pitching you the whole time and maybe even pitching himself. Then suddenly, with no noticeable transition, he's talking about the first Make It commercial, which ran during the Texas-OU game on Oct. 12. In the commercial, paid for with help from Make It's partners – Dickies, Hunt Consolidated, and the Promiseland Project – young people perform the skills they've learned while salaries flash on the screen below.

"That woman in our spot, the truck driver, she makes \$64,000 a year. She likes to drive a truck." He pauses to let that sink in. "And we go, 'Yay!' instead of, 'What?!' Yay you, this is America! No one's too good and everyone's good enough. Go do your deal!"

He explains how commercials work. "We can't change behavior unless we change perception. I talk to community colleges all over the country. All the groups, the apprentice groups, the electrical contractors, they know how to teach and train. What they don't know how to do is market. 'I'm gonna be your air support.' That's why we ran in the Texas-OU game. And Alabama. It wasn't to hit the students, necessarily." His voice lowers. "School superintendents watch those games. Preachers watch those games. Parents watch those games. Leaders."

A Dwindling, Aging Workforce

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The construction industry in Texas is in a familiar place – it's booming. Scott Norman is the executive director of the Texas Association of Builders, a group representing makers of single-family homes across the state. He said, "Houston, I think, is the No. 1 single-family market in the country, and Dallas is No. 2 or 3; I think Austin is No. 7 or 8. So we have three of the top 10 in the nation," he said. "So there's great demand – and you combine that with a dwindling and aging workforce. The average age of an electrician in this state is something like 59; the average

age of a plumber is 62. So as those folks are getting older and grayer, we're not backfilling on the other end as fast as we need to."

Needless to say, Norman, like Rhodes and Dawson, is a proponent of career education, but with the same "and college" message. He said the shortage of licensed and unlicensed workers – plumbers, electricians, carpenters, stonemasons – is causing cost overruns. "We survey our members frequently and they say [that] because of the shortage in labor, it takes, on average, two to three months longer to build homes. It makes things more expensive for the buyer, obviously. But we hope by spreading the word [about] things that we're doing with the Make It Movement that kids, their parents, young adults, old adults, and everyone in between recognizes these opportunities are out there. These are high-paying jobs that are available to start very soon, either right out of high school or right after a year or two of technical training."

If good intentions, hard work, and inspiration are enough to bring the changes that Spence and his partners seek, then those changes are coming. If connection makes a community strong, then ours is stronger than we realize – because connection is at the heart of the work that people like Rhodes, Dawson, and Norman are doing. All three stay connected to public schools across the state. They collaborate with chambers of commerce and the Texas Workforce Commission. Dawson is in constant contact with providers of student services like College Forward, Breakthrough Central Texas, Con Mi MADRE, Capital IDEA, and many others. Rhodes works with the Austin Area Research Organization, Opportunity Austin, Samsung, United Way, and far too many more to list.

The partnership between these groups and Make It is in its infancy – the Make It website is still unfinished, for example – but they're eager to see what a GSD&M-level marketing campaign can do for students and businesses. And they share Spence's desire to lift up public discourse. "All of these skilled jobs are respectable jobs and bring pride and fulfillment to individuals working in them," Rhodes said. "My hope is that they break down this discourse that has not been healthy by providing pride and hope. You know, when people feel good that they can provide for their families, that brings a positive nature into the conversation."

Though Spence is still rhapsodizing, he is aware that the interview is winding down. The pitch changes; a bit of vulnerability creeps in. "So, I don't know, this is audacious. But I really want in some small way for America to be driven by purpose and not politics." His voice is soft and insistent and he stares into your eyes. "In some small way to be driven by values and not devaluing people. I want to also rebuild the idea that – I don't know. It's not perfect. But if we don't try to build a culture of 'us,' we won't do it. Right now we're trying to build a culture of 'us versus them.' And I am done with it. I am done with it."

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