

## NATION / WORLD

# Experts doubt 'college for all' need

**Benefits don't always outweigh cost, some say**

By Alan Scher Zagier

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — In a town dominated by the University of Missouri's flagship campus and two smaller colleges, higher education is practically a birthright for high school seniors like Kate Hodges.

She has a 3.5 grade-point-average, a college savings account and a family tree teeming with advanced degrees. But in June, Hodges is headed to the Tulsa Welding School in Oklahoma, where she hopes to earn an associate's degree in welding technology in seven months.

"They fought me so hard," she said, referring to disappointed family members. "They still think

I'm going to college."

The notion that a four-year degree is essential for real success is being challenged by a growing number of economists, policy analysts and academics. They say more Americans should consider other options such as technical training or two-year schools. They pose a fundamental question: Do too many students go to college?

"College is what every parent wants for their child," said Martin Scaglione, president and chief operating officer of work force development for ACT, the Iowa-based nonprofit best known for its college entrance exam. "The reality is, they may not be ready for college."

President Barack Obama wants to restore the country's status as

the world leader in the proportion of citizens with college degrees. The U.S. now ranks 10th among industrial nations, behind Canada, Japan, Korea and several European countries.

But federal statistics show that just 36 percent of full-time students starting college in 2001 earned a four-year degree within that allotted time.

"A four-year degree in business — what's that get you?" asked Karl Christopher, a placement counselor at the Columbia Area Career Center vocational program. "A shift supervisor position at a store in the mall."

Roughly 1,200 students from central Missouri take classes at the career center, supplementing their core high school courses with specialized training in automotive technology, culinary arts,



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**Travis Wainscott, 17, practices welding at the Columbia Area Career Center certified welding program in Missouri last week.**

animal science, robotics, electrical wiring and more.

Hodges craves independence and has little patience for fellow students who seem to wind up in college more from a sense of obligation than anything else.

"School is what they've been doing their whole lives," she said.

"So they just want to continue."

Ohio University economics professor Richard Vedder blames the cultural notion of "credential inflation" for the stream of unqualified students into four-year colleges. His research has found that the number of new jobs requiring college degrees is less than the number of college graduates.

For many, the dream of earning a college degree — and the social acceptance that comes with that accomplishment — trumps a more analytical, cost-benefits approach.

Scaglione suggested that nothing short of a new definition for educational success is needed to diminish the public bias toward four-year degrees. He advocates "certification as the new education currency — documentation of skills as opposed to mastering curriculum."