



COMMUNICATING THE VALUE AND PROMISE OF CTE WITH PARENTS AND STUDENTS

By Katie Fitzgerald

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) HAS COME A LONG WAY IN THE LAST DECADE.

CTE programs not only teach students real-world knowledge and skills, but increasingly provide opportunities for dual enrollment, industry-recognized credentials and meaningful work-based learning experiences (“Career technical,” 2017). Yet despite its many benefits, limited awareness and outdated perceptions still plague CTE. Enrollment has remained stagnant over the last decade while demand for skilled employees

soars in today’s global economy. If we are to prepare all learners for success in the careers of their choosing, more parents and students need to understand all that CTE has to offer.

Advance CTE, with support from the Siemens Foundation, commissioned focus groups and a national survey to explore the attitudes of parents and students currently involved in CTE, as well as prospective parents and students, to better understand how to communicate the value and promise of CTE.

Key Research Findings

As a result of this study, Advance CTE outlined five key findings: (“The value,” 2017).

- **CTE delivers for students and parents:** CTE students and parents are more satisfied with their education experience as compared to those not involved with CTE by nearly every measure, from general satisfaction with school experience to the quality of their classes and opportunities for career exploration.

“They want to hear more information about learning real-world skills through internships and hands-on projects inside and outside the classroom, as well as how CTE can offer pathways into college and careers through dual enrollment, internships, mentorships and networking.”

How Satisfied Are Students With...

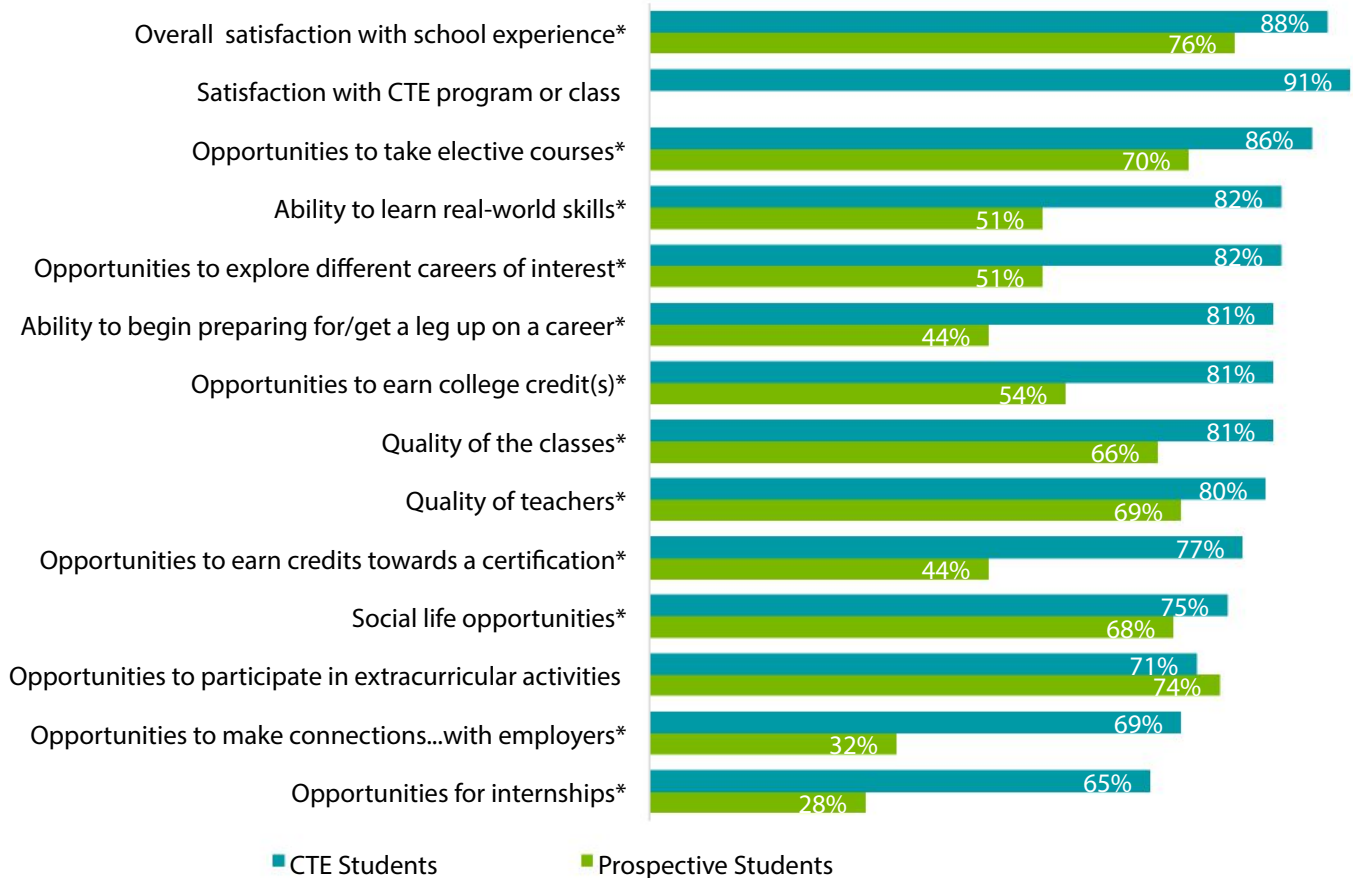


Figure 1: Student Satisfaction

- **College and career success are both important goals for parents and students:** Students (and parents for their children) aspire to a future career in a field about which they're passionate. At the same time, college remains a post-high school goal for nearly all parents and students.
- **Prospective parents and students are attracted to the "real-world" benefits of CTE:** There are many elements of CTE programs that stand out to parents and students, particularly the fact that CTE provides real-world skills within the education system, something parents and students want more of from their education.
- **CTE has an awareness challenge:** "Career technical education" has only moderate name recognition among parents, students and the general public, and understanding of how CTE is structured and delivered remains limited.
- **CTE needs champions and messengers:** The "who" is equally, if not more important than the "what" when it comes to communication. School counselors, teachers and CTE students are among the most trusted sources of information about CTE for prospective parents and students alike.

How to Use this Research Today

What the CTE community has known for so long — that CTE works for all students — is now validated through national data that demonstrates how students and their parents enjoy a better high school experience. This research highlights the ways in which CTE advocates can more effectively communicate about CTE with parents and students, so that they begin to view CTE as an option.

LANGUAGE THAT WORKS

- Real-world skills
- Hands-on experience
- Internship
- Mentorship
- Networking
- Explore career options and what you are passionate about
- Career and career-focused
- Extra advantage for both college and careers
- Leadership and confidence

LANGUAGE THAT DOESN'T WORK

- Workforce
- Jobs
- High-quality programs

1. Emphasize real-world skills.

When developing recruitment strategies and communication materials, whether for an on-site event or a direct mail campaign, it is critical to emphasize CTE's ability to equip students with real-world skills. Prospective parents want to hear about the tangible outcomes of CTE programs and the ways in which CTE gives purpose to learning. This opportunity is a particularly compelling theme for parents and students. They want to hear more information about learning through internships and hands-on projects inside and outside the classroom, as well as how CTE can offer pathways into college and careers. These opportunities and experiences help to fill a gap in education and make CTE appealing, given 86 percent of parents and students wish they had more chances to learn real-world skills in high school ("The value," 2017). Out of five messages tested, the notion that CTE provides real-world skills was chosen as one of the three most important elements of education by every subpopulation including race, ethnicity, gender, education level, income level and geographic distribution.

2. Find the right messenger.

Messengers, or those who communicate directly with parents and students, are a necessary component to getting more parents and students to consider CTE. Overall, those messengers who interact with parents and students on a regular basis are the most trusted sources of information about education opportunities. These include school counselors, teachers and other parents and students. Further down the list of trusted sources are the state department of education, superintendent, employers and the school principal.

However, many messengers may not communicate about CTE in a way that resonates with parents and students. Advance CTE and the American School Counselor Association conducted a survey of about 700 school counselors ("The state," 2018), and found that only about half of school counselors use the message, "prepare for the real world" with parents and students, which indicates there is work to be done to ensure that the most important messengers are armed with information on the best ways to speak to these audiences.

3. Communicate often and with purpose — and leverage the student voice whenever possible.

As part of this work, Advance CTE provided small grants to four states to pilot on-site and virtual recruitment strategies and activities anchored in the research findings. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) chose to conduct a multi-channel approach to reaching parents and students in three low-income middle schools.

The NJDOE developed a day-long school and career fair, partnering with a local college and bringing in professionals and students from the community. While a career fair may not sound like a unique pilot program, what was distinctive was the intentionality. NJDOE recruited a wide range of career professionals who reflected the diversity of the middle school students who would attend, including ethnicity, race and gender, and from similar communities.

The career fair, held at Kean University in Union, New Jersey, detailed the ways in which middle school students can begin planning for their own career pathways — and highlighted the opportunities for such enrichment at institutions like Kean. Too often, CTE is pitted against college, and while there are many careers that don't involve completion of a four-year degree, many do require some postsecondary training. It is important to note that parents and students aspire, overwhelmingly, to participate in postsecondary education. Eighty-five percent of parents and students believe getting a college degree is important ("The value," 2017). When CTE is described as an alternative pathway, the assumption is then, often incorrectly, made that it is lesser when it is anything but.

CTE alumni and college student Lauren Fillebrown delivered a keynote at the event, during which she discussed how participation in CTE in high school helped her find her passion; provided networking and mentorship opportunities; and set her on a pathway toward a career in agriculture. Students from local career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) led a number of activities with middle school students to highlight

the importance of CTE. All presenters, students and professionals were provided with the real-world message to ensure everyone was speaking consistently about opportunities in CTE.

Outcomes from the career fair were fantastic! Forty percent of students reported an increased understanding of how to prepare for a certain career path and intended to speak to a school counselor regarding course scheduling as a result of their experience at the event. Students across each school district also reported that their participation in the career awareness day directly increased their level of interest in engineering (50 percent), transportation distribution and logistics (40 percent), computer science (38 percent) and manufacturing (33 percent). Additionally, 37 percent of students felt that studying a specific career path would increase their engagement and interest in high school (“Grant report,” 2017).

Following the event, NJDOE staff attended a number of back-to-school events at the same middle schools in an effort to meet students’ parents and reinforce the information presented at Kean University. CTSO student speakers continued to conduct workshops at middle schools throughout the state to reach even more students and their parents.

4. Connecting with an audience means having the right message and the right channel of communication.

While it’s important to use a multi-channel approach when developing a communications strategy, the national survey indicated that a quarter of parents and students would use social media to learn more about education opportunities. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) chose to highlight CTE programs and offerings in the state by working with two districts to create effective social media campaigns targeting parents and students.

The department and districts conducted their own series of focus groups with students, parents and counselors to determine the best messages and social media channels to use. Though slightly inconsistent with the national research, they found that one district learned that

the “real-world” message was most compelling, while the other district resonated most with the “explore possibilities” message. Researchers also found that parents are more likely to receive information on Facebook and Twitter, while students use video and photo-based applications such as Instagram and Snapchat.

The school districts and MSDE then worked with a communications firm to create social media templates and messages targeting parents and students using that which tested best in their district. The messages focused not just on the terms “real world” and “explore possibilities,” but also showcased students in the classroom and workplace, aiming to help parents and students better understand how CTE is embedded in the high school experience.

After messaging, the MSDE created a social media guide with templates, sample social media posts, distribution strategies and a year-long social media calendar to encourage school districts across the state to post during the crucial moments for program success: back-to-school night, enrollment in courses, manufacturing day and more.

5. Localize your examples, and make them relevant. Don’t forget the details.

Communicating effectively about CTE is challenging for many reasons. Not only are students and parents largely unaware of the term “career and technical education,” they also do not understand what CTE programs entail at the high school level. Additionally, for more traditional CTE careers such as manufacturing, there is still significant stigma to overcome. To combat this, the Indiana Department of Education used the research and messages and hosted three on-site events with high school students at manufacturing facilities in rural districts.

These events brought together students and employers to dispel myths and highlight what a career in advanced manufacturing consists of in their own community. Students were able to ask employers questions, and heard from a panel of educators, employers and additional stakeholders to learn about manufacturing career pathways. The site

visit allowed students an opportunity to see firsthand how local employers are involved in CTE in their own schools, and through pre- and post-surveys found that students increased their interest in manufacturing careers. A mailing was sent to parents of those students who attended, reinforcing what students learned at the event.

Conclusion

These pilot activities have been designed to discover what works, and what doesn’t work when communicating with parents and students; and have resulted in a number of tools, resources and strategies to use at the local, district and state levels. ■

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EXPLORE MORE

To learn more about the research, pilot activities and how you can begin using the messages in your own outreach efforts, visit www.careertech.org/recruitment-strategies.