

## Chapter 3

# Career and Technical Education: Myths, Metrics, and Metamorphosis

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### ABSTRACT

*Educational institutions are increasingly challenged to provide relevant and rigorous programs to students who demand variety in learning venues, delivery platforms, degree options, and quality assurance. Like many evolving fields, career and technical education (CTE) is additionally challenged by its history, the scope of its mission, a perceived lack of a unifying definition and purpose, a complex of funding formulas and allocations, and the blurring of boundaries among educational providers. This chapter discusses myths regarding CTE that obscure its mission, provides evidence of CTE effectiveness, and illustrates how CTE is transforming itself to meet the demands of multiple stakeholders having diverse agenda and varying needs.*

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Jokinen (2009) laments that career and technical education is too often described as an inferior educational alternative by the public as well as their legislative representatives. Members of the Ohio State Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE, 2006) often articulate the misconceptions surrounding CTE, explaining that it “is not an alternative. It is a great option and it allows students to figure out what they are

passionate about and then go into that passion” (para. 2). Jokinen reports about public and official perception where both parents and state officials see college as the sole option for students, revealing a lack of respect for the educational needs of working men and women.

### 3.2 MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CTE

Husain (1999) has identified enrollment resurgence in CTE programming since 1990, although

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CTE continues to battle a negative image among students, parents, educators and policy makers. Wonacott (2000) suggests that CTE's negative image is largely due to misconceptions and beliefs about the realities of the labor market, college degrees, and CTE programs in general. Some common misconceptions and assumptions associated with CTE include: it is less challenging than traditional academic preparation, CTE graduates have limited employment opportunities, and CTE preparation constricts salary ranges (Wonacott, 2000). Those misconceptions contribute to a "bimodal thinking" that characterizes CTE and traditional academic programs as mutually exclusive realms when, in fact, they are becoming increasingly intertwined (Harkins, 2002). Clarity and transparency regarding the CTE and academic partnership is essential for understanding the role of each in developing a competitive workforce. That partnership, however, is not without obstacles.

This chapter explores some common misconceptions associated with career and technical education, examines the sources of those myths, and clarifies misconceptions. The evolutionary history of CTE provides a framework for understanding the distortions that obscure CTE's purpose and eclipse its mission. In addition to illuminating the dichotomous nature of CTE, this chapter will also discuss some current and emerging issues likely to shape the metamorphosis of career and technical education over the coming years.

### 3.3 ORIGINS OF CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

*There is a long history in western society of de-valuing disciplines that have roots in application and relegating them to a lesser place in the school curriculum, and in society for that matter. In fact, the roots of such separation between thought-based disciplines and action-based disciplines can be traced to ancient Greek Society. The early*

*Greeks believed that working people didn't think and thinking people didn't work. Of course the Industrial Revolution and later, the rise of the middle class, made any further argument about the value of vocational education purely academic. Yet, even though we live in a nation that largely owes its great wealth and success to those hearty pioneers who were not afraid to roll up their sleeves and carry out real labor, one still feels the sting of this relentless stereotype in schools and in larger society. Michael K. Daugherty, Department Head, Curriculum & Instruction, University of Arkansas (M. K. Daugherty, personal communication, May 19, 2009)*

Barlow (1976) outlined the history of the first 200 years of career and technical education in the United States where CTE was designed to prepare people for the workplace. Prior to the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 that provided federal funding and recognition for vocational education, a great variety of programs had trained individuals in work skills and presented a foundation for the contemporary educational system. Hence, CTE was being developed from uncoordinated efforts that individually responded to discrete workplace needs. Colonial and early nineteenth century public educational institutions had no systematic approach to teach literacy or vocational skills. Barlow (1976a) asserted that individuals were more concerned about basic subsistence needs than personal improvement in those early times, but he came to believe that a blatant consumerism has been the primary educational motivator in contemporary society. In contrast, the citizenry of the fledgling Republic recognized the value to the general welfare of an educated workforce. Early movements to create a structured educational system generally relied on a philanthropy that served the indigent, and apprenticeships became the common job-skill transfer mechanism, filling the employment need for both society and indigent youth.

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