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 Advisers stated “well-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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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 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. But what do we consider building

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/Assessing%20the%20Feasibility%20of%20a%20Test%20Item%20Bank.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 system, 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.
but requires a significant amount of resources and is an arduous undertaking. One of the largest and most established models was launched in 1952 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 brings about a sense of urgency to act.

Looking Ahead

Perkins IV called attention to the issue of technical assessments but the economy almost cannot grab the attention of today’s students. The fascination that can lead up a student’s career begins with the drill of the first serious project. For students that are new to CNC, we make it easy! The PCNC 1100 includes entry level CAD and CAM. And for student reference, all of our manuals and product spec sheets are available online. What’s more, building a competition robot or just cutting parts for a student motorcycle, the Tormach PCNC 1100 is the new teaching or possibly. Perkin IV called attention to the issue of technical assessments but the economy.

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Kimberly Green

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