

Addressing the Need for a National CTE Identity Framework:

A Blueprint for the Next
Generation of
High Quality CTE

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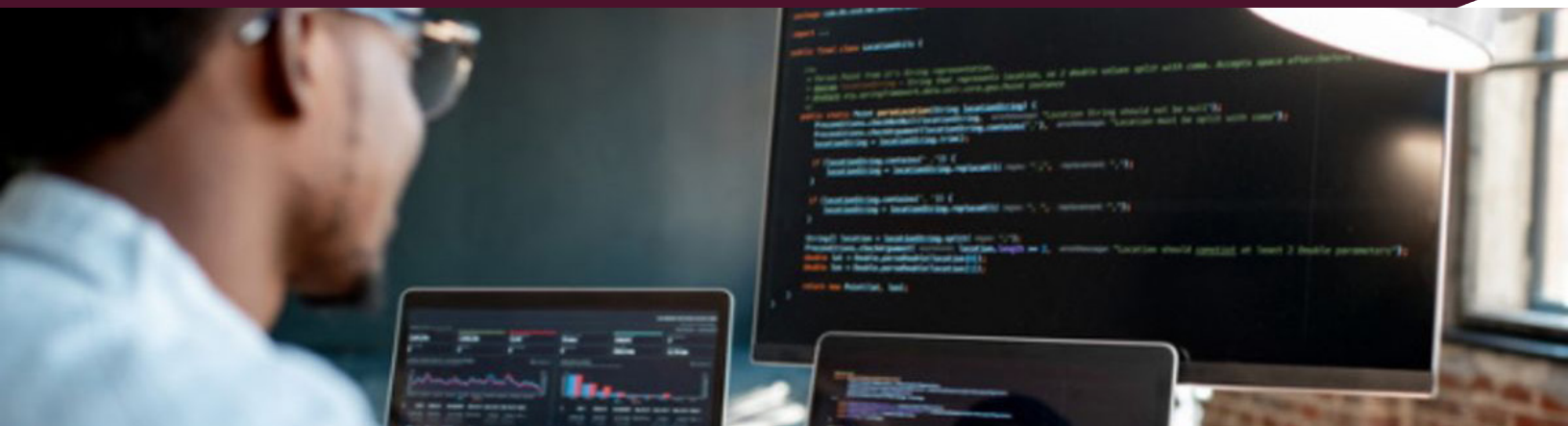
The Problem

America is facing an unprecedented skilled labor shortage. According to lead economists at JPMorgan Chase, the level of unfilled positions as a proportion of the workforce is unprecedented and widespread - 50 percent higher than peak levels in previous business cycles and spread across almost every sector of the economy. The rate of workforce growth has declined sharply, falling almost 75 percent over the past decade. And, as the baby-boomer generation retires, masses of highly skilled workers are leaving the workforce. Unfilled job openings are a missed opportunity for GDP growth.¹ In manufacturing alone, the United States faces a need for nearly 3.5 million jobs over the next decade, and 2 million of those jobs are likely to go unfilled due to a skills gap and a lack of new workers interested in manufacturing jobs, according to new research from Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute.²

According to newly appointed Education Secretary, Dr. Miguel Cardona, “For far too long, we’ve allowed students to graduate from high school without any idea of how to meaningfully engage in the workforce while good-paying high-skilled, technical, and trade jobs go unfilled.”³

Where will businesses get the skilled, technical workers needed, not only to maintain current levels of production and service, but also expand into new market opportunities created by the post-COVID economy? Career Technical Education (CTE), formerly known as “vocational education,” has historically provided the pipeline, by offering hands-on, project-based learning opportunities and applying both academic knowledge and technical skills to real-world circumstances. The newly executed ‘Made in America’— executive order (Jan. 2021) declares that “deeply intertwined with the President’s commitment to invest in American manufacturing, including clean energy and critical supply chains, grow good-paying, union jobs, and advance racial equity. The federal government should buy from suppliers that are growing the sectors of the future and treating their workers with dignity and respect.”⁴

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1. <https://www.jpmorgan.com/commercial-banking/insights/why-us-has-millions-of-unfilled-jobs/>
 2. <https://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/research/2018-deloitte-and-the-manufacturing-institute-skills-gap-and-future-of-work-study>
 3. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/04/biden-selects-miguel-cardona-education-secretary>
 4. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/25/president-biden-to-sign-executive-order-strengthening-buy-american-provisions-ensuring-future-of-america-is-made-in-america-by-all-of-americas-workers/>



Unlike its European counterparts, the CTE system in the United States continues to be hampered by negative stigmas. Even though the low-skill, repetitive jobs of the past have dramatically changed with the advent of new technologies, the public continues to view career technical education as an alternative choice for those with lesser capabilities or lower career aspirations. This must end.

This pervasive stigma and its negative impact on the pipeline of skilled technical workers threatens to undermine U.S. economic recovery efforts. And yet, **many who know and understand the positive impact of CTE continue to use language that perpetuates negative stereotypes even as they argue for the value and importance of CTE education and careers.**

The Proposed Intervention

The intent of this concept is to facilitate and create a new identity for CTE that will emphasize the dignity of work and the pride associated with jobs critical to the growth of the economy. As a nation we need to replace the pervasive negative stigma with positive images of CTE as a primary path towards good jobs, not an alternative path associated with concepts of “lesser” and “menial.” This project will bring awareness and “message discipline” to how career technical educators and supporters talk about and present CTE, eradicating the old stereotype and, over time, replace it with a new, more aspirational identity. Such discipline and awareness are a necessary first step to correct social biases that impede students from entering and thriving in CTE programs and graduating into self-supporting careers.

The process is akin to how business marketing experts engage in “branding.” The proposed tool is the CTE Identify Framework, based on field work completed in 2016 by ASHLIN Management Group under contract from the US Department of Education (ED), Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE). ASHLIN conducted extensive field research to depict both positive and negative perceptions of CTE education prevalent among CTE participants and those not involved in CTE. Focus group participants not engaged with CTE articulated a negative identity for CTE (external stigma), which was legacy driven, or historical. Not surprisingly, the focus group participants engaged with CTE rejected the negative stigma across all stakeholder groups (internal stigma). Based on this field work, ED, through the ASHLIN Management Group, drafted the CTE Identity Framework, as shown in the chart on the following page.



(Em)Powered by CTE - Completed Identity Framework for CTE

Identity Proposition	CTE students are highly-focused, highly engaged, and embrace a more active, real-world learning pathway. This pathway cultivates a unique blend of job-ready skills combine with a collaborative academic experience. As a result, students are ready to transform their communities through economic empowerment and increased intellectual capital.
Role	CTE helps drive economic growth by producing a skilled labor force. Such students are well prepared to progress in their careers, through additional level of academic and technical study, leading to baccalaureate degrees and fulfilling careers.
Primary Target Audience	Independent, self-defined, collaborative oriented, goal-driven thinkers and “doers” who view education as offering more than just one viable pathway to career success, community building and life fulfillment.
Supporting Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CTE prepares students to explore a vast array of career options. • CTE is able to enhance the academic and learning experience through active learning techniques. • CTE is a pathway to better prepare students to attend college by including strong academic preparation.
Potential Implementation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop toolkits for high school counselors to use to reach out to local businesses to connect them to CTE initiatives at the school. • Create informational videos with testimonial from members of the community talking about how CTE has made a positive impact in their community. • Share stories from former CTE students about the opportunities CTE provided for them to be successful in college and/or careers.

The authors propose that CTE educators and supporters use the CTE framework as a tool to revise and discipline their language, and in turn, alter thinking about CTE programs, CTE students, and CTE-based careers. The Framework should be used on a daily basis as a “lens” through which to promote aspirational messaging regarding CTE, in communication with parents, students, employers and the public. To use the Framework does not mean that the wording found in the Framework must be strictly repeated. Rather, the Framework must be understood differently. One may express the same general idea, project a similar positive image without parroting the Framework verbatim. The Framework is based on research that shows how those in CTE already see themselves and, thus, depicts the positive persona of those in CTE. Thus, the Framework provides insight about what to support, what to not violate, when developing communications of all sorts.

There are hundreds of examples of how well-meaning CTE insiders inadvertently reinforce stigma. But such stigmatizing language is ubiquitous once you become aware (e.g., “young people who may not be good in school can find great opportunities in CTE!”). Such statements must be eradicated as a first objective.

Secondly, the field must not only stop the stigma, but must also reinforce the positive persona of CTE depicted in the Framework. Supporters of CTE must learn to use the Framework to write and speak in ways consistent with the existing positive self-image of CTE.



The CTE field is large and is supported by a diverse group of national, state, and local organizations, agencies, and other entities. The authors do not propose to control all of what is said by such groups. The Framework seeks only to provide some much-needed guard rails and bring about a better consciousness of pervasive and damaging stigmas. It will be up to leaders at all levels to use the Framework to craft messaging campaigns that provide ongoing support for a shift in perception.

Short-term Objective

The immediate next step is to convene a small leadership group of institutions to review the process that led to the Framework, consider wording changes, if any, and discuss an action plan to gain the support of leading organizations in CTE education. The proposed leadership group would consist of the entities that developed this paper, including ACTE, Advance CTE, the ASHLIN Management Group, and Americus Reed, Professor of Marketing at the Wharton School. The authors seek to bring into the group of sponsoring organizations the agency that brought about the Framework - the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education and other important agencies and organizations. At the proposed convening of the leadership groups, a work plan can begin to take shape.

Long-term Objective

Long range plans would focus on broad based dissemination designed to create new ways of thinking about CTE as career pathway of choice and a cornerstone of a strong economy:

- Build consensus across leading organizations regarding the need for a new image for CTE and the adoption of the CTE Framework.
- Develop a marketing/communications strategy.
- Release the CTE Framework, informational webinars, and toolkit



The CTE Framework was shared only narrowly at the time of its completion due to the end of the Obama-Biden administration.

More information on the CTE Framework can be found at:

<https://www.ashlininc.com/cte-brand-architecture>.

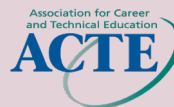
The pilot findings directly align with similar research completed by the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE):

<https://www.acteonline.org/cte-stigma-a-barrier-to-advancing-access/>



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