

## CTE is a win for the economy and our kids

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You cannot pick up a publication today without seeing something about the next generation of workers and the skilled labor shortage.

The biggest post-recession challenge faced by companies continues to be finding and retaining the best talent — and talent is sorely needed.

With so many boomers retiring from the trades (10,000 per day on average across the country), the U.S. is going to need many more pipefitters, nuclear power plant operators, carpenters, welders, utility workers — the list is long.

However, the problem is not enough young people are getting that kind of training.

The crippling of the education pipeline has occurred over many decades and can be seen in many educational trends, including the dismantling of the public vocation and technical education programs and an increasing focus on college preparatory programs at the high school level.

With the “university for all” mentality in education, there is an increasing demand for high school students to focus solely on college prerequisites, which prevents students from enrolling in elective courses such as the construction trades.

There also exists an overwhelming impression among young people, their parents, counselors and teachers that career technical education is unacceptable, despite the fact that these jobs often pay better than many post-college options.

AGC and a broad coalition of associations have worked together to increase funding for career technical education (CTE) during every legislative session. Although we have successfully doubled the amount of CTE money (roughly \$20 million per biennium), there is still more to be done for the up-and-coming generations.

In many respects, Millennials and the generation after them have already proven themselves highly intelligent workers with valuable skills that are on par (and sometime surpassing) their adult predecessors. These are children of the recession and it shows in their outlook.

Across the United States the reality of the education system is that 50 percent of high school students go to college, but only half of those earn a degree.

The result is that 75 percent of our students are looking for jobs that do not require a degree. Students, teachers, and parents need to broaden the “university for all” definition to mean “post-high school education for all,” and understand that there is more than one path forward following high school graduation.

Apprenticeship and other programs that focus on the development of technical, in-demand skills are examples of these other paths forward.

While many young people of the up-and-coming generations intend to go to a traditional college, the lure of money and valuable skills training offered in industries like ours may be enough to appeal to their generation’s need for instant gratification and results. Many trade students can expect to graduate school with no debt and, if they graduate with a particular skill in a particular field, they can likely make more than college graduates over their lifetime. As the most digitally gifted generation yet, we must harness the excitement that our students have toward technology, money making, and entrepreneurship and help them channel it into lasting careers.

The CTE of today is reactive to the demands of an ever-changing economy and grounded in the belief that the skills and abilities that students need to succeed in college and careers are effectively identical. Like much of society, the construction industry is changing at light-speed.

Besides computers, we are seeing rapid integration of such technologies as virtualization, robotics, and 3D manufacturing. The younger generations are going to lead us into this new future. We need to empower these young people to explore the skills they have and understand the kind of lives they want to lead.

By connecting with viable employers via internships and mentorships during school, students are more encouraged and better positioned to enter the industry and earn family-wage jobs.

If income stability and long-term career development are as important to them as they have demonstrated, CTE is the perfect means to an end. CTE is a win for the economy and win for the industry and a win for the kids themselves.

It is a win for the future.

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