

Linking Economic and Academic Development through Workforce Innovations: A best practice in establishing a targeted, talent supply chain

Iceberg Ahead: We're on a Ship to Nowhere

Hearing the Titanic theme music in your head lately? On a daily basis, we are inundated with bleak news of the economic challenges facing our country-- leaving all of us to feel as if the ship may be going down. One of the most alarming trends is our plummeting international standing in terms of education, innovation and growth, competitiveness, and to compound matters, the complete unpreparedness of our students for the global workforce.

Policymakers have been compelled to return to the drawing board time and again to identify solutions within our schools to address these very troubling challenges. And certainly, linking education to economic growth is by no means a novel idea. Horace Mann set that ship afloat back in 1841. We learned we were sailing on the "tide of mediocrity" in 1983, and the world was flat in 2005. In 2010, a new wave swept the shore known as the Common Core.

Compelling reports, innovative initiatives and tantalizing trends have come and gone; yet we are still on the same course. Even with the current unemployment rates, business owners, industry leaders and community stakeholders have been shouting from the rooftops for years emphatically stating they need talent they can *hire* and talent that is relevant. Their shouting is especially concerning when one considers the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projection of 1,606,000 college students who will earn a bachelors degree this year and enter the workforce.¹ One of the problems is many of these bachelor's degrees earned by the class of 2014 are not in areas deemed to be high skill, high wage, or high demand...or in other words, relevant to the economic needs of businesses and industries.

S.O.S:

Linking our educational offerings to actual economic demand is one way to save the ship. There is a decreasing or nonexistent skilled talent pipeline for many of the key industries that directly impact regional, state and national economic well-being and global standing. Now is the time to redefine the relationship between business and education to strategically align multi-agency initiatives to achieve desired outcomes.

Everybody Needs to Row for Shore Workforce Development Agencies: "Grab an Oar"

It has become abundantly clear the burden of creating a qualified workforce cannot rest solely on the shoulders of education. Industry leaders must "become deeply engaged in multiple ways and at an earlier stage - in helping to set standards and design programs of study; in advising young people; and most importantly, for providing greatly expanded opportunities for work-linked learning."² Schools have been "partnering" with local businesses for years. The innovation in the partnership lies in re-defining the term "partnership" and inviting other key stakeholders, such as

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workforce agencies and economic development councils, to jump in the boat and start rowing with district leaders.

These agencies hold the key to the known career clusters and possess the compass indicating the direction on workforce needs and economic issues at local, regional and statewide levels. They can soundly guide school districts in the selection and design of career and technical education programs based on relevant, current and projected labor market information (LMI), and they have insights into supply as well as demand. This level of partnership is a novel approach to reforming career and technical education. It becomes extremely powerful when these entities come to consensus on the strategies needed to grow an economy through the education of the community's youth. Managing these partnerships and alliances toward a single vision for the community is not easy. Yet the synergism among these stakeholders is unmistakable and critical to ensuring the anticipated outcomes.

No longer can schools afford to create career and technical education offerings based solely on student interests, local donations, or perceived need. Though well intentioned, these efforts have done little to impact the economic development of a region or the ability of students to find success in the pursuit of post-secondary training or jobs.

Florida Launches the Lifeboats

Florida heard the S.O.S distress call and has become a national leader in career and technical education. In 2007, the groundbreaking Florida Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act was passed to legislatively establish a link between secondary career academies and anticipated workforce needs. To date, over 1,550 academies have been founded under this new initiative. These bold moves have allowed Florida to not only increase the employability of its students, but also create an extremely effective strategy for business recruitment and retention.

Workforce Florida, Inc., the state workforce agency, recognized the importance of starting earlier than high school to develop a talent pipeline ensuring *future* human capital demands of industry could be met. Using sound labor and industry projections, the agency has been instrumental in the design of career academies that connect education with industry standards-based curriculum across the state. They have been fervent advocates of implementing career and technical education programs in middle schools, now a new legislative mandate. Though many in Florida may have questioned the capability of middle school students to meet the challenges of such rigorous curriculum, Workforce Florida Inc. was determined to give those students the opportunity to prove themselves in relevant coursework.

To state the obvious, under this initiative and partnership: Student employability jumps exponentially and Florida becomes extremely competitive in attracting and retaining industry.

By initiating middle school programs established around high expectations of student abilities, children as young as 11 and 12 years of age can begin earning industry certifications in 6th grade and attend to more challenging coursework and pathways in aligned high schools as they progress toward graduation and pursuit of continued education and/or an in-demand career.

The following project is a best practice in a collaborative statewide career academy initiative seed funded by WFI and implemented by The Whetstone Group and a number of their Information Technology partners. This overwhelmingly successful project is shedding a bright light on what is now possible when key stakeholders of a state come together with the common goal of creating a talent supply chain.

Lighthouse Ahead!

“For states, regions and communities to attract growth industries and create jobs—demands a fresh approach to public education...the fundamental shifts in the economy demand bold and creative policies.”³ The Whetstone Group (TWG), a talent development firm, embarked on a bold voyage with Workforce Florida Inc. this year providing a true beacon for the state and country of what is possible in efforts to turn the ship around. TWG, a blended company of business leaders and educational specialists, created a unique model to ensure career academies are designed to provide students with marketable skill sets for college and/or career. They are dedicated to ensuring these academic offerings are financially sustainable and based on strong linkage with the local, regional and state economic drivers. During a 2011 competitive bid process, it became very clear the missions of WFI and TWG were strategically aligned. Using seed funding from WFI, TWG’s project management and LEAD CTE Pathway Implementation Model and the commitment and contributions of many business and state agencies, the Information Technology (IT) Technical Assistance Demonstration Project has been extraordinarily successful. Information Technology Career Academies have been established at 25 middle schools across Florida where students are earning nationally recognized industry certifications.

TWG’s Florida Middle School IT Academy Demonstration Project

In two phases, through a competitive selection process, a group of diverse middle schools was chosen representing 25 Florida school districts from varied regions across the state. These schools were selected from more than 70 applicants and represented a broad range of social and economic populations including several Title I schools, a charter school, and a juvenile justice facility. Phase I of the Demonstration Project began in January of 2012 with 15 schools for a 2012-2013 school year implementation, and Phase 2 began with 10 schools in January 2013 for a 2013-2014 school year implementation.

The project’s funding was seeded by Workforce Florida Inc.’s Global Talent Competitiveness Council and leveraged more than 50% of in-kind contributions by public and private stakeholders in a true collaboration.

Why IT?

One of Florida's top economic and workforce drivers, ubiquitous to all industry sectors, is Information Technology. "In January 2012, there were approximately 16,000 jobs listed in Florida that required Microsoft or Adobe proficiency, but more importantly, those IT skills are foundational, core, skills that transcend industry sectors and occupations," said Jeff Scroggins, TWG principal and project instructor. The creation of middle school IT career academies not only ensures students receive the fundamental core digital and technical skills needed in today's business climate, but also provides students with the opportunity to develop beyond these skills into advanced IT skills at high school and postsecondary levels - ensuring a highly skilled talent pipeline. Florida chose to establish IT specific career academies for these reasons; however, the TWG model and the principles applied establish a solid foundation for career academies supporting any cluster or industry sector.

Teach Them to Fish

In approaching the implementation of IT Career Academies in middle schools, Workforce Florida Inc. chose to think outside the box of traditional grant funding of projects in an effort to create real sustainability and value with available funds. Instead of giving schools money and hoping they would be able to rapidly launch an academy (giving them a fish), they contracted with The Whetstone Group to provide technical assistance using their proprietary Linking Economic and Academic Development (LEAD) CTE Pathway Implementation Model in teaching the schools how to quickly initiate and develop robust, financially sustainable and replicable academies (teaching them to fish). In fact, several districts have been able to expand the academies to other middle schools utilizing what was learned through the technical assistance.

The LEAD model focuses on three central goals in the creation of career academies within schools while also maintaining an accountability structure within the partnership between the schools and their stakeholder community; thereby providing a healthy system of "checks and balances." The model serves as a step-by-step blueprint that:

- Allows school districts the ability to consistently and rapidly establish, relevant and sustainable/cost effective career academies
- Ensures students develop marketable skill sets tied to local, regional and state economic drivers, thus creating a pipeline of skilled workers.
- Provides communities with a youth talent development initiative ensuring a future talent supply for business and industry.

The Buried Treasure - It's about outcomes and expectations.

What were the results? Over 1470 IT industry certifications from Microsoft and Adobe were earned in the first school year by Phase I schools (and let's not forget; these are 6th, 7th and 8th graders representing diverse geographic locations and demographics). Most notably, students at the Department of Juvenile Justice residential facility, Twin Oaks Vocational Academy, where students have a short length of stay, produced 14 certifications. Similar, if not better, results are expected from the 10 Phase II schools that came on line in the 2013-2014 school year. There are now 25 academies in

operation. This partnership and innovative project has already begun to address the impending demand for skilled IT employees and will ensure a steady stream of qualified students will enter the workforce over the next 5-10 years.

When teachers and administrators are provided a purpose and context on a larger scale for the design and delivery of instruction, there is a transformation and increase in engagement, which is translated into the classroom. Not only do teachers demonstrate “buy in”, but students also experience highly relevant coursework, persevere and persist through rigorous tasks, and reach higher achievement levels. In short, they exceed expectations.

Changing Course

Beyond this, research has already revealed the significant positive impacts of career academies on traditionally targeted areas such as math and reading achievement levels, drop-out rates and disciplinary incidents.⁴ Of course, while these statistics are powerful in themselves, one doesn’t need the statistics to understand the financial impact of increasing graduation rates and employability of students.

“The success of the Middle School IT Career and Professional Academy Project demonstrates the possibilities when Florida’s public and private education partners collaborate with workforce organizations at the speed of business to meet marketplace needs,” said Workforce Florida President/CEO Chris Hart IV. “The Whetstone Group has done an outstanding job of helping Florida enhance students’ access to the industry-relevant training they need to put them on the path to a bright future — providing immediate value to employers and rewarding careers.”

As we expand the role of education as an economic development tool, we must re-define the relationships that currently exist between employers, education and other community stakeholders. This can be a daunting task given the individual mandates and agendas of these various entities; however, leveraging the strengths of collaboration toward a unified strategy and vision is essential in ensuring students obtain needed marketable skill sets and as a direct positive result, ensuring industry has access to the talents and skills necessary to compete on the global stage.

It is time to change course and follow a new heading. The Florida Middle School IT Career Academy project is a powerful example of how everyone wins!

¹ National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) FAQ Retrieved from <http://www.naceweb.org>

² Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st century (2011). Retrieved from http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2011/Pathways_to_Prosperty_Feb_2011.pdf

³ 21st Century Skills, Education and Competitiveness: A Resource and Policy Guide (2008). Retrieved from http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/21st_century_skills_education_and_competitiveness_guide.pdf

⁴ Florida Department of Education, Division of Career and Adult Education's Career and Professional Academy Enrollment and Performance Report, 2011-12

The Whetstone Group (TWG) is dedicated to talent supply chain development and workforce planning at the business, community and state level.

For more project information contact Jeff Scroggins at The Whetstone Group 850-259-2121 or visit TWG's website at www.experiencetwg.com.