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Workforce Education at the 10,000 Feet and One Foot Levels

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ABSTRACT

This article provides the perspective of the executive director of a national education association as he retires after 19 years as a national workforce development thought leader. He provides insights including the essential skills required for all learners and the unique opportunities for adult learners to help fill the skills gap as baby boomers retire.

Keywords: workforce development, adult education, career technical education, student development, career change, employability, skills, technical education.



INTRODUCTION

Retiring as the leader of a national student professional organization of over 365,000 members annually brings on much contemplation about the people I have met, the places I have traveled, and the things I have done in more than three decades in workforce development. I jumped from an airplane with the U.S. Army's Golden Knights parachute team at a height well over 10,000 feet as part of a student influencer public relations program. I met face-to-face with a young man struggling to find a career path, personally paid for his flight to tour the best postsecondary welding school in the nation, and then helped him enroll. In both cases, the experience was exhilarating.

I have based my career in workforce education on an appreciation of people along with genuine curiosity and interest in others. Day after day and year after year, I connected with thousands of students and instructors from across the country. Many were adult learners who were career changers, veterans, and individuals juggling young families and full-time jobs as they were striving to change their lives. I met a fascinating woman from Arizona who was 73 when she decided to try welding at her local community college because she wanted to keep learning. She became a national welding sculpture competitor and, eventually, a metal sculptor.

My one secret to share about success in workforce education is to listen to the perspective of others. Rarely does one need to demonstrate the power of their own position. Instead, the greatest power comes by seeking understanding, finding commonalities, and finding a way for everybody to succeed.



CHEERING ON THE CHAMPIONS

The topic of winning brings to mind the annual SkillsUSA Championships. Held each June, this competition is one of the world's largest hands-on workforce development events for students with 18,000 in attendance. At the awards ceremony, as the executive director of SkillsUSA, I was always seated in a place of honor in the front row of the arena. However, as a champion of students, my desire was to go backstage and greet students who medaled as they made their way to the winners photography area. The excitement is electric as students ages 13 to 70 walk off the stage with a medal around their necks, a look of shock and disbelief, or even tears, on their faces. I would reach out to high-five each student as they passed me, and we would lock eyes and share a moment. We would touch palms. The excitement backstage would make it too loud for conversation, but I would smile, offer my hand, and say, "way to go" or "great job," and they would tap back and smile at me. Some would know who I was, and some just saw a friendly man smiling at them. Either way did not matter to me, as I witnessed personal victory after personal victory in the hundreds of students receiving their awards. They were in the moment and so was I. In fact, this experience became a highlight each year that I called "high five alley," and I soon invited business partners and education leaders to join me backstage. These students, many of them adults with busy lives, jobs and families, were now national medalists at a workforce development event that took them from small towns to a national platform.

Over their course of study, they may have earned a diploma, certificate, or degree; gained technical knowledge; practiced employability skills; and completed an industry credential. And tonight, these efforts over time were validated by industry. Tonight, they were champions in what has been not a sprint but a marathon of endurance as they juggled family, work and school while seeking to launch or expand a career path.

Months or years later, at work or with their families, these medalists might show their medals and tell the story the same way I often told my story of having been a welding competitor as a student member of the organization that I would later lead. They thought they did well at the competition, but it was hard to be sure. They concentrated, but so did everybody else. They struggled, but other students also seemed worried. They solved a few problems with their projects and tasks and regrouped, working steadily until the contest buzzer sounded to put down their tools. They were most

likely tired, dirty, and hungry—but also feeling proud. They pushed themselves to the limits. After watching the industry representatives with checklists on clipboards evaluating their every task, they felt they did a good day's work. This one day distilled all the hours they logged in the classroom and lab, as they demonstrated resilience and adaptability, and overcame doubts.



CAREER AND TECHNICAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS SPARKING ADULT STUDENT SUCCESS

This real-time, authentic project-based testing is one key opportunity that career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) like SkillsUSA offer all students, including adult learners. CTSOs put classroom knowledge and theory into practice and build confidence in a way textbook learning cannot do. The most essential career-ready skills are not studied in a classroom but practiced in real life.

Only by practicing project management, problem solving, teamwork, and conflict resolution in real-life scenarios can students master these skills. Our organization introduced the SkillsUSA Career Essentials suite in 2017 as a way to teach and allow students of all ages to master these career skills and earn a workplace credential. The adult learner version is specifically for older students with unique life experiences to apply to the program, which is online and adaptable for any pace or educational setting.



SkillsUSA Adult Student Jacqueline Limbrick

Adult learners have life experiences and, therefore, unique stories. SkillsUSA student Jacqueline Limbrick graduated college in May 2019 at age 58 with a degree in office systems technology from Southwest Louisiana Technical Community College (SOWELA) in Lake Charles, Louisiana. At age 55, she began college on a journey set in motion by tragedy. On March 25, 2014, she lost her 28-year-old daughter to a brain aneurysm. The mother of three and grandmother of eight immediately took custody of her daughter's four small children. Formerly working 12-hour shifts in corrections, Limbrick began college and joined multiple student organizations including

SkillsUSA. Those experiences led her to serve on the college's student government association and join two honor societies. Soon she became even more motivated as a student. She suddenly wanted to do more and to be more.

She explains that SkillsUSA taught her how to hone her technical skills, interact with various people, and be comfortable in many situations, as she learned from these experiences and built confidence. As Limbrick completed her degree, she interviewed for a position working for the Department of Children and Family Services, a job that incorporates her skills, education, and training.



SkillsUSA Adult Student Karen Ballew

Karen Ballew was another career switcher who found that her second chance at higher education was enhanced by participation in a student professional organization. She had enjoyed a 15-year career with Publix grocery chain in Georgia when her mother's illness led her to become a personal caregiver. She then developed a passion for a medical career that



led her to train as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at a hospital. To become an emergency medical services technician, she had to overcome a fear of math. She then became involved in SkillsUSA and was elected vice-president of her chapter. She states that she was never a leader previously and was so introverted and lacking personal confidence that she could not call and order a pizza. Student leadership activities helped her build these skills. Ballew now works for Motorsport Emergency Services and Community Health in Georgia as an advanced emergency medical technician. She has also served as a lab assistant for the CNA dual enrollment program at Lanier Technical College. Always an achiever, Ballew has earned three technical certificates and hopes to continue in school to complete a degree in emergency management.

SkillsUSA Adult Student Marlana

Wunderlick

Adult student Marlana Wunderlich grew up building and fixing go-karts and always liked to work with her hands. However, until her 30s, she was not able to apply these interests and skills on the job. Married with four children, Wunderlich had been a three-sport athlete who earned a track scholarship to



Cowley College in Kansas. With a family to support, she left school and worked at a nursing home and a restaurant. She remembers these as jobs that paid the bills, but she wasn't going anywhere. After enrolling at Wichita's WSU Tech, Wunderlich discovered computer numerical control (CNC) machining. Before earning her associate degree, she was hired by Cox Machine, which uses CNC to make aerospace parts and assemblies. Wunderlich loves the challenge of automated manufacturing. She credits instructor Michael Corby for guiding her into competition and their three-person Automated Manufacturing Technology team competed at the 2018 SkillsUSA Championships. She said the experience was truly amazing.

Research Findings

These stories about student organization involvement are anecdotal and personal, but the National Research Center for College and University Admissions released research confirming that SkillsUSA members are learning essential skills while developing effective career plans (NRCCUA, 2017).

The study surveyed nearly 16,000 SkillsUSA students about the personal and employability skills they develop in a SkillsUSA program. Among the top skills members felt they'd developed were responsibility (66%), work ethic (60%), teamwork (59%) and communication (55%). Regarding the impact of SkillsUSA involvement on a student's GPA, 53% of students claimed it was positive. Additionally, SkillsUSA seems to be helping its members plan for their futures, as nearly 60% of those surveyed agreed with the statement that involvement in the organization gives "a better understanding of my career plans."

This somewhat limited research aligns with the stories of these adult learners. Participation in student organizations like SkillsUSA puts theory into practice and puts a real-world perspective on what students know and can do on the job. This helps students determine where they still need to grow and provides a way to articulate what they have learned to employers. Building confidence through these programs seems to be key in helping students to accelerate their education plans as highly-engaged students.



BRIGHT FUTURES STILL AWAIT

Trends indicate that a wave of retiring baby boomers have occupied many of our country's most-needed skilled trade jobs. These boomers are now retiring as approximately 10,000 Americans turn 65 every day. Before the COVID-19 crisis hit this spring, many firms were struggling to fill skilled trade positions including machinists, electricians, plumbers, construction, HVACR, healthcare, and welding. And, even during the challenges of the pandemic, skilled workers are keeping the economy moving. Manufacturing workers are keeping the supply chain alive. Technicians and mechanics are keeping truck fleets and rail freight systems moving, our power and waters systems maintained,

and our home systems repaired. And, of course, skilled healthcare technicians are on the front lines and are emerging as our new heroes. Despite the economic challenges presented by the 2020 pandemic, which has sharply increased current unemployment rates, the strong need for all skilled trades workers will rebound in time, and graduates with employability skills will be most prepared to fill these essential jobs. A survey by Autodesk and the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC, 2019) indicated that 80% of firms predict a shortfall of qualified skilled trades workers.

These worker gaps can be addressed, in part, by two-year colleges, trade schools, apprenticeships, on the job training, mentorship, and training partnerships that team industry with education to establish new training programs leading directly to employment in the shortest amount of time. All these opportunities are ideal for adult learners who can step up to fill the skills gap with the necessary technical skills, as well as the life experience and maturity to rise as leaders in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Whether looking at workforce development from 10,000 feet, before jumping from an airplane as a student influencer for the U.S. Army Golden Knights parachute team, or from one foot away while returning a high five with a student in a moment of victory, my most learned lesson in workforce development is the value of connections and the importance of helping all students to practice both technical skills and personal skills in a safe environment that offers both motivation and rewards through practice and competitions. The SkillsUSA Framework is how our organization teaches personal skills, workplace skills, and technical skills grounded in academics. As I wind down an incredible career as a thought leader in CTE that has taken me through every state in our great nation and to 23 countries around the world, I reflect and look in the rearview mirror just as many students are opening their futures and looking ahead. The career outlook has never been stronger for adult students with such varied learning opportunities in classrooms, on the job and online. Those with career-ready skills and technical knowledge will always be able to travel down a smooth, wide-open road to the career they desire.



Timothy W. Lawrence, Executive Director Emeritus, SkillsUSA, worked in the manufacturing industry and graduated Magna Cum Laude from James Madison University. Mr. Lawrence became an industrial education teacher in 1978 and was National Teacher of the Year in 1983. In 1987, he joined the Virginia Department of Education. In 1996 Lawrence became SkillsUSA Partnerships Director and Executive Director in 2001. Lawrence served on the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council, the Chief State School Officers Career Taskforce and represented the State Department in Kazakhstan and as Official Delegate for WorldSkills. Mr. Lawrence served on the National Assessment of CTE and the Job Corps Advisory Committee, both reporting to Congress. After 19 years as the executive director of SkillsUSA, Mr. Lawrence retired on February 15, 2020.

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