

Encouraging Students to Dream Big, Plan Accordingly Spurs Economic Development



By Phil Harrington

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As Baby Boomers retire and Millennials become the majority of the workforce, employers are grappling with major skills shortages. These multigenerational workforce issues and other shifts in the employment landscape are causing industries to experience unprecedented challenges in attracting the number of workers they need with the skill sets required to be successful. It's no exaggeration to say that our nation's economic development is in jeopardy, and I believe investing in Career Technical Education (CTE) is the answer.

An Integrated Approach

Advance CTE defines CTE as a form of education that provides students of all ages with the academic and technical skills, knowledge and training necessary to succeed in future careers and to become lifelong learners.¹ I applaud CTE's integrated approach that includes hands-on learning in the classroom as well as work-based learning, because these experiential learning opportunities can fast-track students to middle- and high-skill, high-demand careers.

CTE acknowledges and embraces the fact that in today's world, most high school students will need to pursue some form of postsecondary education or training in order to compete in the workforce. But we've seen that a "one-size-fits-all" approach simply doesn't work because, after all, traditional, four-year college isn't for every student or every career path. CTE celebrates the many education and training options that are available to students following high school, including two-year programs, industry credentialing programs and, of course, the traditional four-year degree.

Student-Centered CTE = Success for All

I've observed an uptick in the number of CTE programs that are centered on individualized student career and education plans, and I couldn't be more pleased. Leading

experts tell us that self-knowledge is at the top of the list of competencies that are appropriate for high school students as they begin the career development process². So it behooves CTE programs to help students identify their career interests and values at the outset.

Research-based career assessments that are aligned to the National Career Clusters® Framework — such as Kuder's — enable students to explore occupations, pathways and related education and training options based on their personal results. CTE takes this discovery process to the next level by finding that sweet spot where students' interests and values intersect with industry needs and trends. Students' dreams take flight when exploration turns to interaction, and when applying what they learn initiates the process of making decisions and setting goals for the future. It's a formula that capitalizes on students' interests and aspirations, and spurs economic development at the very same time, forming the ultimate talent pipeline. And it's a formula that's becoming a model for success, as encouraging students to dream big and plan accordingly can deliver major returns on investment for economic development.

CTE in Action

No matter where I travel throughout the United States, I see great examples of CTE programs that are connecting abstract concepts from students' academic coursework to the "real" world of work, incorporating STEM, and fostering employability (or "soft") skills critical to 21st-century jobs. These programs encourage and even incentivize students to be engaged, stay in school and complete their education with a rock-solid plan in hand for their next steps in life. Best of all, these CTE programs expose students to possibilities they may never have even imagined for themselves. It's a real gift, as secondary students who avail themselves of CTE can leverage its low-risk, high-yield returns when they try a career on for size.

¹ (2017, February 16). Retrieved from <https://www.careertech.org/cte>

² Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. A. (2016). *Career development interventions in the 21st century*. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson Education

Kuder has been a longtime participant in a local School-to-Work (STW) program at Waukee High School – Newsweek Magazine’s 2015-16 Top High School in Iowa – both as an employer partner and online career planning system provider. Waukee runs an outstanding program; year in and year out, our experience never fails to reinforce our belief in and commitment to CTE. Following an intensive career development course focusing on resume prep, workplace etiquette and interviewing skills, Waukee STW students apply for and are placed in college-level internships at a variety of local business partner sites based on their Kuder assessment results. In a recent survey of current Waukee STW students and graduates from the past five years, 97 percent said they would recommend a work-based learning program to their peers. One student said the program, “puts you way ahead of everyone entering college. When people look at my resume they say, ‘whoa, how did you get that job in high school?’”



Our current STW intern, a senior who plans to major in international business this fall, recently penned an article for our company blog in which she reported that within her first six weeks at Kuder, her self-confidence had increased. She also shared that many of her peers appreciated the exploratory aspect of the STW program as it afforded them the opportunity to identify — as well as eliminate — potential career paths. As a parent, I can get behind the idea of encouraging students to rule a career in or out before investing in postsecondary education, especially when the prospect of accumulating student debt is a legitimate concern for so many. Certainly it can be argued that students who are career-ready are in a better position to avoid debilitating student loan debt than students who are plagued with indecision related to their future.

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The CTE Ecosystem

To me, being a CTE advocate means that I’m committed to helping students realize their dreams, but I’m also committed to helping employers satisfy their need to fill jobs with talented employees. I don’t see the point of preparing students for future careers without proactively engaging a major stakeholder in their future success. Like any healthy ecosystem, it’s about fostering interactions and interconnectedness. When employers’ needs coincide with candidates’ skill sets and goals, there is synergy. I would also argue that we are doing a disservice to students when we send them off to college or the workforce without fully preparing them for the realities they will face after high school. Students need to gain self-knowledge to harness their passions and dreams, and then build viable skills that will put those passions and dreams to work in the new economy.

Understandably, most employers aren’t in a position to administer on-the-job training for medium- and high-skill jobs, so they depend on a steady flow of candidates with the know-how to hit the ground running. We’ve seen what happens when there is a disconnect between student skills and employer needs, and while the root causes are complex, CTE offers a clear path to a sustainable solution. CTE programs teach students job skills in an applied learning context where they can make tangible connections between school and career. I’m proud that CTE programs throughout the country integrate Kuder into the curriculum, because when students unlock the power of their own potential and gain relevant, portable workforce skills, they’re well on their way toward a better future — and the economy flourishes.