

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

Increased Opportunities

I shrug off my jacket, slip off my Converse, and heft my bag of groceries into the kitchen. Joining my cousin, I spread our supplies across the counter. Thankfully, my aunt already dropped off the chicken and placed it in the oven, so one item is completed. Under the guidance of my grandmother, we mash the potatoes, chop the green beans, and stir the gravy. Then comes the cutting of the chicken, the final task. I'm about to cut into the bird when I hear, "Cool! Those white bands there are the tendons. We dissected a chicken today at school."

"Gross!" I respond, laughing. "This is our dinner!"

"I know, but.... Oh, wait, if you cut the bone here...look! It's dark red; that's the bone marrow. Isn't this awesome?"

"Yes, it would be awesome, if I wasn't planning on eating tonight. You're ruining my appetite." Chuckling, I shake my head and pass her the knife to finish the job.

My cousin attends Kent Career Tech Center (KCTC) for nursing. This is one of the many instances in which she has displayed her enthusiasm for the learning she has experienced there. At KCTC, she studies with students of like-minded interests and work ethic. She explores applicable and interesting subjects that pertain to her future field of study. Daily, almost 2,000 high schoolers from over twenty school districts attend KCTC. From agriscience to culinary, from automotive technology to aviation electronics, from construction to engineering, from criminal justice to nursing, KCTC helps students pursue their career interests ("Preparing").

Since their debut in the 1910s, vocational education programs have advanced from a dumping ground for poor and struggling children to a practical choice for many students

(Hanford). Programs have further developed to include not only skilled trades but also applied sciences and modern technology. They provide and connect students to work experiences, on-the-job training, job shadows, and internships (“Career”). Beyond the technical skills, they also teach practical and marketable skills that will help students whether they choose to attend a university or focus on a career in a skilled trade (“Career”). Despite these benefits, career and technical education (CTE) programs have been declining for decades. Beginning in the 1980s, states increased the number of required credits to graduate high school. These new requirements, along with declining funds, have led to an overall decrease in CTE participation—until recently (Jacob). In the past decade, the lack of qualified skilled job applicants has led to a resurgence in interest. However, most career education facilities lack the funding and space necessary and must turn away many potential students. By refocusing on career and technical education, West Michigan’s businesses, schools, and citizens will witness economic growth and a more motivated high school population.

Encouraging career and technical education in West Michigan will profit businesses because it will narrow the skills gap. Vocational jobs such as carpenters, electricians, and construction workers are continually in high demand in West Michigan (“West Michigan’s Hot Jobs”). However, as the Baby Boomers retire there are not enough skilled laborers to fill their positions (Scott). “According to the U.S. Manufacturing Institute, the industry will need to fill more than three million open positions over the next decade, as many as two million of which will go unfilled due to a skills gap and shortage of technical education” (Copacino).

Manufacturing is not the only business lacking skilled employees. “Seventy-percent of construction companies nationwide are having trouble finding qualified workers, according to the Associated General Contractors of America” (Gross and Marcus). From now until 2022 over

one-third of new jobs will be in construction and health care (Gross and Marcus). If 70% of construction companies already struggle to find employees the problems will only increase over the upcoming years if nothing is done to fill those positions. Brian Long, the director of Supply Management Research at Grand Valley State University, stated that “Michigan still has 80,000 jobs that can't be filled because of the scarcity of trained workers” (Scott). Mechanical skills are also in high demand. Greg Penny at Woodward’s Garage in Kalamazoo noted that while business continues to grow, the number of workers he can find to fill positions is declining (Jokich). Steve Huizenga at Allied Mechanical Services in Grand Rapids shares Penny’s struggles. “We are at a shortage of 20 percent right now... it’s hard to find people to do the type of work we do” (Jokich). Students graduating from nursing programs will fill roles at Spectrum Health. With the aging Baby Boomer population, the nursing field rapidly expands. From 2014 to 2024 almost 3,300 registered nurse positions were and are expected to open up in West Michigan (“West Michigan’s Hot Jobs”). Nursing programs, such as those offered at KCTC, will prepare students to fulfill the post-secondary training required to become a registered nurse. This will provide Spectrum with highly qualified nurses to work with their patients. By advocating interest in CTE, more high schoolers will choose that route and therefore increase the number of skilled workers to fill the labor market.

Increasing awareness will also heighten interest by exposing parents and students to the many benefits. The negative stigma associated with technical education directly results from its past reputation. In order to understand its status, we must first understand its history. Due to the rapidly industrializing America, factory owners faced a shortage of skilled labor. So, the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 authorized the first federal funding for vocational education (Hanford). However, instead of preparing students for future education, it separated the poorer farm kids

and immigrants from the wealthier children. School sent the more affluent children to universities and directed the less privileged students to trade schools. In the 1960s two studies uncovered that the majority of students from vocational schools were from lower-income families (Hanford). They also discovered that graduates from some programs were just as likely to receive a job as high school dropouts (Hanford). By the 90s, vocational education programs had become mostly populated by students who weren't successful in a traditional school environment (Hanford). These students included children with behavioral problems and learning disabilities. At this point in time, education in traditional schools far surpassed vocational teachings. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 highlighted this distinction (Hanford). Requirements in math and reading comprehension forced vocational schools to improve their education out of fear of being shut down (Hanford). Since then, vocational schools have increased their focus on academic education in addition to trade skills. Career and technical schools nowadays work to prepare students for both career and college and have expanded to encompass careers such as healthcare, engineering, and criminal justice ("Preparing"). However, many students overlook the recent developments due to CTE's past struggles. Currently, graduating from a four-year institution and finding a steady job is the American Dream. From a young age, children are told that college is the path to a happy and prosperous life. Most students are unaware of other options. Promoting career and technical education in high school will introduce students to alternative forms of education beyond the traditional four-year approach. Half of all STEM jobs require less than a bachelor's degree ("About CTE"). These professions include dental hygienist, graphic designer, and electrical technician and require either a two-year degree or a certificate ("8 High Paying"). However, without increased awareness in high school,

people will continue on their journey toward a four-year degree and neglect to explore other possibilities.

Nevertheless, not all students thrive in career-based schooling. In order to participate in CTE programming, a student must answer the difficult, burdensome, formidable, terrifying question: What will I be when I grow up? Through traditional schooling, students are exposed to a wide variety of classes that prompt them to try unfamiliar skills and explore new areas of expertise. Career and technical education requires students to determine their profession from a younger age. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost 80% of college students in America change their major at least once (Ramos). The majority of students need to research and explore many skills before choosing a lifelong profession. However, for students who determine their career early-on, CTE schooling will help them get a head start on required knowledge.

Schools can also benefit from an increased number of high school graduates. Massachusetts was one of the first states to revitalize their CTE programs, coining them as Regional Vocational High Schools (“Advantages”). Ninety-five percent of students graduate from these high schools—a 13% increase from the average 82% of students who graduate from traditional high schools in Massachusetts (“Advantages”). Nationally the graduation rate for CTE schools is the same (95%), ten percent above the national average (“78 Career”). The reason for this dramatic shift is motivation. Immersing students in subjects they find interesting can cause them to be more engaged and henceforth improve core academic skills as well (Jacob). A CTE study done by Applied Education Systems concludes that “70% of CTE students say entering a CTE program of study helped them get better grades” (“78 Career”). Although not all kids benefit from hands-on learning and experiences, the majority of CTE students profit from the

shift in curriculum. Along with the core academic and trade skills being taught, CTE schools also teach “soft skills” that are necessary for any career (Jacob). These skills include communication, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, time management, work ethic, and flexibility (Loretto). Regardless of whether a CTE graduate advances to a university or proceeds to find a job immediately, the skills taught in a CTE school will benefit the student by making them more marketable to an employer.

Individuals also benefit from increased earning potential. In a study done by James Kemple, students who attended a career academy earned 11% (or \$2,088) more per year than the control group (Kemple). The control group was, in this case, students not attending a Career Academy. His study evaluated the long-term effects of attending a career-based high school. He and the team at MDRC observed High School students in California, Washington D.C., Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Texas (Kemple). In addition to increased pay, students who choose a vocational path often have much less debt. Sixty percent of vocational jobs do not require a four-year degree but instead a two-year degree or a certificate (Scott). Also, as many as 30 million jobs in the U.S. have an average annual salary of \$55,000 and do not require a bachelor’s degree (Gross and Marcus). Without college debt, vocational students are able to advance more quickly without having to worry about paying off loans. Career and technical schools are also often connected to the world of work. In the case of health care, at the Kent Career Tech Center (KCTC), a student can become a Certified Nurse’s Assistant (CNA) after only two years of free education. By becoming a CNA, students are able to continue to learn about medicine while simultaneously earning money for college, where they can fulfill the education necessary for a higher paying job (“Preparing”). When workers earn higher wages it also benefits the economy because the workers are able to spend more on consumer goods and

promote a healthier economy. The quality of life in the community will also improve with successful businesses and well-paid residents (“Advantages”).

In West Michigan efforts have already been made to put a focus on career and technical education. The Kent Career Tech Center (KCTC) allows students from Kent County to extend their knowledge beyond core academics and explore career-based education. In the Grand Rapids area there are also theme-based schools such as the West Michigan Aviation Academy where students develop piloting skills. Although these places exist, many people do not know about them or their many advantages. By increasing emphasis on career and technical education in high school, students will become aware of the many options they have before embarking on postsecondary schooling. This will benefit our community by generating interest in CTE, leading to the closing of the skills gap. It will also help our students with increased motivation as they study among pupils with similar interests and enthusiasm. The enjoyment of career classes is not limited to my cousin. Her fellow students also embrace the hands-on learning, intriguing topics, knowledgeable staff, and relatable peers. Refocusing West Michigan’s emphasis on CTE will expand opportunities for more high schoolers to experience this engaging and exploratory environment.

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