



Written by [Salena Zito](#) on June 7, 2023

Mike Rowe Is on a Mission to Reverse the ‘Unspeakable Stupidity’ of Devaluing Work

A few months ago, Mike Rowe stumbled upon a 2011 video of himself speaking in front of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee during the Obama administration about the mindset of government toward skilled trades. His argument was that skilled trades were the key to saving our economy, not those jobs that require a four-year degree.

His argument fell on deaf ears.

So he went again in April of 2014, this time testifying before the House Committee on Natural Resources to discuss the opportunities for skilled trade workers in the energy industry. This time he brought props, specifically the poster his guidance counselor from high school pointed to when he tried to bully Rowe into picking a high-priced university over a community college his senior year.

Rowe said he had nothing against college, but the universities his counselor recommended were expensive. “I had no idea what I wanted to study. I thought a community college made more sense, but Mr. Dunbar said a two-year school was ‘beneath my potential,’” explained Rowe.

“Mr. Dunbar pointed to a poster hanging behind his desk; on one side of the poster was a beaten-down, depressed-looking blue-collar worker. On the other side was an optimistic college graduate with his eyes on the horizon. Underneath them, the text read: Work Smart NOT Hard,” Rowe told the committee.

“Mike, look at these two guys,” Mr. Dunbar said. “Which one do you want to be?”

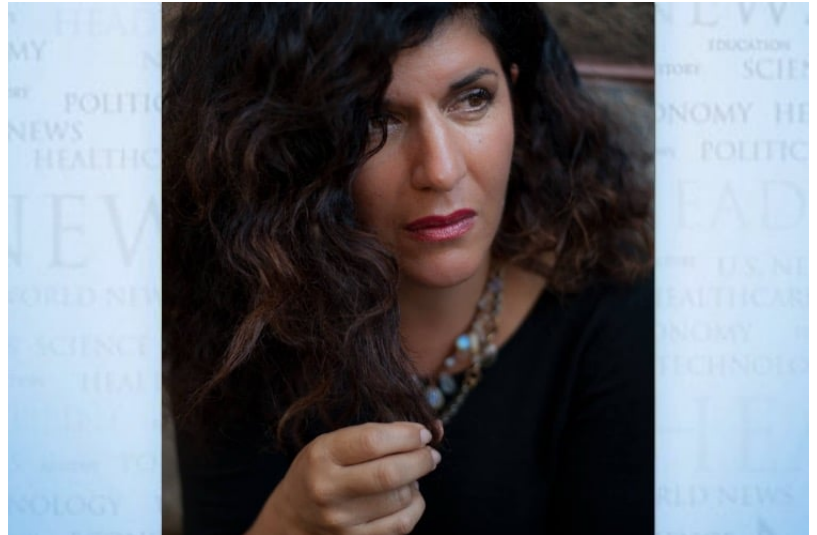
“I had to read the caption twice. Work Smart NOT Hard?” Rowe recounted.

The visual was jarring, not to mention insulting, yet once again, nothing happened.

Rowe made his final plea to Congress in March of 2017 when he once again schlepped to Capitol Hill, this time for the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education. He discussed how Career and Technical Education (CTE) can help close the skills gap and empower students to succeed, and he stressed the need to reform the current law.

His message was simple: Career and technical education, and skilled trade professions, need a PR makeover and a champion. “If you want to make America great again, you’ve got to make work cool again,” he said.

“So, my point to Congress was we just have to get people to think differently about the definition of a



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good job. And we need to put better examples of real people out there who are prospering as the result of learning a trade,” he said.

“We just shot seven or eight PSAs a couple months ago with people who we helped through the trade scholarship fund at the foundation. HVAC workers, plumbers, welders, all making six figures, and I am going to put these PSAs out there in the same spirit of those ads that made people think differently about conservation, and we are going to make people think differently about work,” he said.

The spots are pitch perfect. The first one with Chloe Hudson begins with Rowe dispelling the notion that you cannot make six figures working with your hands. It then cuts to Hudson, a welder who received a work ethic scholarship from mikeroweWORKS and went on to earn six figures a year, talking about the beauty of her life.

“I’m going to raise whatever I have to, I’m going to spend whatever I have to get these examples front and center. So that’s what I’ve got. In a way, it’s nothing new. In another way, it’s me finally saying, ‘Look, this was a good idea 10 years ago, and why not me?’ I’ll do it. I’m going to do it,” Rowe says with his characteristic charm that has endeared him to millions for more than 20 years.

Rowe said people really need to acknowledge the “unspeakable stupidity” of taking shop classes out of high schools 40 years ago. “The unintended consequences of that alone have been unraveling in ways that’s just mind-boggling. We effectively removed from view an entire category of vocations,” he said.

“In the long history of stupidity, you’d have to go a long way to find something dumber than universally removing shop class from high school. But of course, at the same time we did that, we started telling that same generation of kids that the best path for the most people was the most expensive path,” he said of the idea that higher education is the only path to success.

Which brings Rowe to wonder: Were they intentionally telling students who went into trades that they were achieving lower education?

It should make us wonder as well: Who did these decision-makers think was going to take care of their plumbing, fix their car, install their air conditioning, repair their furnace or rewire their house?

Rowe said he knows he is not going to open the eyes of the varsity blues crowd. “I can’t. They’re not persuadable. But there are a lot of people in the middle, a lot of people that just want to feel better about the possibility of exploring a career. So that’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to take my own advice. I’m going to stop telling Congress what to do, and I’m going to do it myself,” he said.

Salena Zito is a CNN political analyst and a staff reporter and columnist for the Washington Examiner. She reaches the Everyman and Everywoman through shoe-leather journalism, traveling from Main Street to the beltway and all places in between. To find out more about Salena and read her past columns, please visit the Creators Syndicate webpage at www.creators.com.

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