

By Alisha Hyslop

# CTE's Role in Workforce Readiness Credentialing

**CTE PROGRAMS PLAY CRITICAL ROLES IN THE GROWTH OF WORKFORCE READINESS CREDENTIALS BY HELPING STUDENTS APPLY SKILLS, PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PREPARATION AND ASSESSMENT, AND CONNECTING WITH BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY.**



ISTOCK PHOTOS

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**A**CTE issue briefs are designed to highlight the role of career and technical education (CTE) in broader issues of national interest. Each brief is designed to strengthen the voice of CTE related to the specific issue and to draw more attention to CTE activities and best practices around the country. The briefs provide background information, highlight research, profile CTE programs, and include numerous examples of how CTE is tied to the broader issue. They are designed in a concise, easy-to-read format that is perfect for use in advocacy and public awareness efforts with a variety of audiences. The latest brief is titled, *CTE's Role in Workforce Readiness Credentials*. Read a condensed version of the brief below, and access the complete text, including case studies and examples at [www.acteonline.org/resource\\_center/issue\\_briefs.cfm](http://www.acteonline.org/resource_center/issue_briefs.cfm).

## The Concerns

In a very short time, America has evolved from an industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy. Since the early 1990s, the pace of change in the global economy has accelerated even further due to the “flattening forces” spoken of in recent economic analyses. The globalization of business and industry requires workers to acquire core knowledge and skills that can be applied—and quickly upgraded and adapted—in a wide and rapidly changing variety of work settings. Unfortunately, the skills of Americans have not kept pace. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce notes a growing skill gap. In its 2002 “Keeping Competitive” report, 73 percent of employers reported “very” or “somewhat” severe

conditions when trying to hire qualified workers.<sup>1</sup> The changing nature of jobs, education that lags behind skill needs, a slow rate of growth in the workforce, and ineffective training investments by employers all cause skill gaps. As a result, employers experience limited innovation and growth and lower productivity and profits. The gap in employee skills impacts the local, state and national economy.

Employers have reported that the most important skills employees need more of include technical skills, strong basic employability, and reading, writing and communication skills.<sup>2</sup> While traditional education programs and assessments may address some of these skills, few provide comprehensive training across the skill spectrum. There is a growing discussion, influenced by legislation, a cadre of reports, and the interest of business-education and governmental partnerships, around the need for skill standards in all of these areas of American education and training. Out of these efforts, the concept of a “workforce readiness credential” has emerged to attempt to validate work-ready skills. Jobs for the Future suggests that these skills be defined as a baseline of hard and soft skills that are transferable from one position to another across industries.<sup>3</sup> ACT similarly points out that the skills are valuable for “any occupation—skilled or professional—and at any level of education.”<sup>4</sup>

Numerous assessment approaches have been developed nationally, and in states and localities around the country. Many employers are turning to workforce readiness credentials to validate common workplace skills in job applicants and em-

ployees, and in turn, education and workforce agencies are responding by issuing or preparing students for these credentials. Once selected, a credential can drive the curriculum and instructional practices in education and training settings, helping to ensure that youth and adults have the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century economy.

### CTE's Role in Workforce Readiness

CTE programs have been on the frontlines of offering new workforce readiness credentials, and should be considered leaders in their growth. Nobel laureate James Heckman reports that the skills measured by workforce readiness credentials are just as important to a student's future workplace success as are more publicized academic indicators.<sup>5</sup> However, students often lack opportunities to gain these skills through traditional academic courses. CTE programs provide the relevance necessary to engage students in their education, and the real-world situations that can prepare them

with workforce readiness skills. Career and technical educators find value in using workforce readiness credentialing systems to improve student achievement, and link learning to future study and careers. The formal credentials fill gaps in many state assessment systems that originated from state standards created under federal legislation, and provide clear links to business and industry needs for high school students and adults. CTE programs play critical roles in the growth of workforce readiness credentials by helping students apply skills, providing opportunities for preparation and assessment, and connecting with business and industry.

### Helping Students Apply Skills

Numerous research studies have shown that context is critical in the learning process. Context has been described as "the integral aspect of cognitive events,"<sup>6</sup> and the National Research Council and the National Academies of Science "encourage the design of engaging curricula that

apply to real-world situations."<sup>7</sup> In order for students to be successful on workforce readiness assessments, and in turn, in the workplace, skills must be gained in an environment that is relevant to the real world of work. CTE provides an environment where students can apply fundamental academic and employability skills to complex job-related problems. While each workforce readiness credential or assessment validates a different set of defined skills, almost all include some focus on applying literacy and numeracy skills to typical work-related tasks. These skills are classified by many career and technical educators as "technical literacy." Skills related to technical literacy are taught and reinforced daily in CTE classrooms across the country, preparing students for workforce readiness assessment components such as the WorkKeys® "Reading for Information" and "Applied Math," and the National Work Readiness Credential's assessments "Read with Understanding" and "Use Math to Solve Problems."

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## Oklahoma Career Readiness Certificate

At the VF Jeanswear production and distribution center in central Oklahoma, the high cost of employee turnover was having a negative impact on profitability. H.R. Manager David Forgety began hearing about education programs in the area offering students the opportunity to obtain the Oklahoma Career Readiness Certificate. An initiative of the Governor's Council for Workforce and Economic Development, the certificate was being offered by career-tech centers and high schools throughout the state. This provided VF Jeanswear a unique opportunity to measure skills that could not be identified by an interview alone and that could help to ensure potential employees' success in the company. The company went through a process of having jobs in its center profiled to determine necessary minimum skill levels, and then began working with nearby Gordon Cooper technology center to create a process by which the Career Readiness Certificate could be used as an initial screening tool prior to a job candidate's interview.

Gordon Cooper served as a conduit to other community organizations and leaders to ensure that the necessary administration and testing was possible. VF Jeanswear now has agreements with Gordon Cooper and Wes Watkins Technology Centers, as well as the local workforce One-Stop center, to offer its prospective employees the opportunity to earn the certificate. Different scores on the assessment are required for different job openings, and individuals who do not meet the standards on the assessments the first time are offered education and training through the KeyTrain system at the technology centers.

The pre-screening process has been in place since April 2007, and the biggest success has been in identifying employees that are able to meet learning standards and reducing training costs. Forgety emphasized the need for business and education to work together to drive the spread of workforce readiness credentials. He explains, "This initiative needs to be talked about more. Business is looking for something to assess employee skills, and needs to know where to find this tool."

## Providing Opportunities for Preparation and Assessment

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006, 28 percent of adults received a bachelor's degree or higher<sup>8</sup>; the other 72 percent of Americans need other pathways to gain technical skills and additional education to be successful in the workforce. CTE provides the comprehensive preparation necessary for students to show that they do have the skills desired by business and industry, and the venues for offering assessments and credentials. CTE programs in high schools, community colleges and technical centers have all been involved in offering students the opportunity to gain workforce readiness credentials. There are more than 15 million secondary and postsecondary CTE students nationwide.<sup>9</sup> These students have already shown a commitment to career preparation, and are in the process of gaining the skills necessary for future success. By utilizing CTE programs, more students at both the secondary and postsecondary levels can be given the opportunity to gain workforce readiness credentials.

## Connecting with Business and Industry

Workforce readiness credentials have little value without the support of business and industry. While the skills learned are still vitally important to future career success, the payoff from the certificate or credential can only be realized with employer support leading to preferential status in hiring decisions. Though many states have educa-



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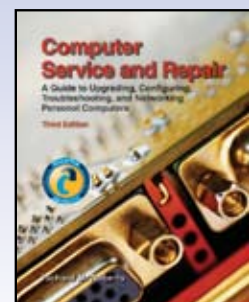
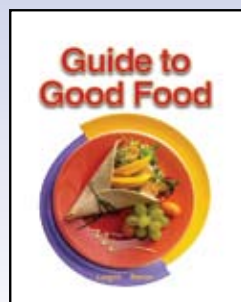
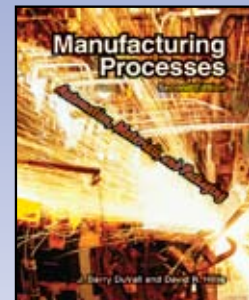
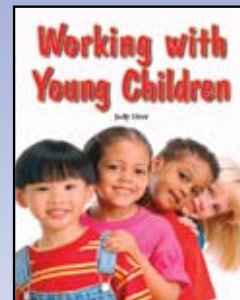
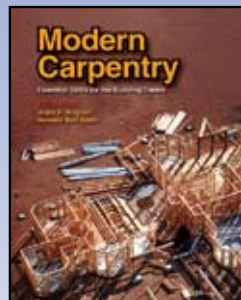
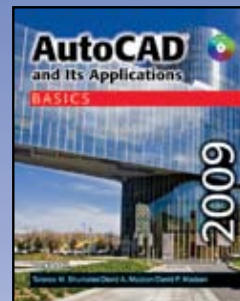
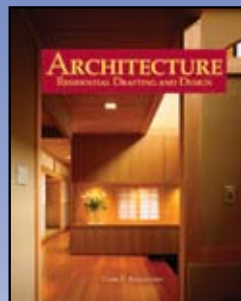
tion campaigns, employers often do not understand the different credentials and what they mean, or may not even be aware that workforce readiness credentials exist at all. CTE, due to its unique relationship with employers, is in a prime position to promote the use and value of workforce readiness credentials. Advisory committees, for instance, put CTE leaders in the perfect position to share information about the credentials, and to serve as conduits to the employer community. The connections with local business leaders allow the use of workforce readiness credentials to spread from the ground up in a way that is mutually beneficial to students and employers.

## Conclusion

It is clear that 21st century employees must acquire advanced skills to meet the needs of the U.S. economy. The use of workforce readiness credentials is likely to increase as employers seek ways to measure these skills efficiently and evaluate potential hires. Workforce readiness credentials provide added value to the high school diploma and help adults gain the skills necessary for workplace success. CTE is at the forefront of preparing students at all levels for the testing that leads to a workforce readiness credential, and perhaps more importantly, with the skills necessary for 21st century success. **I**

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