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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Stop Calling It ‘Vocational Training’

How we speak about education reflects class prejudice.

By Virginia Foxx

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I know how it feels to be the only woman in a room of powerful men. I also know how it feels to be tuned out because of how I look or where I’m from. For these reasons I’m sympathetic to those who are passionate about changing culture for the better by promoting “inclusive” language. But the focus on inclusivity hasn’t extended to the way we talk about education.

Education has always been the key to opportunity in America, rightly called “the great equalizer.” But the sociologist Herbert Spencer once noted “how often misused words generate misleading thoughts.” By placing descriptors like “vocational” and “technical” in front of the word “education,” we generate misleading thoughts about the types of people who enroll in such programs.

Those who earn what people usually call vocational and technical degrees have long been viewed as inferior to those who graduate with a series of letters after their names. If you went to school to learn a trade, you must be lesser, because someone long ago decided that college should be called “higher” education. Considering the state of colleges and universities today, the word “higher” may be the most misleading of them all.

The way we speak about education is inherently classist. When a student of lesser means attends a traditional four-year school, we say she “overcame her circumstances.” When a student from a wealthy background chooses a trade school we say he didn’t “live up to expectations.” We are all but telling people that the trade jobs this country needs are dirty, and that skills-based education is for people without means or, much worse, without potential. We have perpetuated the idea that baccalaureate degrees and desk jobs are for middle-class and affluent people; community college and technical pursuits are for the poor.

I ended up with a series of abbreviations after my name because I wanted to teach. One of the few lessons that stuck with me from all the courses I took on the way to earning my Ed.D. came during a classroom discussion that sparked my passion for changing the way we talk about



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education. I'll never forget how the professor responded to a student who used the word "training." Training, the professor admonished, was for animals. Humans receive an education.

We can't keep speaking of people as if they are animals. Whether an individual acquires a skill credential, a bachelor's degree, a postgraduate degree or anything in between, it's all education. We

need to think about the words we use and why we use them if we are to break the stigma around all forms of education. If we don't, we will never overcome the abiding sense of inequality and unfairness that so many Americans feel.

Individual potential transcends all demographics. It's time that we speak honestly about the educational paths we set for Americans—and the paths they should be commended for choosing for themselves.

Ms. Foxx, a Republican, represents North Carolina's Fifth Congressional District.

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