

CTE is Not an Either/Or – A Response to “General Education, Vocational Education, and Labor-Market Outcomes over the Lifecycle”

A new [study](#) came out recently that is garnering some [media](#) attention and calling into question the long-term value of CTE for students internationally. In a nutshell, this study, **General Education, Vocational Education, and Labor-Market Outcomes over the Lifecycle**, finds that the labor market advantage associated with participation in vocational education diminishes over time as the vocational individuals’ skills become outdated, making them less able to navigate the ever-changing world of work, compared to those students who completed a general education (or non-vocational) path in high school.

Needless to say, this is raising questions for some about what this means for U.S. CTE system. While the study raises some important questions about the consequences of a truly tracked system, it also **validates the direction CTE has been going here in the U.S.** In particular, this paper reaffirms so much of the exciting work going on – led by states and supported by the federal government, advocacy organizations like Advance CTE, and philanthropic partners like [JPMorgan Chase](#) – to raise the quality and rigor of CTE programs and pathways so that they serve as **effective platforms to both college and careers for students.**

The study compared students on the “vocational” track to those on a “general-education” track in 11 individual European countries. Right off the bat, the idea of a “track” is one that we have been very intentional about moving away from. And, the researchers freely admit this:

“The United States, for example, has largely eliminated vocational education as a separate track in secondary schools on the argument that specific skills become obsolete too quickly and that it is necessary to give people the ability to adapt to new technologies. On the other hand, many European and developing countries, led by Germany’s “dual system,”

provide extensive vocational education and training at the secondary level including direct involvement of industry through apprenticeships.”

This is hugely important, but also a bit ironic. I can't tell you how many articles I have read or conversations I have had about how we can better replicate the German model for CTE. The fact is, **CTE and academics are not an either/or in the U.S. system** – all high school students are still required to take an academic core and, in many states, a college- and career-ready course of study, in addition to having the option to pursue a CTE pathway. From this perspective, **CTE is a “value add”** to the traditional high school experience, offering opportunities for specialized, career-focused coursework, hands-on learning and access to a network of mentors inside and outside the classroom, in addition to core academics.

Equally important is that high-quality CTE programs are designed to develop lifelong learners. **Programs of study**, by design, begin with foundational knowledge and skills and then progress to more occupationally-specific expectations over an intentional sequence of courses that extend across secondary and postsecondary. Programs of study like our **Excellence in Action award winners** offer opportunities for early postsecondary opportunities, meaningful work-based learning experiences and are anchored in credentials of value. These are programs not focused on short-term labor market needs – although they may fill them – but rather on the lifetime success of their students.

There is undoubtedly real value in this paper. It identifies important trade-offs and offers a potential **cautionary tale of focusing on the short-term needs of an economy when designing a career preparation system**. While it is important to continue to study international models – or, really study any models, policies or strategies that we think can help us get smarter about designing effective and meaningful career-focused pathways – this study also reaffirms that the efforts across the U.S. to drive quality CTE programs deserve just as much attention, if not more.

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