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features

The Power of Three
The energy generated by a SkillsUSA competition team spawns an invention that may help solve a problem for two industries.
BY ANN P. SCHREIBER

Root to Stem: Sowing Seeds of Change
A reformer in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education credits SkillsUSA with giving him leadership skills and a reason to stay in school.
BY TOM KERCHEVAL

Gold Standard: Student
Diagnosed with dyslexia, Brittany Velez spent years in special education. Now the high-school senior is at the top of her class. Find out what led to this personal 180-degree turnaround.
BY CRAIG E. MOORE

Small Steps Lead to Big Results
Step inside SkillsUSA’s newest training events, Activate and Leverage, designed for first-time leaders or state officers who want to maximize their potential.
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SkillsUSA Champion Nicholas Perez of Bradbury, Calif. Photo by Lloyd Wolf.
In keeping with a tradition of respect for the individuality of our members and our role in workforce development, SkillsUSA strives to ensure inclusive participation in all of our programs, partnerships and employment opportunities.
Many Happy Returns

Executive Director Tim Lawrence has known SkillsUSA as a student member, instructor, industry partner and state director. Got a question? He can help.

Q: How can I set educational goals that will have the best return on my investment of time and energy?

Tim: We often think of investments as financial in nature, but the skills you’re developing today are also an investment in your future that will pay real dividends.

The work you’re doing right now in your SkillsUSA chapter will pay off. This time of year is when technical skill development, competitions, service projects and leadership opportunities all culminate.

As an organization, SkillsUSA does the same for America’s future. We invest for a future payoff by being part of the STEM movement. STEM is an acronym for fields of study in the categories of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The U.S. Department of Education, governors, colleges and industry are putting a huge focus on STEM, which directly affects funding and programming at the local, state and national levels.

SkillsUSA is investing in STEM because it will help students be ready for the next wave of jobs and improve our nation’s competitiveness. There will be a sharp increase in jobs requiring these skills by 2020. Our goal as a leader in workforce development is to make sure we have teachers ready to fill some important gaps in education — and students ready to learn these vital skills.

In this issue, you’ll find a great example of STEM education in action: three Washington students combining forces for the SkillsUSA Championships. Their Engineering Technology/Design project was to solve the problem of young migrating salmon being sucked into river dam turbines. As the project grew, so did their skills, knowledge and confidence. Now all three students have new abilities plus STEM career paths mapped out.

You’ll also read about former SkillsUSA member Alan Gomez, president and chief academic officer of the STEM Academy. He tells how SkillsUSA gave his education sharper focus and set him on a path of achievement within the STEM movement.

Stories like these are what SkillsUSA is all about. Students invest in their future through technical training and SkillsUSA. Our teachers and administrators make a difference in students’ lives, a return on investment with immeasurable dividends.

Thank you for the investment you’re making to keep SkillsUSA the nation’s premier student organization in workforce and professional development.

Got questions about SkillsUSA or other topics? Email anyinfo@skillsusa.org or send a letter to the address on the facing page. Put “Ask Tim” in the subject line or mail address.
Partnership with Lowe’s
Strengthens Its Local Roots

Partnerships with SkillsUSA at the national level accomplish wonderful things, but partnerships that take root locally? The fruits they produce taste extra sweet.

Lowe’s ongoing partnership with SkillsUSA is about to yield another big local harvest through the work of this year’s “Schools in Need” grant recipients.

Each year, Lowe’s awards grants of up to $25,000 to local chapters to support classroom improvements, leadership development and more. This year, 21 schools in 17 states received grants for a variety of worthy projects. At Logos Public Charter School in Medford, Ore., for example, students will build a classroom and update equipment, while students at Bryan Senior High School in Omaha, Neb., will purchase official SkillsUSA attire.

For the full list of winners, visit: www.skillsusa.org/educators/lowes.shtml.

Lowe’s representatives deliver new welding equipment to students at Cedartown (Ga.) High School, one of the recipients of a “Schools in Need” grant in 2013. More needs will be met in 2014.

Skills Fly South for the Spring

In 2012, 11 members from the SkillsUSA WorldTeam visited São Paulo, Brazil, to participate in the WorldSkills Americas competition. The results were impressive: three gold, two silver and two bronze medals.

SkillsUSA returns to the competition in April, this time held in Bogota, Colombia. The team has yet to be fully assembled, but one thing’s for certain: members will be looking for your support as they proudly represent the United States. The four-day event will feature nearly 50 contests and more than 20 countries.

For full details on the team as it develops, visit: www.skillsusa.org/compete/worldskillsamerica.shtml.
Sure, SkillsUSA is a great organization and an awesome example of what a career and technical student organization can be. But there are other great CTSOs out there, too, and when many voices become one, some powerful messages can be sent. That’s the idea behind a new website that nine CTSOs have joined forces to help create: www.ctsos.org.

One of the site’s main goals is to be an advocacy tool for career and technical education proponents when corresponding with politicians and decision-makers. The site helps explain the value of CTE and its role in building not just a strong economy, but also strong communities.

The website features information about each CTSO involved in the project, the latest CTE and CTSO news, Twitter and Facebook feeds, and more. It also features download links for advocacy fliers that have been personalized for each state. Along with a short, effective message on the value of CTSOs, the fliers contain info on the total number of CTSO members statewide as well as within each congressional district in the state. It’s a great way to make a generalized message seem more personal and relevant to the government leader receiving it.

SkillsUSA isn’t just something to participate in while you’re in school; it’s a lifestyle. In fact, SkillsUSA relies on its past student members for all sorts of things, from help at conferences to mentoring ... even to brokering industry partnerships. It’s not just a one-sided relationship, though. Joining the SkillsUSA Alumni and Friends Association gives you the opportunity to network with current industry partners and other former SkillsUSA members. You’ll get a snazzy alumni membership card, a quarterly newsletter and more. Membership is free. For details, visit: www.skillsusa.org/supporters/alumni.shtml.

In this day and age, every little bit helps when it comes to finances. (Come to think of it, is there a “day and age” when that hasn’t been true?) SkillsUSA has partnered with American Airlines this year to bring our members 5 percent off published fares — including sale prices — to attend the National Leadership and Skills Conference in Kansas City, Mo., this June. That means you can shell out a little less gold on your quest to bring home a lot of gold (medals, that is).

The travel dates authorized for this discount span from June 10-28, and the destination must be Kansas City International Airport.

For full instructions on how to claim your savings, visit: www.skillsusa.org/events/nlscair.shtml.
Salmon or hydropower? Both are critical to the Washington state economy, but gains for one industry often mean losses to the other. The steps of three high-school students may literally help solve this longtime dilemma.

At Central Kitsap High School in Silverdale, Wash., senior Rachel Kagan and teammates Kaitlyn Duarte and Larisa Brown learned about the declining salmon population in their environmental class. River dams that generate electricity also can be an obstacle to fish migration.

When young salmon hatch and grow to the 3-inch fingerling size, they swim downstream. Unfortunately, many fingerlings are sucked into the dams’ turbines. Lowering turbine speeds means economic loss for the power plants, and the process isn’t foolproof: lots of the fish still die.

The students chose this problem as the basis of their Engineering Technology/Design entry in the SkillsUSA Championships. Between the three of them, their studies had covered computer-assisted drafting, chemistry, physics, robotics, statics (an engineering term), environmental science, language arts, trigonometry, geometry and calculus. Using these complementary skills, the team found what they consider the best solution: combining a slide with stairs to help the fingerlings swim downstream.

They began by studying the ladders already built near dams to help salmon swim upstream. “We thought, ‘Why not just harvest that idea and utilize and manipulate it to be dual purpose instead of just one purpose?’” Brown says.

“We wanted a solution that would adapt to the environment, to mimic nature,” Duarte adds. “This invention would transform from stairs to a slide — simplistic, yet efficient. The stairs will systematically drop down, then a slide will be created.”
With their design, the stairs are raised in the fall, when mature salmon return to fresh water to spawn. In the spring, the stair dividers are dropped, allowing the young salmon, or smolt, to safely slide downstream.

Gills and drills
Thanks to a Lowe’s grant offered through SkillsUSA, their school was able to purchase tools, which the team needed to construct their working prototype. As they got started, the students realized they were breaking new ground.

“Before this year, I hadn’t really used a drill at all,” Kagan reflects. “We don’t have that stuff at home — mostly a screwdriver. But this year, I’ve built with Plexiglas, all sorts of glue, just everything.”

They were also venturing into a career area with students who are predominantly male. Brown, who’d previously competed in a robotics contest, now says she’s proud to have been part of an all-female team in engineering.

As the project progressed, the three developed their skills beyond the technical aspects, such as working under pressure and as part of a group. In fact, their teamwork skills became so synchronized, they started answering questions in unison, according to Duarte.

Through the SkillsUSA competition experience, Kagan says she learned a great deal about both time management and building things from her teammates and her instructor, Jim Adamson.

“There were a lot of sleepless nights staying up and working on this, but we learned the outcomes,” she admits.

“Originally when I first started working on this project,” Duarte explains, “I was like, ‘OK, I’ve got this great idea; I don’t know where to go with it at all’ ... and then I ran into Rachel. Rachel’s all like, ‘We could do this part, too, if we modify that,’ and then Larisa’s all like, ‘Well, if we apply statics to this, we could have this, and this could work.’ It’s like a snowball effect. We just kind of go down a mountain, and then at the end, we have what we have currently constructed.”

The team’s process included rendering computer models and printing them on a 3-D printer. They also developed an animated 3-D video showing how their combination stair slide works.

“We looked at different systems of flipping up, flipping down, moving side to side, dropping down into the foundation and things like that,” Brown says. They considered how the rivers would be affecting the material and talked to an industry professional in concrete and construction.

With teamwork and ingenuity, students invent a combination stair slide to help boost salmon populations without disrupting hydropower systems

By Ann P. Schreiber
Brown adds, “We also addressed what the impact of this system would be on the people around, on the communities, the local home owners, the people eating the fish, the fish themselves, making sure the fish would be able to survive through the system using lots of calculations.”

**STEM-ing the tide**

Working on the competition has helped all of them sort out their career paths. Each is pursuing a career in a field related to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

Kagan, in her final year of high school, plans on a career in chemical or nuclear engineering. Brown is majoring in electrical engineering at Seattle University, specializing in computer engineering. She plans to earn a master’s degree and work in robotics or the aerospace industry.

“I originally was a little iffy on what I wanted to do,” says Duarte, who’s now at Whitworth University in Spokane, studying computer science and international business management.

Duarte adds that her role with the team was heavy in planning and management. “And actually, I didn’t know I was interested in management until I did this team effort. Being in an actual working environment, we have been communicating with all types of people. It’s been very much an eye-opening experience.

“SkillsUSA enables you to have this opportunity to take your basic knowledge and accumulate it into a full project and actually implement it,” she explains.

According to Duarte, the competition allowed them to apply the concepts they were learning in their science classes, with the added bonus of helping the students sharpen their communications skills.

“We got to apply all of this into our own concept, take it out of our brains, and make it into a reality.” •

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Clockwise from top left: Duarte gathers data at the Poulsbo, Wash., fish park; Kagan and Brown build a prototype; and Brown with the team’s stair-slide diorama.
Executive Director Tim Lawrence had just delivered a presentation on SkillsUSA to industry, education and government leaders at a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) education conference in Arlington, Va. An audience member was about to add an unexpected exclamation point to the message.

“People were nodding their heads,” Alan Gomez recalls the panel discussion, sponsored by STEMconnector. “Sometimes, people don’t really understand.” So the president and chief academic officer of the STEM Academy stood, revealed himself as a SkillsUSA alumnus and shared his story of how it transformed a rudderless high-school student into a visionary leader in education reform.

That story took root in Milwaukee, where Gomez, now 42, was born. “[My family] didn’t really have a lot,” he remembers. “Upper lower class, maybe lower middle class.” His performance in high school hit similar marks. “I was the kid who just got by,” he says. “Nothing really inspired me.”

It finally took an uninspiring comment from a guidance counselor to motivate him. “She told me I shouldn’t bother going to college,” Gomez reveals, “that I’m ‘not college material.’” He doesn’t recall the counselor’s name, but he does remember her secretary: Janice Pallon.

Once told he wasn’t “college material,” a former member creates materials used to shape education from kindergarten through college.
“SkillsUSA kept me connected, gave me a rationale for being [in school] and gave me the leadership and survival skills to get through and beyond any obstacles.”

—Alan Gomez, chief academic officer, STEM Academy

“[Pallon] said, ‘If you have the desire to be there, go,’” Gomez fondly recollects. The two diametrically opposed comments yielded one result: a newly inspired student on a mission to forge his future.

Gomez had already acquired another ally on that mission, and he would soon come to understand how important an ally it could be; he’d recently become a member of SkillsUSA. “One of my instructors, Jim Reinhard, got me to join and participate in the contests,” Gomez says. But it was more than just the contests that began to influence the young student.

“At first, it was more social than leadership,” he adds. “But we got to learn and love the organization, and later, it became leadership. I didn’t know it at the time, but SkillsUSA kept me connected, gave me a rationale for being [in school] and gave me the leadership and survival skills to get through and beyond any obstacles.”

Gomez labels his first competitive experience (in Cabinetmaking) a “colossal failure.” The next year, he became the state champion. “I adapted,” he explains. “I had a plan to optimize my time before I even started. It was that organization and those [soft] skills I learned in SkillsUSA that got me through.”

Those skills became a launching point for Gomez after high school, as his guidance counselor’s advice went spectacularly unheeded: three years in architectural school, a bachelor’s degree in education, a career as a technology education instructor on the middle- and high-school levels, a master’s degree in education and, most recently, a Ph.D. in industrial and systems engineering from the University of Wisconsin, where he currently teaches. He’s also served as a SkillsUSA advisor, part of a team at Sun Prairie (Wis.) Area School District that grew the program from nothing in 2005 into the state’s largest SkillsUSA chapter by 2010. The once uninspired student is now inspiring change in education with curriculum he’s developed through the STEM Academy, an organization Gomez co-founded in 2008 (www.stem101.org).

“Decision-makers in education think if it was good enough the way they did it ‘back then,’ it’s good enough today,” he says. “That’s not a vision. That’s like a wake at a funeral.”

How do programs like SkillsUSA fit in? “Here’s where the hair on the back of my neck stands up,” Gomez exclaims. “STEM is an integrated approach to education. SkillsUSA is a celebration of the things that are integrated in class and school. It’s evidence that you ‘can do’ and are not just a piece of paper. GPA is an indicator of your potential. It’s not the only indicator.”

Gomez is evidence of that. •

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Brittany Velez has already faced more than her fair share of uphill battles, so it’s good that she takes them in stride.

Whether it’s an Advanced Placement course workload, a technical program in dental assisting, or being captain of her school’s varsity basketball and soccer teams, the Fitchburg, Mass., student is always willing to do a little more.

“I like to take on challenges,” she says — something learned at a very early age.

Her Spanish-speaking family moved to Massachusetts from Puerto Rico when she was just 2 years old. While Velez says “coming and trying to integrate into the English language was very difficult,” she also had to overcome a learning disability. “I’m dyslexic,” she explains.

Finding it hard to grasp subjects, Velez was sent to special education classes throughout elementary and middle school. But “I didn’t really want to use that as an excuse as to why I’m not successful in the future,” she says. With a lot of hard work, the student was back in regular classes by her freshman year of high school.

“I wanted to do big things,” she explains. Not coincidentally, that was also the year she joined SkillsUSA at Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School. Her older brother was a member, and Velez had heard his “great stories.” So she said, “OK, I really want to get involved.”

Velez jumped right into the mix, first as a voting delegate and later as SkillsUSA secretary for her school. Gaining confidence, she ran for state office and was elected SkillsUSA Massachusetts president during the 2012-13 school year.

Last June, Velez became a SkillsUSA national officer and now serves as the high school division’s secretary. That’s a long way to come for a self-described “special-ed kid who wasn’t smart.”

She describes the change this way: “Through the [SkillsUSA] experience ... I’ve been able to do a 180-degree transformation.” Velez credits her chapter advisor, Anne Marie Cataldo, and state association director, Karen Ward, with helping shape her life by continuing to provide her with the encouragement she needs.

Now at the top of her senior class of more than 360 students, the aspiring oral surgeon might make it look easy, but schoolwork is still challenging for her. Good time management is a must.

“I have to try more when it comes easier to other people, but I don’t mind,” Velez says. “I’m not going to use any challenges that have found their way into my path as an excuse not to be successful.”

Her next goal? College. “I want to go to Harvard. That’s my dream. That’s why I’m working so hard to stand out from the rest of the crowd.”
Just as the smallest of steps can sometimes lead to the greatest of rewards, simply signing up to attend an Activate or Leverage training event can make a big difference in a SkillsUSA member’s life.

“It’s an incredible opportunity to find our true talents and strengths and utilize them,” one member remarked after attending an event last year. Another student added, “It’s an amazing way to learn how to become an amazing leader not only in SkillsUSA, but in life as well.”

Leverage is an exciting leadership training program that’s open to all high-school and college/postsecondary state officers. Through high-energy, motivational training that focuses on servant leadership, the event equips the student officers with the knowledge and skills to lead their state SkillsUSA associations. Officers learn personal skills, how to work as part of a team, and how to use those new skills to serve others in their state.

Held concurrently, the Activate training program is open to all SkillsUSA students. It’s designed for those just beginning to assume leadership roles at the chapter level. While they serve as role models and on teams that get things done, they may have a hard time getting started. Activate helps them find their “start button” through action-oriented, high-energy and motivational programming.

During both events, state officers and chapter leaders discover how to ignite and maximize their leadership potential. They learn what motivates them and how to motivate others. They look at what it means to present a positive image — and the effects that can have on them, their school, SkillsUSA, and career and technical education. The training also gives participants employability skills to benefit their careers.

In the words of one member, Leverage and Activate training “honestly changed my life.” Take that small step, the one that leads to big results. Both events will be held June 21-23 in Kansas City, Mo. Visit skillsusa-register.org to learn how you can seize this opportunity.

See a brief video of Activate and Leverage training at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHWXUe_MSFO
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- Washington Leadership Training Institute

For details and registration, visit: www.skillsusa.org/educators/training.shtml
If You’ve Failed to Prepare, You’ve Prepared to Fail

Let’s face it, even the word sounds boring: “planning.” After all, when there’s a goal you’re after, you want to get to work, not talk. Turns out, planning is part of that work. Effective planning can not only help you reach a goal faster, but can help you get better results, too.

As a class, discuss the most important steps in planning a SkillsUSA chapter activity. Write a brief description of what each step entails, and list each step in the order you think it should be performed.

Next, check out SkillsUSA’s “Chapter Activity Planner” at: www.skillsusa.org/educators/cap.shtml. It’s a free tool designed to make planning for chapter activities an easier and more effective experience.

Look at the six steps of planning listed on the Web page. How do they compare to your list? Go through the student module to see how the planner works, then download the tool and use it to plan your next activity. The results are bound to be — dare we say it — exciting!

As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.
— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Find the photo, win a prize

No, the picture on the left isn’t abstract art. It’s actually a distorted part of another photo in this issue. Find the original photo and send us the page number where it appears to win a SkillsUSA sport duffel bag (first prize) or travel mug (second prize). To enter, email your answer, name, address and phone number to: anyinfo@skillsusa.org (include “Photo Contest” in the subject line). Or, send to: SkillsUSA Photo Contest, 14001 SkillsUSA Way, Leesburg, VA 20176. One first- and one second-prize winner will be drawn from the correct entries. Entries must be received by March 15.

Congratulations to last issue’s winners: Daniel Miller of Henderson, Colo., and Sofia Andersson of Pine Mountain, Ga.
A LITTLE TLC LIFTS SPIRITS OF PATIENTS

For patients dealing with blood disorders, a little pampering can go a long way, especially during the holidays. That’s why SkillsUSA cosmetology students Danica Barnes, Caylan Benge and Iva Kessler led culinary, multimedia and graphic design students to organize a Merry Makeovers event benefiting the local Texas Center for Cancer or Blood Disorders.

The Weatherford (Texas) High School students facilitated the event and provided manicures, pedicures and facials. Culinary students provided punch and treats. A multimedia student took holiday portraits of the patients, and a graphic design student created the fliers and invitations for the event.

Carnival builds camaraderie

To foster school spirit among students from feeder schools, Maine’s Mid-Coast School of Technology advisors and students organized a winter carnival. Activities at the Rockland school included a dance as well as food and blood drives. For a pie-in-the-face contest, students paid 50 cents to vote on who’d receive one (such as welding instructor Ed Lee, above, from student Liza Clark). In a “penny war,” groups collected money, with the value of the pennies counting toward a group’s point total and the value of other coins or dollar bills being subtracted.

Funds went to two local families with loved ones battling cancer.

White House teleconference

Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School in Upton, Mass., hosted a teleconference with the White House. Sam Kass, executive director of Let’s Move! and senior advisor for nutrition policy, addressed health services and culinary students, as well as youngsters from Woodland Elementary School in Milford. The elementary students held signs they drew showing Kass (pictured on the screen) the fruits and vegetables they ate during the week. The event was facilitated by the SkillsUSA Community Service contest team at the high school.

One question on everybody’s mind: What’s the president’s favorite vegetable? According to Kass, the entire Obama family likes broccoli.

For more on Let’s Move!, visit: www.letsmove.gov.

Got talent?

Students at Dr. James A. Forrest Career and Technology Center in Leonardtown, Md., held a talent show to raise funds to travel to SkillsUSA’s state and national championships. Besides learning how to organize and manage an event, students gained stage experience. Mariah Blackstock and Shelby Boyer documented and presented the project as their entry in the Community Action competition and took home fifth place in the nation.

Photo: Mid-Coast School of Technology, Rockland, Maine. Used with permission.
SkillsUSA Champions features our members’ photography. We’re looking for images of SkillsUSA chapters in action, or ones that show individual members’ concentration or perseverance. For details, email thall@skillsusa.org (put “Image Photo” in the subject header) or write SkillsUSA Champions, 14001 SkillsUSA Way, Leesburg, VA 20176. The photographer’s chapter is awarded $150.

I am a dream chaser. I set the bar high for myself, and I always remind myself to take any opportunity, to always think positively and to work hard at everything I do.

Elena Melekos, a former SkillsUSA national officer from Hopatcong, N.J., is majoring in counseling psychology at Johnson and Wales University.

Open wide! Students Markell Cowan and Erin Kealey perform a canine dental exam for their animal science class at Eastern Long Island Academy of Applied Technology in Bellport, N.Y. The photographer is Samir Masrour, whose advisor is Elizabeth Grafer.

The students hold several meetings, host a general session with guest speakers, do a community service project, attend an industry tour, run a fundraiser, compete, and hold a social event. Sounds simple, right?

National officer Zach Pechacek reports from SkillsUSA’s three-day Mid-America Conference in Columbus, Neb. Ten states participated in the event, which is now in its 36th year.
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