

Career Technical Education: Keeping Adult Learners Competitive for High-Demand Jobs

December 2011

Brought to you by the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education (NASDCTE)

Summary:

- Research indicates that Career Technical Education (CTE) aligned to Career Clusters is a gateway to training and qualifying individuals for high-demand jobs
- Despite high unemployment rates, employers are struggling to fill job vacancies with qualified workers because of the “skills gap”
- CTE provides opportunities for adults to stay competitive in the workforce by affording students access to certificate programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials and postsecondary education
- Local examples: Meridian Tech Business Incubator Program in Oklahoma and Great Oaks Aviation Maintenance Technician Program in Ohio
- Through the projections highlighted in this brief, adult learners can plan strategically to strengthen their skills in a way that will increase their marketability as the economy continues to change

Career Technical Education: Keeping Adult Learners Competitive for High-Demand Jobs

In today’s turbulent economy, how can adult workers best position themselves to secure jobs in high-demand fields where they are more likely to remain competitive and earn more? Further, how can employers up-skill current employees so that they meet increasingly complex job demands? Research indicates that Career Technical Education (CTE) aligned to Career Clusters™ is a gateway to training and qualifying individuals for high-demand jobs.

CTE provides opportunities for adults to stay competitive in the workforce by affording students access to certificate programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials and postsecondary degree programs. Research has linked jobs that demand such credentials with jobs that are expected to experience growth. In fact, a recent report suggests that “well-trained and highly-skilled workers will be best positioned to secure high-wage jobs.”ⁱ Using Career Clusters™, an occupational organizational framework for CTE programs, students can identify what job sector is projected to offer the most employment opportunities, and can subsequently enroll in CTE programs that truly prepare them for current economic demands.

Though the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) uses the term “high-demand,” no definition is provided in the legislation; therefore, each state uses its own definition.ⁱⁱ For our purposes, high-demand jobs are defined as those in which “employment is projected to grow faster than the average rate for all occupations between 2008 and 2018, which is 10 [percent].”ⁱⁱⁱ

CTE Allows Students to Gain High-Demand Skills

Despite a national unemployment rate of more than 9 percent, employers still struggle to fill job vacancies with qualified workers.^{iv} This mismatch of skills, known as the “skills gap,” results in part from a disparity between what students are choosing to study in secondary and postsecondary education, and the actual demands of the labor market. Whether due to a mismatch of skills, layoffs, or other effects of the changing economy, many adults are finding that they no longer possess the skills needed to stay marketable in an increasingly competitive climate. Therefore, they are returning to school to strengthen their current skills or to explore entirely new careers.

Through CTE, adults can attain industry-recognized credentials in a shorter period of time. According to a recent survey from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, more than 3 out of 4 currently-employed workers believe that continuing education is important for success in their careers.^v To actualize this goal, adults reported that a flexible schedule and tuition cost are the most important considerations in a postsecondary degree program. Business leaders also support

continuing education, as three-quarters of U.S. employers surveyed believe that increasing the number of individuals who complete a postsecondary degree or credential will contribute to the success of their company.

Employee and employer perceptions also align with recent data projections showing that at least some postsecondary education will be needed to succeed in high-demand jobs of the future. Most employers (80 percent) and workers (72 percent) agree that a college education – through a certificate, 2-year degree, or 4-year degree – is necessary to succeed in the workplace today and through the next decade.^{vi} According to a report from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, seven Career Clusters™ are projected to meet the “high-demand” classification: Information Technology; Education and Training; Health Science; Law, Public Safety, Corrections and Security; Government and Public Administration; Human Services; and Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources.

By 2018, those with some college or an associate’s degree will qualify for about one-third of job openings. The majority of these jobs will be in one of the following six Career Clusters™^{vii}:

- Manufacturing
- Marketing, Sales and Service
- Transportation, Distribution and Logistics
- Health Science
- Business, Management, and Administration
- Hospitality and Tourism

Hospitality, Marketing and Business top the list of Career Clusters™ that are projected to experience the most growth through 2018 and offer the largest number of jobs.^{viii} Between 2008 and 2018:

- Hospitality and Tourism Career Cluster will add over 2 million jobs for a 12 percent increase over 2008 total employment.
 - Marketing, Sales and Service Career Cluster will add more than 2 million more jobs to increase its total employment by 11 percent.
- Business, Management, and Administration Career Cluster is projected to add almost 1.5 million more jobs (a 6 percent increase from its current employment level of 22,400,000).
- Business, Management, and Administration Career Cluster

CTE offers students programs in all of these Career Clusters and is hence poised to help address the skills gap issue.

Meridian Tech Business Incubator Program: Entrepreneurial Adults Creating Start-Ups That Fuel Local Economy

CTE programs across the country are making great strides to ensure that students’ academic and technical coursework directly connects students with high-demand jobs. The Business Incubator program at Meridian Technology Center in Stillwater, Oklahoma, provides a launching point for entrepreneurial clients to pursue their business ideas. Research shows that start-ups provide vital job growth in communities, and Meridian’s program connects adults to local high-demand jobs.

Participants in Meridian’s Business Incubator program, called “clients,” are selected based on their entrepreneurial capacity, business and focus area expertise,

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and monetary and intellectual resources, as well as the level of demand for their business idea. Program staff provides management guidance, technical assistance, and consulting for clients in addition to other services such as networking and business counseling, to get the start-up off the [ground](#).^{ix}

Clients can receive support in two ways: as a resident or virtually (non-resident). To support the working space of resident clients, Meridian allots rented space to each start-up. Since its inception in the late 1990s, the program has housed and worked with 55 companies. Today, approximately 70 percent of those businesses are still open. Meridian has successfully assisted environmental laboratory and consulting companies, engineering and aerospace companies, outdoor products, defense contractors and information technology [companies](#).^x

Programs like Meridian’s appeal to adults for a variety of reasons. Those who have lost jobs due to layoffs use business incubator programs as a fresh start to use experience and skills from prior jobs in a new way. However, many of Meridian’s students also are adults who have chosen to leave their jobs specifically to become entrepreneurs.

Great Oaks’ Aviation Maintenance Technician Program: Meeting the Needs of Local Businesses While Providing Education and Employment Opportunities for Adults

Another CTE program that connects adults with high-demand jobs is the Aviation Maintenance Technician Program at Great Oaks Career Campuses in Wilmington, Ohio. Though the community has been experiencing widespread layoffs, a partnership between Great Oaks and a local company offers an opportunity to retool Wilmington’s adult workers and increase their employment opportunities.

Over the summer of 2011, the Airborne Maintenance and Engineering Services (AMES), an area aircraft maintenance, repair, and overhaul provider, anticipated substantial growth over a short timeframe. AMES partnered with Great Oaks Career Campuses and Workforce Solution Unlimited, a workforce consulting group, to formulate a quick response to this surge in demand. The collaboration resulted in the development of the Aviation Maintenance Technician (AMT) program at [Great Oaks](#).^{xi}

Participants of the AMT program, which was launched this fall, simultaneously work at AMES and take courses at Great Oaks resulting in the acquisition of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) certification. A powerplant course follows the certification component, so that students can continue their educational experiences, enhance their skills, and positively contribute to AMES. Through the program, students acquire diverse skills to fix and inspect aircraft, read blueprints, and understand and apply physics concepts.

Eighteen adults, from 25 to 60 years old, are participating in the program’s first run this fall. AMES has agreed to bring on program participants as full-time employees; since many of the students have been laid off for up to two years, employment at AMES is a critical component of the program.

In addition to the positions filled by current program participants, AMES recently announced the opening of 259 new jobs; more than 230 of these vacancies will be in technical positions that require skills provided through the AMT program.

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Debbie Loveless, Director of Human Resources at AMES, said that the partnership “is helping AMES meet its employment needs by building the workforce to support current and future growth.” Harry Snyder, Director of Adult Workforce Development at Great Oaks, agreed, calling the collaboration a “positive opportunity that provides hope and a future for more than 250 citizens.” Among many other benefits, Snyder stated that, “Students have the opportunity to become financially stable, and to improve their skills and educational level. This truly is a win-win for the student, the company, and ultimately, the community.”

Through the projections highlighted in this brief, adult learners can plan strategically to strengthen their skills in a way that will increase their marketability as the economy continues to change. Regardless of education level, all students need to be confident that their education, certificates and credentials will help them to attain a satisfying job and family-sustaining wages. The findings are clear: CTE programs demonstrate their potential to prepare adults for the high-demand jobs of today and the future.

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 - vii Georgetown Career Clusters report.
 - viii Georgetown Career Clusters report.
 - ix Interview with Robin White and Harry Snyder of Meridian Technology Center, October 2011.
 - x Meridian Technology Center website: <http://www.meridiantech.edu/>
 - xi Great Oaks Career Campuses website, available at: http://www.kauffman.org/uploadedFiles/startup_act.pdf