

A Case for Improving Career Readiness for all High School Graduates

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Abstract

This paper examines an unsettling recent trend of unpreparedness among the emerging workforce in the United States and offers recommendations for a paradigm shift in the attitudes and practices of what high school graduates should know. Results demonstrate that high school graduates in the United States are often grossly underprepared for postsecondary education and careers, while employers line up waiting with jobs for those who can demonstrate the competency and academic foundation to successfully enter specialized training programs. The paper discusses some possible solutions to this problem, along with presenting the idea that all students should be taught career readiness skills that will benefit them in their future careers.

Keywords: Career Pathways, Youth Apprenticeship, Career Counseling, Career Training, Career Readiness, Career and Technical Education, Employability Skills

Chapter One: Introduction

One of the main goals of the public education system in the United States has always been to prepare students for what comes after high school graduation. What this means for the majority of high school graduates changes each year based on both social and economic factors. Job markets and high-demand skills are constantly changing in today's global, technology driven industries. Whether students choose to immediately enter the workforce, or to pursue post-secondary education or training, one common thread should exist in high school curriculum: Ensuring that students have the employability skills to succeed in whatever career path they choose.

Traditionally, career training in high school has focused mainly on preparing students who do not plan on attending four-year college for careers in industry or the skilled trades. Federal Perkins legislation requires fund recipients to offer at least one program of study "which must include coherent and rigorous content aligned with challenging academic standards and relevant career and technical content" (Lewis, 2008, p. 165). The delivery must align secondary education with postsecondary education and result in an industry-recognized credential or certificate at the postsecondary level. High school students must also be given the opportunity to participate in school and employer coordinated programs that will allow them to earn postsecondary education credits before graduation (Lewis, 2008).

Career training is not a new concept, before Perkins legislation was enacted, other initiatives existed in the United States to prepare high school students for the workforce. In the 1970s, Career education was introduced as a concept, and school-to work programs started in the 1990s. The common thread was the idea that students could prepare for future careers if they were taught relevant knowledge and skills in high school. Although these two programs were not

widely successful, they paved the way for current programs including Tech Prep, career clusters/career pathways, and youth apprenticeships (Lewis, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

The popularity of four-year college in recent years, along with the stigma historically associated with pursuing a career in the trades, or deciding not to attend college, has led to an attitude of condescension in this country regarding what it means to be successful. The main problem is that there is a widely accepted belief among American families that earning a four year college degree is the only way to succeed. (Basu & Naterelli, 2017).

According to Harrington and Long (2012), 37 percent of jobs in the United States do not require a college degree, and most of those jobs require one month or less of specialized training. Meanwhile, many students who do attend college either decide they do not want to work in their field of study or are unable to find a job and discover they are lacking in non-cognitive skills that employers are looking for. Students will benefit most from consistently learning employability skills that allow them to be successful in the workplace.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is centered on the growing problem of successfully transitioning students from high school to the workforce in a way that benefits both the students and potential employers. In the United States, there is little guidance for high school graduates who do not immediately enroll in four year college. Because of this, they often become stuck in the same low paying jobs they held in high school since employers do not yet view them as adult workers (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1994).

According to Basu and Naterelli (2017), the United States has experienced a significant loss in the labor force of construction and the skilled trades in recent years due to less high

school graduates immediately entering the workforce and a high retirement rate among existing trades workers. The jobs of workers who are retiring will need to be filled, and employers are eager to hire young, adaptable workers who have the basic skills and attitudes to be successful in specialized training programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the current state of employability among United States high school graduates, and to provide guidelines for improving career readiness for all high school graduates, regardless of their post high school plans.

Definition of Terms

Career Assessment: Help transition from ideas to actions using tools such as tests and metrics to make decisions about appropriate career development and interventions for individuals (Harrington & Long, 2012).

Career Clusters: A way to divide jobs into categories based on the products they produce or the services they provide (Lewis, 2008).

Career Confidence: Individual confidence in achieving career success (Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2012).

Career Counseling: Helps students make academic decisions based on their future career goals (Stipanovic, Lewis, & Stringfield, 2012).

Career Indecision: Individual indecision about career goals (Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2012).

Career Pathway: Offer direction of the academic knowledge and technical skills required to be adequately prepared for jobs within career clusters (Lewis, 2008).

Career Preparation: The multilayer development that leads to career choice (Stringer, Kerpelman, and Skorikov, 2012).

Career Readiness: Having the required skills, knowledge, and attitude to be successful in school, job training, or a career (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2012).

Employability Skills: Non-academic skills and attitudes that employers demand (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2012).

Goal Instability: Problems with setting and keeping goals, personal motivation, and persistence (Reardon & Betch, 2010).

Internship: A form of school-based, employer sponsored learning (Lerman, 2013).

Perkins Act: Federal legislation that requires institutions that receive funds to offer at least one program of study that leads to a postsecondary credential or degree in a technical field (Lewis, 2008).

Tech Prep: Technical training programs of study that span the last two years of high school and the first two years postsecondary (Lewis, 2008).

Youth apprenticeship: Programs that provide comprehensive career training including both work-based and academic components (Lerman, 2013).

Delimitations of Research

Research for this paper was conducted using the UW-Platteville Karmann Library database search tool. Peer-reviewed articles from the 1980s to present were included to help define the history of school based career training in the United States. Statistics used to describe current job outlook or employment rates are from sources published within the past five years. Searches were conducted for the following keywords: employability skills, youth apprenticeship, career readiness, and tech prep.

Method of Approach

A review of the literature about the history of youth apprenticeship programs in the United States and Europe (1980 to present) was conducted. The literature examining the ongoing evolution of technical education and career readiness programs in United States High schools and recommended improvements was also reviewed.

Summary

This paper will examine the problem of lack of career readiness among high school graduates in the United States and what can be done to improve employability skills. Ultimately, employability skills refer to a bundle that includes general and transferable skills which might be useful in any workplace in addition to the specific requirements of a job or occupation (Suleman, 2018).

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

The following literature review explores the history of career readiness in the United States in the context of current economic and technology driven conditions. Changes that could be made to improve the career readiness of high school graduates are also discussed.

Career Readiness in the United States

According to the Career Readiness Partner Council (2012), the United States was once a world leader in academic achievement and career preparation but has fallen behind in recent years when it comes to adequately preparing the incoming workforce for available jobs. Along with current economic conditions, this has created opportunities for new ideas and developments in the field of career and technical education to meet the needs of both students and their future employers. High school seniors can benefit most from transitional school to work programs since they are at a point in their lives where they are considering their options and making important work and career choices (Lehmann, 2005).

Lerman (2013) questioned if the high failure rate of high school based career training programs was based on academic difficulties, or if the widespread problems with these programs could also be due to a lack of emphasis on important career readiness curriculum and skills which meet employers' needs. Recent results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress academic achievement reports have shown that one-third of eighth graders meet or exceed proficiency standards. This includes results for math, reading, writing, and science. Graduation rates in the United States are around 71% and jobs that were historically available to young people who do not finish high school have all but disappeared, leading to higher rates of incarceration, health problems, unemployment, and government dependency among high school dropouts (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

In order to change this narrative there needs to be positive improvement made in the career readiness of high school graduates. Stringer, Kerpelman, and Skorikov (2012), describe three dimensions of career preparation among high school students: decidedness/indecision, planning, and confidence. This process is tied to the adolescent transition to adulthood and identity formation of young adults. Consideration of long-term career preparation is essential since academic and employment choices made by teenagers can influence the type of opportunities that will be available to them later in life.

Four-year college has become increasingly accessible over the years, which means that a larger proportion of the population is able to attend. However, along with increased availability of post-secondary education have come higher costs and less available jobs for four-year graduates who don't continue on to earn a masters or doctorate degree. Meanwhile, job openings which require some postsecondary training or education but not a full four-year degree are increasing (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1994). There is a growing need for a competent, training-receptive workforce to fill these jobs.

Many people with college degrees choose careers that are not in their field of study or do not require a degree. According to Basu and Natarelli (2017), in 2010, 48 percent of working college graduates had jobs that did not require a bachelor's degree and 37 percent only required a high school diploma. A mere 42 percent of college attendee's graduate with two or four year degrees before their mid-20s (Jackson & Hasak, 2014).

This is not to say that a college degree is not a worthwhile option, however, preparing for a career in the trades should be seen as an equally valuable path for all high school students, regardless of academic achievement and family income, rather than an alternative to college. The view in the United States that technical education is only for students who are not academically

or developmentally ready for college, or those who cannot afford it, is antiquated and unfounded. Careers in the trades often pay as well or better than those available to college graduates, with less financial investment needed from the prospective worker (Basu & Natarelli, 2017). Despite many attempts to pass bills that will lessen the burden of student debt on college graduates, even those who are able to find employment in their field of study often struggle to pay back huge debts with high interest rates (McKenna, 2014).

The time when a bachelor's degree was a guarantee of employment has passed, and employment forecasts and industry leaders point to the need for highly skilled, yet adaptable workers (Jackson & Hasak, 2014). The current technical skills heavy job market has made the skills gap glaringly clear. Employers need workers with highly specialized skills, and a comprehensive strategy is needed to prepare students to fill that gap (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2012).

Grubb and Lazerson (2005) discussed the "vocalionalization" of college which has occurred over the past two hundred years in the United States. With the need for increasingly specialized training for countless different career paths, the teaching of employability skills and practical experience has often been neglected. Critics have emphasized the need for less memorization and more hands-on training, critical thinking exercises, and development of communication and interpersonal skills. The solution is once again found in teaching nonacademic skills that will improve not only what students know, but how they think and solve problems, interact with their co-workers and clients, and whether they show up to work consistently and on time.

Industry leaders are often willing to hire or take on training for high school graduates who show that they have the employability skills and disposition to be contributing and

successful team members. High schools should focus on preparing students, not just for post-secondary education, should they choose to pursue it, but also to be better employees. This can be accomplished by teaching communication, teamwork, resilience, and pride in a job well done. “Employers need better educated workers to cope with new technology and rising global competition, but schools themselves are unable to meet this need” (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1994).

According to Sutrisno and Sugandi (2017), demand is rising for quality, skilled workers in the trades. Employers want workers who can not only successfully perform the technical tasks required by the job, they also want workers who excel in employability skills such as communication, attitude, and leadership. In order to get and keep jobs, workers need to show that they have both the technical skills and the personal characteristics that employer’s value.

Career readiness for high school students should acknowledge that their identity and goals may change dramatically in the years following high school and include skills that will benefit them in any career as well as making them more adaptable and receptive to changing workplace needs. According to Stinger, Kerpelman, and Skorikov (2012), there are three dimensions that make up career identity development and career adaptability. The first dimension is career decision making, which involves the student evaluating their career options and personal attributes. The second dimension is career confidence centered on career goal achievement. The third and final dimension is career planning. This involves finding a strategy for personal career goal achievement. These dimension are commitment-focused and are an integral part of the process of career preparation.

Another issue faced by potential sponsors of on the job training programs is that many students are not leaving high school with the academic skills they need to be successful in the postsecondary education system or training programs. According to Jimanez and Sargrad (2016),

40 to 60 percent of college freshmen test into remedial English or math. Coupled with increasing tuition costs, it is neither ethical nor fair for colleges to charge tuition for students to take courses they have already taken (Jackson & Hasak, 2014). American college students spent \$1,287,483,000 on tuition for remedial courses in 2014 (Jimenez & Sargrad, 2016). Graduates need to leave high school with basic academic and communication skills. Employers should not spend time or money teaching what should have been graduation requirements.

Existing programs in youth apprenticeship have focused on training for a specific career, when a more important goal may be to ensure that both college-bound and students entering career training programs or directly joining the workforce, have academic knowledge and career readiness skills that will allow them to succeed. According to Lewis (2008), while youth apprenticeship participants generally had positive perceptions of their experience, the schools involved often experienced problems with recruitment, costs, and managing curriculum changes. The traditional structure of youth apprenticeship programs relied too heavily on time and money investment of the schools and employers. In addition to the problem of student recruitment, it was difficult to find employers who would participate in time-intensive, meaningful, hands-on training that involved more than just tours or observation.

Basu and Natarelli (2017) also contend that the problem cannot be entirely solved by on-the-job training that relies on employers to shoulder the financial and time burden of training their own workforce due to the problem of “free-riding competitors”. Employers have no guarantee that workers will stay long enough for them to recoup the costs of training, and especially if the training was of high quality, these workers are highly valuable and likely to be sought out by competitors who can pay them more since they haven’t spent money on training.

How to Implement a Successful High School Career Preparation Program

As stated by Gysbers (2005), the best contemporary career guidance programs are comprehensive and include career development competencies and benchmarks that begin in kindergarten. Students should not be pushed into making early career decisions but should be given appropriate guidance to make sure that they do not make decisions early on which might limit their choices later in their academic career (Gysbers, 2005).

According to Musset and Korekova (2018), effective career guidance can improve academic success and employment outcomes. One of the current problems with career guidance worldwide is lack of access and marginalization. Students cannot benefit from the positive impacts of career guidance unless they experience it, and recent data shows that certain demographics who could benefit, including low socioeconomic status girls, have less access to career guidance services in high school.

Musset and Korekova (2018), also suggest that programs should provide opportunities for students to think about their future goals. This could include activities such as job-shadowing and guest speakers to highlight career options that young people may not have as much exposure to, such as the skilled trades. Students should not be put into categories of college-bound and non-college bound, rather all students should be allowed to consider all jobs, especially those that are newly emerging, economically significant or those with historically negative stigma, for example waste management.

These initiatives should not be limited to certain groups of students such as “at-risk” or low academic achievers, although particular attention should be paid to those groups since they can often benefit the most from interventions. Instead, career guidance should be a school-wide effort which includes instructors, administrators, parents, and employers in addition to career

guidance counselors. This comprehensive approach will allow all students to participate in career readiness curriculum and activities so they are aware of all the options that are available to them. When it is time for decisions to be made, students should have access to job availability data, and have adult guidance in interpreting it in the context of their own career and education goals. Parents should be part of the team, but students should know that they are ultimately responsible for deciding what they would like to do with their future (Musset & Korekova, 2018).

Musset and Korekov (2018) and Stringer, Kerpelman and Skorikov (2012) agree that career guidance should acknowledge that the ideas high school students have about their future career path may change significantly throughout their high school years and into their early twenties. They are also heavily influenced by parents, socioeconomic background, emotional and identity stability and ethnic and gender stereotypes. For example, a woman of color who gives a presentation on her career as a carpenter has the potential to make a significant impact on students who may not have previously considered a career in the skilled trades as an option for themselves.

Stringer, Kerpelman, and Skorikov (2012) also found that confidence in their choices and an attitude that career goals are attainable are important factors when working on career readiness between ages 17 and 22. Their study found that high school seniors who experience career indecision often fared better than those who have decided on a career path but lack confidence that their goals can be accomplished successfully. Career counselors should make it a priority to ensure that students are supported in both career decision making and planning for attainable goals Reardon and Bertoch (2010) developed a Goal Instability Scale to determine which students might need extra guidance or motivation to participate and succeed in career development programs and which students would be more likely to succeed with less individual

assistance. The Goal Instability Scale used a list of questions related to student attitudes and feelings about their career and life goals along with a Likert scale. This scale was designed for college students but could be given to high school students to identify students who might require additional career guidance.

Particular attention should be paid in this regard to students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who may already lack confidence due to stereotypes and attitudes that make them think they cannot succeed. Additionally, current data and educational policy initiatives should be used to continuously improve interventions and student support programs (Musset & Kurekova, 2018).

A comprehensive approach to career preparation is essential to success. Programs that include input and support from teachers, parents, community partners and administration will give students confidence by demonstrating that there are many people interested in their success. Instructional supports including high standards for quality and regular assessments of readiness are important components of a successful program. Workplace experiences and alignment with schools at all levels as well as business and industry are also necessary (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2012). Mastering career readiness skills is a process that must be supported by a comprehensive program of academics, technical skills training, guidance and counseling. There must be cooperation and integration among all facets of the program in order for it to be successful in producing college and career ready graduates (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2012).

Morningstar, Lombardi, and Test (2018) suggest a college and career readiness framework in secondary school that includes academic engagement, mindsets, personal growth, learning processes, critical thinking, interpersonal engagement, and transition competencies.

College and career readiness should be integrated into a multitiered system of support with a focus on promoting secondary and postsecondary success. Students should be proficient in both core academic and nonacademic skills and should have knowledge of postsecondary requirements needed to achieve their career goals.

An ideal career readiness program benefits from three types of support: employer and professional association support, student, parent, and trade union support, and government support. The program should be presented to stakeholders in a way that demonstrates its benefits to them to encourage ongoing supportive relationships.

Employer Engagement

It is important that employers feel that they are making an investment in their company's future, rather than volunteering their time and resources for the good of the community (Eichhorst, Rodriguez-Planas, Shmidl, & Zimmerman, 2015). Employers who do not recognize the benefits of apprenticeship programs that go beyond Corporate Social Responsibility tend to be less engaged and see more conflict between costs and benefits of the program. They may also perceive a risk to their reputation if participating students do not do well due to lack of preparedness when entering the program (Simms, 2017).

Without prior career training or experience, employers hesitate to commit to hiring young people permanently. This creates a climate of instability surrounding youth apprenticeship or work experience programs. "In this respect, reducing the rigidity of dismissal protection while increasing employment security for labor market entrants according to tenure could be a solution. Practical work experience and training could then further ease the successful integration of young people into stable jobs" (Eichhorst, Rodriguez-Planas, Shmidl, and Zimmerman, 2015).

According to the National Alliance of Business, benefits to employers who participate in youth apprenticeship programs include expanding the number of qualified applicants they can choose from, increasing opportunities to recruit and review possible applicants, chances to preview apprenticeship participants before hiring, an efficient and reliable program to provide skilled labor, help meeting legal obligations for EOE and affirmative action, local community improvement, less entry-level employee turnover, and the opportunity to tailor curriculum to their specific needs (Bremer & Madzar, 1995).

Student, Parent, and Trade Union Support

Parents, students, and trades unions should feel that a trade-off exists in the form of accepting lower wages in exchange for skilled training (Eichhorst, Rodriguez-Planas, Shmidl, & Zimmerman, 2015). Neumark and Allen (2003) noted that parental resistance to Tech Prep participation was based largely on the widespread idea among parents that all children should attend college and that Tech Prep was not appropriate for students who would later attend college. This was despite the fact that Tech Prep by definition has both a high school and postsecondary component which can include either a two or four year program.

Bremer and Madzar (1995) found that one reason for lack of employer engagement in youth career training programs was union opposition, which has historically been seen as a threat to union influence in the trades. Any successful career readiness program should seek local union support. Asking a union leader to speak to students in the program about the benefits of unions could be one way to secure union support.

The highly successful Bayless Floor Layers Middle Apprenticeship Program used grant funding from the High Growth Job Training Initiative to provide apprenticeship opportunities to students for participation during their junior and senior years of high school. This was an earn-

while-you-learn model which provided the same training as the regular 4-year, 640 hour apprenticeship in a two-year program with about 800 hours of training including hands-on field work during the summer before their senior year. Participation in the summer portion of the program required three-way contract signed by the student, parent, and a contractor which stated that work would only take place from June 15 through August 15 of that year. (Gaal, 2018).

Student interest and support in the program should be a high priority. Messer (2017) conducted a study in the U.K. and concluded that it is beneficial to start as early as 14-15 years old with school sponsored job placements. Working at this age can help students develop the non-academic skills that employers demand as well as improving student focus and motivation regarding career goals.

Government Support

Requests for government support should be framed in a way that shows the economic and job market impacts that can be achieved through successful career readiness programs (Eichhorst, Rodriguez-Planas, Shmidl, & Zimmerman, 2015). Government policy and financial support can help mitigate the cost/benefit problem for participating employers. Offering financial or tax break incentives can encourage employer participation and improve employment and training rates among currently underemployed populations. Policies that offer real advantages to employers are likely to see greater long-term benefits to all stakeholders. It should also be acknowledged that employers are valued partners in this process and it is helpful if they are involved in the policy making process through advisory boards or other initiatives. (Simms, 2017).

Another skill that high school students across the board need more guidance with is the ability to articulate their skills and experience to a potential employer. In their evaluation of an

after school employment readiness program in Chicago, Alexander, Hirsch, and Hynes (2012) found that students who participated in the program had no awareness that their experiences could be considered work experience. The apprenticeship instructors had not adequately communicated to the students that they were learning skills that would improve their employability. Alexander and Hirsch (2012), suggest that high school students should be able to describe what constitutes marketable job skills, experiences and skills they have that employers want, and should know how to explain this connection to potential employers in an interview.

Summary

High School students may be undecided about their future educational and career goals. Even those who are decided may make significant changes to their plans following graduation and into their early twenties. In addition to improving students' academic preparation for college or postsecondary training, high schools in the United States should increase their focus on career readiness skills for all students. Employers in all sectors of the workforce will value workers who can make good choices, communicate in a professional manner, and adapt to changing technologies.

Bremer and Madzar (1995) identified several motivators for student participation in school-to-work transition programs, including integrating theory and implementation, the importance of both wide and narrowly focused work experiences, self-reflection when exploring job preferences, practice in supervisory or more professional aspects of a job, specific organizational knowledge, experiences that will facilitate additional learning, contextual skills exercises, and personal growth.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

The United States high school system needs to make the career readiness of graduates a top priority in order to improve employment rates and successful career transition for all students. Based on the existing literature, the academic performance and skills acquisition of high school graduates has declined in recent years, with students needing to take remedial courses when they reach the postsecondary level. Students are graduating without basic academic skills or dropping out in greater numbers, while the number of jobs available to graduates who have the basic skills necessary to succeed in industrial and trade sector employment has significantly increased.

Based on these conclusions, employability and career readiness skills should be prioritized in all high schools for all students, regardless of students' chosen career or education path. Skills like effective communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and work ethic will benefit all students and their future instructors and employers.

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