

# HOW DO I FIND THE BEST NON-TRADITIONAL BLUE-COLLAR CAREER TRAINING PROGRAM?

THE FOLLOWING SERIES OF ARTICLES WERE PUBLISHED IN *PRIDE AND A PAYCHECK* FROM JANUARY THROUGH DECEMBER 2008. *Pride and a Paycheck* is a bi-monthly FREE newsletter for tradeswomen and friends as well as those women who are “thinking” about entering the blue collar trades. It includes photos, stories and poetry by tradeswomen themselves as well as tips from advocates who have been working hard to recruit women into these high paid, great benefits careers. To get on the email list, just email your request to [tradesis@aol.com](mailto:tradesis@aol.com) and start receiving support information and words of advice from tradeswomen who have been working in these jobs for many years. The geographical focus for most of the support organizations listed in *Pride and a Paycheck* is the San Francisco Bay Area; however the articles, poems and stories of tradeswomen’s “adventures”, span the entire country. *Pride and a Paycheck* is edited by Sue Doro (retired Machinist), author of “Blue Collar Goodbyes” and “Sugar String” with support from Madeline Mixer, (retired Region Nine Director, U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau). *Pride and a Paycheck* is distributed to more than 5000 tradeswomen, advocates, agencies and friends through the USA as well as Canada.



# HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TRAINING PROGRAM?

## HOW DO I FIND THE BEST NON-TRADITIONAL CAREER TRAINING PROGRAM?

January/February 2008 Number one in a series of six articles.

Dear Pride and a Paycheck,

I know what skilled non-traditional blue collar career I want to pursue. My problem is that I don't know which program would be the best for me. There are three programs in my area that offer this training. One in a non-profit, one is at a community college and there is also a union run apprenticeship program for my trade of choice. I would also be willing to move in order to go to the best program so that opens even more options and confuses me more. People move for college all the time so I don't see any reason not to try this strategy to find the non-traditional training program that would lead me in the best direction. What do you suggest I do to help narrow my choices and decide which program is the best one? How will I decide if any of them are any good? Thanks for your help.

Sincerely, Trying to Choose Tradeswoman



Dear Trying To Choose Tradeswoman,

Thanks for your letter. You raise two very important questions. In most places in the United States there are no programs focusing on non-traditional skilled blue collar careers for women. But, in some places there may be more than one program and programs of different types. And if you include moving as a possibility then you open up your options and the difficult choice making process even more. Even when there is only one training provider, it may or may not be worth your time. How does a woman decide? Your question opens up a great learning opportunity for our readers about choosing a training

program in situations where there is only one program or a choice of programs. There is a lot of information to cover about this process so we will be doing it in a series of articles in the next few issues of Pride and A Paycheck. We suggest you keep these issues so you can make sure you cover all the information and make the right tradeswoman training program decision. Thanks again sister for your great question!

First of all we want to clarify the role of Pride and A Paycheck in this process. While we want to help you with learning how to choose a training provider we want to make it clear that we don't recommend one specific program over another. This newsletter lists programs based on their requests to be listed and not on any other criteria. You'll find this list on the back of the newsletter. This is by no means a complete list so going on the internet, looking in phone books, contacting unions, companies, non-profits, schools and tradeswoman will be helpful in broadening your range of choices. Women should make sure they have the most choices as they begin the program selection process.

To get to the right choice for you we hope you consider the following information. Your future depends on it. People often say they just want to start a training program and not do the kind of detailed investigation we are outlining in this series of articles. Programs pressure women either with real or made up deadlines to start training before they are ready. You may have to speed things up for a real deadline like an upcoming apprenticeship test that is only offered once a year, but watch out for other types of so called deadlines that make you skip important stages in investigation. It could be better to miss a deadline than make a premature and wrong choice about training that you will live to regret. People want to start learning, earning and getting closer to their dream career rather than waiting to check things out about programs. People may also think there can't be that much difference between programs that teach about the same job so why take so much time investigating them? **ALL OF THESE STATEMENTS ARE HUGE MISTAKES IN THINKING AND BE CAREFUL THEY DON'T TRAP YOU. THESE INVESTIGATION SHORT CUTS ARE VERY DANGEROUS TO YOUR FUTURE! READ ON IF YOU THINK WE ARE EXAGGERATING THE IMPORTANCE OF INVESTIGATION!**

Here are some of the differences in outcomes from various programs that prove why a solid complete training program investigation process is the key to your future.

- \* You will drop out of some programs and finish with honors in others.
- \* You will be in a depressing job search of many months after some programs while you will be working the day after graduation in others.
- \* In some programs you will give up on trying to get the type of job you have been trained for because the reputation of your training provider in that industry is so bad that your diploma or certificate actually works against you and employers don't want people from that program. In other programs your diploma or certificate will mean a short interview as you beat out the other more experienced candidates for the job that don't have your highly valued credentials.
- \* You won't know how to do the work, handle sexual harassment or discrimination after you graduate from some programs and this will drive you out of the trades. You will graduate from other programs fully qualified both in the work and in how to deal with the problems women in non-traditional employment face so they don't get in the way of your career and job satisfaction.
- \* You will be making low wages with few benefits and career advancement opportunities after finishing some programs while others will give you jobs that will yield the lifestyle of your dreams and a great retirement!

These are the real outcomes of the right training provider choice. Take your time, be thorough and educate yourself as a training provider consumer and your future great career as a tradeswoman is pretty much a sure thing! On to your future!

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## HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TRAINING PROGRAM?

**Number two in a series of six. March/ April 2008**

### **BE A SMART SHOPPER!**

Before we continue, one cautionary note about the process of choosing a program is in order. While most programs are run on a very ethical basis, some are not. Public and private schools, non-profits and apprenticeship programs may all have recruiters that do their best to represent their program honestly and have your best interest at heart, while in other situations you may be dealing with someone that lies, exaggerates or covers up problems. People can have a wide variety of motives for doing these things. In some cases their own job security and promotions, the funding of their program, commissions or many other things may rest on their ability to recruit you at any cost to their honesty and your future.



Remember when you are dealing with recruiters, apprenticeship coordinators, counselors or program promoters you will run into many different kinds of people. Like any occupation these have their great representatives that can help you with your future in ways you'll never forget and also have their less admirable members that can make your future a nightmare. Beware of stereotypes about who you are dealing with based on what type of organization they come from. Just because a person comes from a private sector business run program, a union, a public or private school or non-profit does not automatically equal their integrity or the quality of their program so you have to use other criteria.

Think of your responses to these questions as you meet with program representatives. Do you trust the representative of the program? Do they answer your questions in a straight forward way or do they evade the question? Do they talk respectfully about other programs even though they think theirs is the best or do they harshly trash all of their competition? Do they state the facts in language you can understand or do they use a lot of terms you aren't familiar with and seem to talk in exaggerations? Do you feel like they are giving you adequate time to make your decision or are you getting high pressure sales tactics designed to get you to make a quick decision without enough evaluation time? Do they make you feel respected or do they make you feel like you are stupid and they are experts who should not be questioned? **Be a smart shopper! Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions and evaluate both the content and style of their responses - your future career depends on it!**

While the ethics and motives of the program representative are of concern to all women, it is also very important that you keep in mind that what turns out to be the best program for one woman's needs may not be the best for another woman. You may even make different program choices from other women that are very similar to you. The best choice for you is one which enables you to complete the program successfully and enter a great career and job as well as accomplish any other goals that you set.

So part of the decision-making process is figuring out what is important to **you** in order for you to be successful in a training program and environment as you look at how well a particular program matches your needs. You may prefer and do better than someone else if you have a certain type of classmate, teacher, curriculum, cultural or lifestyle sensitivity in a program, classroom environment etc. Matching the program in these ways is as important as making the match of what trade to pursue. Going after the right trade in the wrong program for you is a recipe for disaster. Some women do not pay enough attention to this part of the matching process. They only look at the type of career training being offered and not the environment and culture of the program. Some may end up dropping out of programs where they don't feel like they fit or get the services they need while others will find these same things are not a concern for them.

This is why there is no such thing as the universally best non-traditional training program for all women.

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## HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TRAINING PROGRAM?

**Number three in a series of six. May/June 2008**

### **HOW DOES THE PLACE "FIT" YOU?**



How do you get information about the feel of a place and how it fits you? You can get this information best by a first hand visit to the program, asking questions and observing a class as a guest. This will let you see the student population, the style of the instruction, the availability of tools and work stations as well as how well organized the program seems to be and the overall personality of the place. Some programs may be limited in their ability to handle visitors due to their policies, availability of personnel, safety concerns and insurance coverage requirements while others will be more than willing to do this. The ability to observe the program in action is an important part of your evaluation, but some very good programs may have limitations around this so you have to use other means of investigation if you can't see it in action.

It will be helpful if you can talk to current students, former graduates and employers that have hired people from the program. These types of references are extremely important although in the case of graduates and employers you will be getting that information from the training provider representative so there may be a bias in what information is given to you. For example, you may not find out if a lot of women have dropped out of the program or if some major companies in that line of work don't want to hire the graduates because the training is substandard.

Again it would be great to have these discussions, but their results should be integrated along with other considerations before you come to your final conclusion. Remember choosing a training provider is an investigation process not a single point of investigation!

Another factor you may want to know is how much specific experience the program has with women and how important that is to you. Keep in mind that many training programs are just starting to recruit and serve women. You may be a pioneer helping them develop their training. Some women will like to be in this potentially influential role while others will want a tried and true program to spend their time in. Some of the signs of how woman friendly a program is can be found in the answers to the following questions.

Do they go out of their way to recruit women or do they just accept them if women come to them? Does their curriculum include things that will specifically help a lot of women? For example, while some women are perfectly strong enough for their trades and even stronger than many of their male co-workers, it is a common problem that many other women will need body building and exercise to increase upper body strength or to work on the parts of their bodies that will be put to most use in that trade in order to work fast enough and satisfactorily without injury.



Does the program offer anything like an exercise plan as part of its classes and curriculum or will you have to figure it out yourself? Does the program curriculum teach women how to identify and deal with sexual harassment and discrimination? Does it offer assertiveness training? Does the program offer on-site or other childcare assistance? Some programs have been outstanding in making their curriculums and services address issues of particular concern to most women while others haven't done a thing, but may still want you as a student. You will not be as well prepared and may risk harassment, injury, a lack of career advancement or your job retention if the program has not specifically considered the needs of women in the trades they are teaching.

What information about program outcomes exists in writing? Beware of important things that are told to you, but never appear in print in the brochure, fact sheet or catalog. These things may or may not be true. Does the program print information about how many women it serves or does it just list all students? Does it have any information on the types of students by age or other demographics? What percentage of people and women specifically complete the program? Does it track wages in employment by gender? Remember women in the trades have shorter job retention than men and sometimes lower pay because of harassment, discrimination, not being trained equally, being given the worst jobs etc. and these same things can cause poor retention and other bad outcomes for women in training programs. Not all programs keep a distinct set of statistics about women, but they should and some do unless they are prevented by backward policies that are beyond their control. If they don't track these outcomes how do training providers know how well they are doing with women in their program? **A separate set of retention and outcome statistics for women is one indicator to what degree a program really cares about women in non-traditional employment.**

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## HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TRAINING PROGRAM?

**Number four in a series of six. July/August 2008  
UNDER CONSTRUCTION!**

Looking at the outcomes of the training may require more investigation than you think. How many people and women get hired into training related jobs? It is important to distinguish the number of people that get hired into any job from those that go from training to a training related job. Some unprincipled programs will make claims about hires that include all people that are working in any job whether or not it was the training that opened the door for them. You want to know that the training really paid off and not just that people are working.

What is the range of pay of the graduates? What is the median range of pay and not just the average? One very highly paid graduate can result in misleading information if you don't have the median pay range. What percentage of people are getting jobs with benefits, vacation pay, retirement etc? What quality of these benefits are they getting? What type of healthcare (co-pay can be a killer), how much vacation, what kind of retirement contributions do their employers make? Again getting the most specific median information and not just general statements is your goal. Don't be surprised if all programs don't have this specific information in writing, but ask for it and give extra points in your decision making to programs that do well with statistics gathering.

You are going to spend a lot of time as a student. You need to know something about the teachers. Try and talk with and see specifically the teacher that you will have and not just any teacher or class. It's important you feel good about them. How available are the instructors outside of class for questions and help? What are the qualifications of the instructors?

Even if they are very qualified if you really don't like them you will have a hard time learning from them. Did the teacher work in the industry they are training about and how long ago? How long have they been with the school? How much turnover is there in the instructors? In some very good skilled blue collar trades programs the teachers will not have degrees or teaching certificates or current licenses for their trade, but they may have lots of on the job experience. In some cases this will be better than the book knowledge while in others it may be limiting them to one way of doing the work. You need to see whether their on the job experience translates into them being able to teach in a way that you can follow and that gets people good jobs.

Lots of people can do jobs really well, but training other people to do them is a separate skill that they may or may not have. You'll get this by seeing them teach, talking with the teachers, students and graduates and by and looking at the statistical data about their graduates. Compare the instructors in various programs on all these levels as you make progress toward your decision.

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# HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TRAINING PROGRAM?

Number five in a series of six. September/October 2008

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO PLAY DETECTIVE!**



How do you get information about the feel of a place and how it fits you? You can get this information best by a first hand visit to the program, asking questions and observing a class as a guest. This will let you see the student population, the style of the instruction, the availability of tools and work stations as well as how well organized the program seems to be and the overall personality of the place. Some programs may be limited in their ability to handle visitors due to their policies, availability of personnel, safety concerns and insurance coverage requirements while others will be more than willing to do this. The ability to observe the program in action is an important part of your evaluation, but some very good programs may have limitations around this so you have to use other means of investigation if you can't see it in action.

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**NOTE: More about choosing training programs** (Submitted by Jack Geary, Geary and Associates, Santa Rosa CA)  
A school should publish the names of graduates, starting salary and name & address of the employer. Contact at least three graduates and three employers. Be careful about paying for the entire program upfront – for example, pay in four installments. Avoid signing papers that enable a school to receive all the funds upfront from a funding source. Once you sign, you may be on the hook if you decide to withdraw from the training or the school closes. Visit the school and sit in or observe one of more classes for one or more days. Finally, talk to one or more vocational counselors who have used the school.

# HOW DO I FIND THE BEST TRAINING PROGRAM?

Number six in a series of six. November/December 2008

## “YOU’RE TRAINED! NOW WHAT?”

**What job assistance help does the program give to women after the training?** Do they have staff working on this as a major part or as all of their job duties or are you on your own once the training is complete? These people are often called job developers or placement specialists. What do they do if you can't get a job after a long job search? What services do they have to help you once you've become employed? Can you call them for advice on retention related or technical issues? Do they offer any post-employment skills retraining and upgrading services? If the job is terrible will they help you find another one or do they only help you once? Is their help time limited? How long does it last? Don't expect a perfect and positive answer to all of these questions (it would be suspicious if you got that), but do ask them so you can put the answers in your sorting bin on the way to your training decision.

**No training program is perfect.** But if you are comparing them you should make a check list of the things from this article that are most important to you and compare them with what each program offers. A thorough comparison chart can be helpful in this process so you can see the various features of the program compared side by side. It is also good to tell the representatives of programs which you are rejecting why you favor another program and see what they have to say in response. Sometimes they will say things you've never thought of and you have to go back to your program of initial preference and revisit your ranking order.

While all of these criteria can be helpful; whether or not you are thinking of relocating for training, there are some other criteria you should think about in specific terms for relocation evaluations. **It can be difficult to investigate programs thoroughly from long distance.** Make sure you use as much of the criteria stated in this series as possible. Long distance investigation also doesn't tell you what the place is like where the training facility is located. It is one thing if you are thinking of moving for a three month program and quite another if it is for a four year apprenticeship. **In the case of a long term move,** visiting the place for at least a week if possible (while you are on vacation or between semesters) could be one of the best things you can do. You might not be able to afford to do this or not be able to do it for other reasons.

If you can't go first hand before you apply for the program you will usually have to go for an interview, assessment or testing prior to being accepted for the program. **Try and arrive a few days early to get more time to check things out.** The degree of difference between where you are now and where you might be going should be taken into account especially in prolonged training situations like multi-year apprenticeships. Some programs will offer relocation assistance. This can be a real plus for a newcomer. Check out the city on the internet. Read its newspapers. See if the Chamber of Commerce or local visitors and convention agency has a new resident packet or other information. Make sure you think about things like comparing the cost of living and the existence of other things that are important to your preferences, identity, values and lifestyle. If you are moving long term with children, spouse, partner or friend a whole other group of considerations comes into play. **You will want their support while you are in training and how they react to their new home may be as important to your success as the training itself.**

This series has attempted to make you more successful as you decide about being trained in the trades. We look forward to your feedback on these articles and to learning about your positive and negative experiences about choosing a training provider. We'll compile these responses for a future update to this piece. Tradesisters! We wish you the best as you train in your blue collar career. **Making a big difference in your life, in the lives of others, in the world of work and Future Tradeswomen!**

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**WE HOPE THAT THIS SERIES HELPS MORE WOMEN ENTER THE BLUE-COLLAR**

**“NEW TRADITIONAL” TRADES.**