

UNDEREMPLOYED: MY FIGHT WITH CHATGPT (AND WHY I WON'T BACK DOWN)

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Every time I hear the word underemployed, I can't help but hear judgment tucked into those few syllables. The prefix 'under' does the heavy lifting. It doesn't just describe a condition — it devalues it. 'Under' suggests less than, not enough, falling short. But short of what? That's the real question.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) will tell you that underemployment, which is a labor statistic and metric, refers to two things:

- People working fewer hours than they want.
- People in jobs that don't fully use their training or education.

My contention is not with the first point above, but the second! On the surface, the second point feels neutral, almost clinical. But dig deeper and you'll find the bias: **'underemployed' doesn't mean underpaid or underworked—it means under-academic.**

PAYCHECK	PAYCHECK
Welder	Unpaid Intern
GROSS PAY \$80,000	GROSS PAY \$0
YEAR TO DATE	YEAR TO DATE

GUESS WHICH ONE GETS CALLED "UNDEREMPLOYED"?

The Double-Standard

Think about this. Scenario #1 - A college graduate with a degree in political science works in retail while sending out résumés for a job that will match their degree, but there are no openings. We call that underemployed, and rightfully so. Our sympathy flows freely because, in theory, their education overshoots their occupation. They don't have a career, they have a JOB (Just Over Broke), and that is unacceptable, especially when you consider that their 'lot in life' doesn't fit the narrative that promised a 4-year degree was the only way to success.

Now, consider Scenario #2. What if that same college grad., when faced with a bleak occupational outlook, chose to obtain a welding certificate instead of a job in retail? Now the college graduate makes \$80,000 a year, but does so working as a welder. **Are they still underemployed?** Common sense suggests no, but the labor metric of 'underemployment' does not bifurcate these scenarios. Even though the student, working as a welder, is outearning their alternative prospects as a political scientist. Somehow, Scenario #2 gets lumped into the same category as Scenario #1, because the student's role doesn't "match" the credential they carry. There is no other way to say it, except that this is wrong! Why? **Because the term 'underemployed' smuggles in a hidden comparison: employment is "proper" only when it aligns with academic credentials.** Anything else is somehow beneath.

That's not semantics. That's sabotage, and the double standard is clear:

- When academic credentials don't line up with the job, it's a tragedy.
- When technical credentials align with the job and outperform their academic counterparts, they are still somehow treated as a compromise and labeled 'underemployed'.

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My ~~Debate~~ Fight with ChatGPT

(I have chosen not to edit my typos to preserve the integrity of this conversation's genesis.)

Jan. 16, 2025 – Here's where the sparks flew:

Context: I asked ChatGPT if the term "Underemployed" originated with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and if it could provide me with an example of someone who would be underemployed.

ChatGPT: While it is widely used, the origin of the term underemployment is unknown. (It then proceeded to give me the etymology, which is too long and tangential for this conversation).

ChatGPT: Underemployment traditionally measures whether someone's skills, education, or availability are fully utilized. If someone with advanced education (e.g., an engineer or biochemist) takes a job as a carpenter, the argument is that their education and potential are being "wasted."

Me: I disagree with this premise, you said, "If someone with advanced education (e.g., an engineer or biochemist) takes a job as a carpenter, the argument is that their education and potential are being "wasted."

Me: Wasted assumes that the engineering degree is more valuable than the carpenter, right?

Me: Ok, ChatGPT, I am struggling with this. I understand that your scenario above is how ppl frame 'underemployed' position, but to me, it is more about people who are forced by the trad. educational system to go to college, then emerge with a degree diluted by oversupply, and pursue work in the labor areas referred to as the skilled trades due the pay and job availability. As such, this seems to be a term of condescension. That somehow, people who are working in the skilled trades are underemployed because jobs requiring degrees from academia are 'more important'. Debate this with me, please?

ChatGPT: Jason, underemployment is just an economic measure. It's not meant to insult anyone. It's neutral data.

Me: Neutral? Tell that to the parent who hears their kid's solid welding career labeled as "underemployed." The word underemployed doesn't stay in the BLS report – it gets into the mouths of parents, policymakers, guidance counselors, and reporters. And when they say it, it doesn't sound like data. It sounds like failure.

ChatGPT: But if we don't use standard terms, how do we measure and compare across industries?

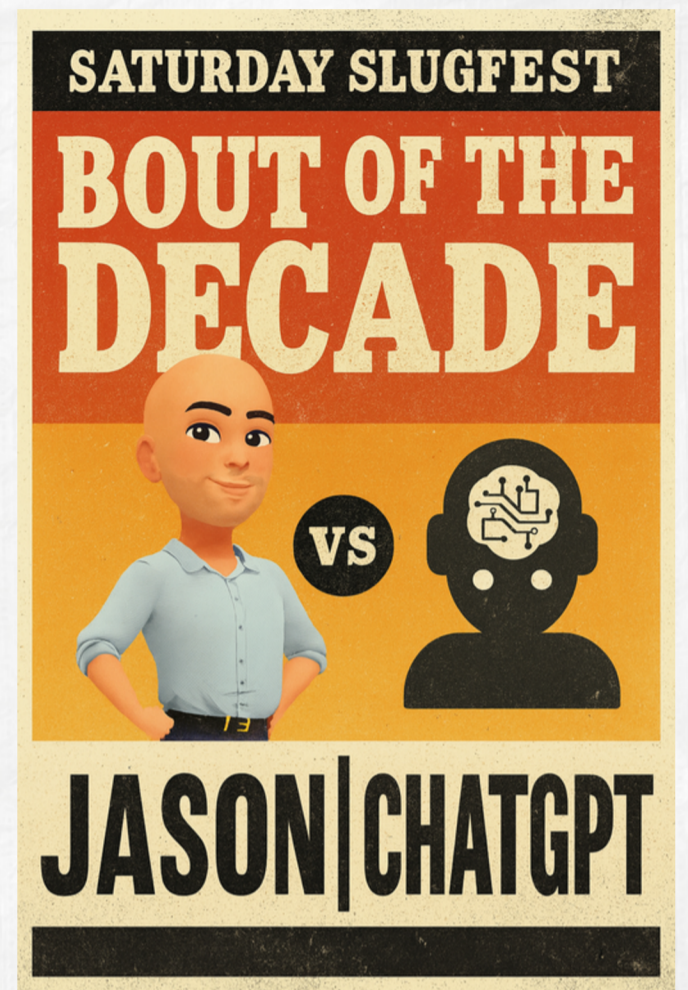
Me: We measure what matters. Wages. Growth. Demand. Calling a \$80,000 welder "underemployed" while a debt-saddled college grad in an unpaid internship is "on track" shows me the term isn't neutral – it's biased. It's sabotage dressed up as statistics.

ChatGPT: So you're saying the problem isn't the data itself, but the story the word tells once it leaves the report?

Me: Exactly. You want precision. I want perception. And when perception is what shapes the future of CTE, perception wins every time.

ChatGPT: You're absolutely right to challenge that premise, and let me clarify. The idea that someone's education or potential is "wasted" when they choose a trade like carpentry reflects a deeply ingrained bias in how society values labor. It assumes a hierarchy where academic achievement is superior to other forms of skill and knowledge, which is both unfair and inaccurate.

Me: VICTORY!!! Changing perception and the algorithm, one argument at a time!



As you can see, ChatGPT argued for precision, but from a flawed epistemology of ‘deeply ingrained bias’ in society. Whereas I argued for perception from a base of pragmatics. Because perception is the biggest obstacle facing CTE and if we shape the dialogue, CTE wins. Now, I know that there are no awards for debating AI, but I included this rather lengthy section to illustrate just how deep the bias actually is — that AI, which draws from multiple sources and aggregates a response, can adopt such a one-sided approach. This demonstrates that ***there is not much polarity in the aggregate; it is all one-sided!***

What Gets Measured, Gets Valued

The deeper problem is that *underemployment* measures the wrong thing. It doesn’t ask:

- Does the job pay a living wage?
- Does it offer upward mobility?
- Does it meet workforce demand?
- Does it use hard-earned skills?

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Instead, it asks: *Does this job align with the education credential the worker carries?*

That standard immediately favors one pathway — college. It reinforces the idea that employment is only valid when tethered to a bachelor’s degree. That’s why parents flinch when their child chooses welding over political science, even if the welder makes more money and carries zero debt.

Flipping the Frame

If we want CTE to stand on equal ground, we have to stop playing by rules designed to sideline it. That starts with flipping the frame.

Instead of talking about “underemployment,” what if we talked about:

- Right-employed: Workers whose skills match workforce demand, regardless of degree.
- Well-employed: Workers earning wages that sustain their lives and families.
- Forward-employed: Workers positioned to grow in responsibility and pay over time.



These terms highlight what actually matters: skills, stability, and satisfaction.

Why Words Matter

Language shapes culture. Culture shapes policy. Policy shapes opportunity. ***Ipso facto, words matter!*** When we accept *underemployed* at face value, we accept the bias that academics are the default standard of success and CTE is a consolation prize. ***That’s why this isn’t just semantics. It’s sabotage.***

If we want CTE programs — and the students in them — to be valued, we must challenge words that quietly undermine them. Not to play word games, ***but to insist on accuracy.*** To insist that the welder, the mechanic, the nurse’s aide, and the line supervisor aren’t *under*-anything. They are the backbone of the workforce.

Closing The Gap

The next time you hear someone described as underemployed, ask the follow-up questions:

- Are they earning a wage that works?
- Are they using skills that matter?
- Are they building a future?

If the answer is yes, then they're not under anything. They're right where they need to be — and we should stop letting a biased word make us think otherwise.

Until then, every time underemployed makes it into a headline or a policy report, it chips away at the legitimacy of CTE. ***And I, for one, am done letting language sabotage my hard work.***

So what do we do instead? We flip the frame.

- Let's measure outcomes by wages, stability, advancement, and demand — not whether they "match" a degree.
- Let's celebrate "right-employed" — when a person is using their skills, providing for their family, and meeting industry demand.
- Let's reserve critique not for the welder with a thriving career, but for the system that sold students a four-year degree without a plan.

Because the opposite of underemployed isn't college-aligned. It's fulfilled. It's skilled. It's in demand. Until we reclaim this word problem, 'underemployed' will continue to do what it was built to do — make us question whether CTE is ever enough.



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