

Vocational Education Demands a Paradigm Shift

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Intro

While working as lead communicator & marketer for the Department of Construction Science at Texas A&M University, I had the opportunity to attend a Strategic Planning Summit that hosted industry leaders, senior faculty, and students from the department. The goal of this summit was to assess the growing needs of the construction industry and vision cast the department's future in hopes of meeting such needs.

While many topics were discussed, there was a continuing emphasis on the lack of skilled tradespeople entering the industry paired with an overabundance of Project Managers/industry leaders. Within the past 20, American educators have experienced a drastic increase in emphasis on post-secondary four-year education. When in reality, this may not be a student's most economically sound or ideal route for their desired lifestyle. A high school structure focused almost solely on advanced academic success ostracizes entire demographics of students including kinesthetic learners or students suffering from learning disabilities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 575,000 young persons dropped out of high school between October 2019 and October 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). That statistic in conjunction with the 67.2 percent of recent high school graduates not enrolled in college (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), begins to raise the question, is the United States education system preparing our students adequately for today's globalized economy or simply creating efficient standardized test takers?

I submit that the U.S. and its education system is in need of a new paradigm. Not every high school student needs to go to college and earn a baccalaureate degree. A college degree is not the only road to success. A career in the technical fields has as equal potential for a fulfilling and financially rewarding life. Rather than merely learning academic fundamentals, "high schools need to be the places where we start teaching life skills," Senator Mike Braun said (Wilson, 2021). The literature and recent legislation indicate that many educators and scholars, as well as many legislators, share this opinion.

Vocational Education

Addressing the need for vocational education in American school systems, Michael Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, said, "A better approach for many young people would be to develop coherent

pathways beginning in high school, into authentic technical education options at the postsecondary level (Whitmire, 2019). But, right now, 81 percent of high school students are taking an academic route; only 19 percent are “concentrating” in career and technical education.”

Vocational education, according to the 1990 Perkins Act, is defined as “organized educational programs offering a sequence of courses which are directly related to the preparation of individuals in paid or unpaid employment in current or emerging occupations requiring other than a baccalaureate or advanced degree” (National Center for Education Statistics). In short, vocational education’s core goal is to equip students with skills to work in a particular field after high school (Kelly, 2021).

By government standards, secondary vocational courses are currently distinguished by three different classifications: consumer and homemaking education, general labor market preparation, and specific labor market preparation (National Center for Education Statistics). These courses can either be found in standard comprehensive high schools, area vocational schools (allowing students to relocate for a portion of their day to receive training), or full-time vocational high schools.

Policy History

Throughout the last 100 years, the United States has worked through a multitude a of different education policy reforms related to both the need for and lack of need for vocational education. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was the first governmental act authorizing funding and implementation of vocational education in American schooling (Hanford, 2020). This most basic understanding of vocational training was intended to be merely “preparation for a career not requiring a bachelor’s degree” (Hanford, 2020). Students were heavily encouraged to participate in or “tracked” to a field seeming to align with their family’s economic status. Thus, students from financially challenged families were typically destined to be that of manual labor workers and those from financially wealthy families were pushed to aspire for intellectual fields/university bound opportunities. This way of education specialized students in specific fields before ever entering the workforce. In the 1970’s, as the nation’s growing economy began to globalize, requirements for career success started to shift. Workers with a multi-faceted set of skills were beginning to be highly sought after, leaving generations of single-skilled workers behind.

The first attempt to revitalize vocational education tactics within the U.S. occurred in 1990 with the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act (Blunk, 2010). This Act allowed for \$1.6 billion in funding for vocational education programs. It also was the first law to require the implementation of these programs rather than merely suggest so. It was created with the intention of developing both a skilled labor and academic force to help raise the nation's competitive position in the world's economy. These programs targeted specific demographics such as students with disabilities, limited English skills, economically poorer and foster children to be a part.

Governmental efforts continued with a series of acts each taking their own unique approach to educational priorities. In 1994, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act was established to provide additional funding for vocational education programs. It remained in effect until its expiration and replacement in 2001 by the No Child Left Behind Act set into action by President George W. Bush's administration (Rosen et al., 2018). This Act was put in place as a push for academic proficiency as well as a college readiness among students. Schools were required to place a heavier emphasis on academics thus stepping away from vocational education, as academic standardized testing became the grading scale of a student's success. The results of the tests also brought to light the poor academic quality of these vocational education programs, as these students typically scored much lower than their peers in a typical academic setting.

In 2015, President Barack Obama's administration replaced the No Child Left Behind Act with the Every Student Succeeds Act (Rosen et al., 2018). This Act had a heavy focus on giving schools opportunities to implement Career and Technology Education (CTE) programs.

Career and Technology Education

Former First Lady Michelle Obama helped raise support for CTE in a speech to young high schoolers invited to the White House to celebrate their innovative academic accomplishments (The Obama White House, 2015). In her speech she impressed upon students the importance of striving for excellence in their education. However, First Lady Obama did not believe four-year universities were the only option for students. Through CTE programs students could obtain the needed certificates or trainings to either advance in their field or significantly cut down the time spent in their post-secondary education. This would allow many to enter the workforce well

prepared to succeed at a fraction of the cost and time. She also believed CTE programs had the potential of “leading to a wave of innovation in our young people.”

Concepts In Action

In many areas across the country today, school systems are working to implement their own forms of vocational training into their education curricula. A private high school in New Orleans, Louisiana, Rooted High School, has recently opened and finished its first year of schooling. This school’s mission is to break the cycle of poverty within its surrounding areas by teaching students technical skills they can take directly into today’s work force and earn a living. Within their first year, 84 percent of founding freshman had received an industry grade tech certificate in web design. With this certificate students have the potential to earn upwards of \$20 an hour before ever graduating high school (Candler, 2018).

Other privately funded initiatives have begun to arise throughout the country as well with similar core values. JP Morgan Chase has invested in a program by the name of New Skills for the Youth as well as Jobs for the Future’s Pathways to Prosperity Network. These programs have already sparked policy changes in their states (Candler, 2018).

College View High School, located in College Station, Texas, announced in November of 2021 their goal to increase CTE enrollment from 82 students to more than 200 within the next three years (Oliver, 2021). This high school’s CTE curriculum offers a wide array of courses. Courses range from culinary classes to engineering technologies. CTE director Kevin Ross said CSISD is also adding hotel and resort management, digital arts, and fire science to their list of class options.

Areas of Concern

Despite the great potential for student success CTE programming brings, there are still areas of concern when it comes to job relevancy. The development of artificial intelligence and its rapid replacement of many middle-class working jobs, brings up the question, will these jobs vocational education has historically prepared students for even be around in 10-15 years? And the truth is, if there is not revision and revitalization of these vocational education programs, they will cease to remain relevant or effective for students wanting to enter the workforce.

For CTE programming to truly be a beneficial resource, it is crucial that education leaders work to continually develop curriculum centered on industry's current and future needs, rather than those of the past.

Conclusion

The potential for economic growth and prosperity that vocational education offers for the generations of tomorrow is seemingly endless. Studies have already proven the benefits such programs can have on students. As previously discussed, many of these programs in history's past have targeted areas and people of low economic wealth. This has created a stigma against the working class in many sectors of the country. Four-year post-secondary education has been seen as one of, if not the only, means to a prosperous economic life. However, the ever-changing industry needs in new hires continue to prove such statements categorically wrong. For vocational education to be effective in the U.S.' secondary education system, whether that be under CTE programs or something of similar nature, all students should receive equal opportunity to learn academic, technical and the hands-on life skills needed to take into the industries of tomorrow.

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