



Raising the Bar:

Technical Assessments for Secondary CTE Programs

BY ERIN UY AND KIMBERLY GREEN

As our nation continues to struggle to get out of our current economic quagmire, it seems that there is one area of agreement—creating new jobs that can be filled by well-qualified workers is part of the solution. In fact a recent report by the President’s Council of Economic Advisors stated “(w)ell-trained and highly-skilled workers will be best positioned to secure high-wage jobs, thereby fueling American prosperity.” Jobs in technical fields such as health care and manufacturing will be among the leading fields in employment by 2016. However, identifying qualified workers in these fields and connecting them to employers is a challenge.

Industry is seeking more assurances that job seekers have the skills required

to fill their openings. Aiming to save time and money, industry is expected to rely on barometers such as industry assessments and related certifications to measure and validate job seekers’ skills. “The employer market is looking for a way to guarantee they hire a good hire,” said John Foster, CEO of the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute, a nonprofit assessment developer. “If you can offer the employer market some kind of guarantee that the hires they have coming into their business have certain skills, it makes it easier to make a selection.”

Perkins Sparks an Assessment Debate

Having a strong connection to the employer community, career technical education (CTE) has long understood

the importance of students being armed with industry recognized credentials and certificates as they enter the workplace. The enactment of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act in 2006, commonly referred to as Perkins IV, brought new attention and debate to the issue of technical skill attainment and assessment, and their related certifications and credentials.

As is the case today, the 2006 policy environment was heavily focused on accountability, standards and assessment. These priorities are clearly reflected in Perkins IV and have often been touted as the most notable changes made to the legislation. The stakes were raised. CTE programs were required to align rigorous academic and technical standards, and to measure achievement through assess-

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ments that lead to degrees, credentials and certificates at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. These requirements shined a spotlight on a vexing issue facing CTE—how best to measure technical skill attainment. This article will focus on this issue at the secondary level.

Gaps to Close

Secondary CTE has the greatest gap to close when it comes to measuring technical skill attainment. Why? One answer is that the majority of technical assessments that currently exist are focused on measuring very specific job or occupational skills. With the movement toward career clusters and programs of study, there is a mismatch between existing assessments and the curriculum being taught. Another potential response is that many licensing exams and industry assessments have age

restrictions, therefore making secondary students ineligible to even take the tests. And yet another potential reason is that the number of available elective credits to secondary students makes it difficult for a student to achieve competency and be prepared to pass an industry recognized assessment at a level that results in a certificate or credential.

More than Accountability

So as we seek to fill this gap, the challenge before us is making sure that the assessments that are created have meaning and value beyond simply fulfilling federal accountability requirements. The assessments should serve as a signaling and credentialing tool for students entering the workplace and postsecondary education. The assessments must have a direct and tangible benefit for students. For this

to happen, “industry and postsecondary communities must value these assessments,” said Dave Buonora, assistant director of programs with the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEC).

“The value to the student must be obvious, transparent and significant. An industry certificate or credential that does not have widespread recognition in the related labor market is of little value. In the postsecondary world, this equates to credit earned in an articulation agreement that a student does not know exists, or credit that is earned but is limited to use at a single postsecondary institution with no ability to transfer the credit.”

So what is the solution? Some new assessments, or perhaps a system of assessments, will need to be created. This is for

certain. But how do we consider building a system of assessments when there are literally thousands of individual jobs? What is the right framework? And how do we build assessments that have real value to the student and are recognized by employers and postsecondary institutions? And how do we do this when few, if any, new resources are available to dedicate to this massive undertaking? In comparison, the academic community has a much clearer focus for its assessments—four core subjects. And the academic community has had billions of dollars dedicated to the development of its assessments. The challenge before CTE is significant but not insurmountable.

An Item Bank and Clearinghouse: A Systemic Solution

To get the community started in working toward a collaborative solution, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education commissioned MPR Associates to explore the feasibility of a test item bank and assessment clearinghouse. The 2008 report “Assessing the Feasibility of a Test Item Bank and Assessment Clearinghouse,” located at www.mprinc.com/products/pdf/Feasibility_of_Test_Item_Bank.pdf, is written by MPR Associates in partnership with NASDCTEC; it laid out some of the challenges of developing such a system, including cost, variability in delivery systems, variability in system capacity, and concurrence on the purpose of the assessments.

The report proposed the creation of a national test item bank where states, through a sort of subscription service, could access nationally validated test items aligned to the knowledge and skill statements of the 16 career clusters. This would allow states the ability to package assessments aligned to their Perkins-approved programs of study. However, implicit in this design was the assumption that when states built their programs of study, relevant industry certificate/cre-

dential programs and dual credit would be integrated so that passage of interim assessments resulted in something of value to a student.

While the concept of the national item bank still holds great promise, resources are a major obstacle. Conservative estimates for creating the item bank ranged from \$2.1 to \$4.2 million, depending on the number of states that choose to

SkillsUSA Championship competition standards. By 2010, SkillsUSA intends to roll out 46 Skills Connect Assessments, said Tom Holdsworth, SkillsUSA’s director of communications; these assessments will range from automotive service technology to carpentry to nurse assisting—and will be delivered online.

When students earn credentials through the Skills Connect Assessments,

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participate, as well as other contingencies. These estimates pale in comparison to what the academic community has spent on its assessments, and having had flat funding for nearly two decades, it seems that CTE is an idea-rich but resource-poor community. The report suggests that in the interim, a service could be offered that evaluates and rates the quality and market value of existing industry assessments, certificates and credentials—another worthy concept but one that is fraught with legal implications.

Skills Connect Assessments: An Incremental Solution

While the item bank and related clearinghouse provided a systemic solution, there are groups out there making contributions toward closing the assessment gap. SkillsUSA, a nonprofit student organization, received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to develop a broad range of industry-guided assessments for high school students that are built upon their

they receive an industry-endorsed document that validates their abilities in particular areas. The assessments “cover the totality of what’s needed at the entry level in that occupation,” aiming to provide students distinction in the employment pool when they apply for a job, Holdsworth said. “Our research of instructors and administrators was clear: the value of the assessment must be the distinction it gives students when they go for employment,” he said.

SkillsUSA has yet to gather longitudinal data linking the secondary assessments and industry-endorsed certifications with students’ employment rates. But Holdsworth said SkillsUSA and industry are collaborating to elevate the value of the assessments and associated credentials to benefit both students and employers.

ASE: A Replicable Model?

Creating an assessment and certification program that is valued by both industry and postsecondary education is possible,



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but requires a significant amount of resources and is an arduous undertaking. One of the largest and most established models was launched in 1972 to address qualification concerns among mechanics in the auto industry. Until the mid-60s, most auto mechanics received their training informally in local shops, leading to significant disparities in technicians' skills.

As a means to protect consumers, the federal government helped establish an industry-directed national program called the Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), an assessment and certification initiative. With the support of motor industry giants, ASE was able to roll out the first set of assessments that led to nationally recognized credentials. Today, the ASE blue seal is a symbol of quality assurance that is known and valued by consumers and employers alike.

ASE has also earned clout in the aca-

demical arena. ASE assessment standards have an established reputation in higher education sectors—particularly with the American Council on Education (ACE), a higher education organization that represents presidents and chancellors of accredited, degree-granting institutions. ACE has approved certain ASE certifications to qualify for college credit, said Tony Molla, vice president for communications at the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. ASE is certainly a high-quality model but the question is whether it is truly replicable in other industries.

Looking Ahead

Perkins IV called attention to the issue of technical assessments but the economy brings about a sense of urgency to act. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to this challenge. Instead, we will need to continue to patch together a solution com-

prised of new and existing assessments. “Collectively, states, schools and industry working together can find a solution,” Buonora said. “Using the bully pulpit of federal accountability policies, we have an incredible opportunity to create assessment tools that better serve our students and the nation’s economy.” **T**

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