

Remarks by Andy Van Kleunen Executive Director, National Skills Coalition

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Vocational and Adult Education
Career and Technical Education (CTE) Community Conversation

April 1, 2011

1. Continue to Strengthen Public Message and Student Guidance about the Value of CTE and Middle-Skill Jobs

The broader workforce development, adult education and CTE community has greatly appreciated statements made by both President Obama and Secretary Duncan regarding the value of career and technical education, particularly as a means for young people and adults to enter good-paying, technical jobs that require more than high school, but less than a four-year degree (what National Skills Coalition and others call “middle-skill jobs”). President Obama’s February 2009 address to Congress, when he called for every American to get at least one year of education past high school toward either a college degree or a credential leading to skilled employment, was a game-changing moment for CTE proponents. More recently, Secretary Duncan’s Harvard University speech in response to their *Pathways to Prosperity* report demonstrated the Department’s commitment to CTE education. Such statements by our nation’s leaders reassure our young people, their parents, and millions of working Americans that there is a range of viable education and training pathways, in addition to the traditional college pipeline, whereby people can develop skilled careers in this increasingly volatile economic environment.

Of course, we wish such remarks by the President and the Secretary were more frequent. And while we recognize that we are in a tight fiscal climate, budget requests by the Administration do send a powerful message to Congress about what programs are its highest priority—and career and technical education programs did not fare as well as traditional K-12 and college financial aid programs either in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 request, nor in the negotiations around the FY 2011 continuing resolution (CR). We hope the Administration can re-enforce their commitment to CTE in future funding requests.

In terms of the message sent about CTE outside Washington, we would further encourage the Administration to make sure that our nation’s guidance and career counselors—whether they be at our high schools, our college financial aid offices, or our Department of Labor-funded One-Stop Career Centers—are fully versed in the value of CTE programs. Too often, counselors tell students only about the education and training opportunities associated with the federal



program that is paying their salary. Hence, high school and collegiate counselors typically focus on traditional postsecondary pathways, while One-Stop counselors focus on WIA-funded programs.

In addition, particularly in our schools, career guidance is often framed by counselors' personal impressions of where the good jobs are rather than by actual labor market data. If that data were consulted, it would show students that there are typically at least as many good-paying middle-skill jobs in their local community as there are those requiring a bachelor's degree. Without that data, fewer students are learning from their counselors about how CTE programs can lead to good-paying employment.

We think the upcoming Perkins and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) reauthorizations offer an opportunity to address this guidance issue head-on. We should be moving toward a single, robust federally subsidized career guidance system in this country whereby everybody—high school students, prospective college students, and current workers—receive the same information both about what jobs are out there in the labor market, and what different education pathways are available to access those jobs. To that end, we propose that the Departments of Labor and Education start to jointly fund the infrastructure of a national career guidance system, including both the operations in our One-Stops and the counseling in our schools. High schoolers should be made aware of WIA-funded training and seasonal employment programs. One-Stop customers should be able to get assistance filling out the FAFSA. And colleges should be telling their prospective students about Perkins-funded, non-credit vocational programs as well as their traditional for-credit courses of study. Further, counselors in all of these settings should have ready access to the same labor market information, which itself could be made more dynamic with new data-scraping technologies. Such provisions would not only enhance enrollments in our CTE programs, but also help “traditional” students make more informed decisions about their studies as well.

2. Programs of Study vs. Career Pathways, and their Implications for Youth and Adults

The content of today's agenda, and the broader collaborations between OVAE and the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Employment and Training Administration, confirm that “career pathways” is a new OVAE focus and priority: that is, developing policies that align a variety of education interventions (basic skills, technical training, postsecondary education) and support services across agencies, so they can be brought together in different ways at different times in a person's learning and working life in pursuit of a series of stackable, industry-recognized credentials and employment. We applaud this strategy, as we think it is reflective of some of the best work being done in the field.

What we're not clear on, particularly as Perkins awaits reauthorization, is how this concept of career pathways squares with the concept of Programs of Study. Our Coalition's concern during earlier Perkins reauthorizations was that Programs of Study were being conceived not so much



as a pathway with multiple entry and exit points, but as a pipeline with a single entry-point for young people in school and extending toward a single exit-point some time in college. Some practitioners in Perkins-funded community college programs serving working adults were concerned that POSs would push Perkins to become an extension of K-12 and “college ready” reform and, as such, would make Perkins an exclusively school-based, youth-focused program. Success or failure would be judged by a state’s ability to move young people through their designed Programs of Study from beginning to end, with few opportunities for adults to enter the POS midstream or from Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs.

Under the next Perkins reauthorization, we would encourage the Department to assess how its career pathways work within the context of ABE reform does or does not correlate with the focus on POSs under Perkins. While we would not advocate for career pathways approaches to be mandated in lieu of Programs of Study, we think POSs should at least be structured and evaluated, in part, by their ability to be part of a broader-based career pathways strategy that can flexibly serve in-school youth and out-of-school youth and adults.

3. Program Alignment and Common Outcome Measures

National Skills Coalition continues to endorse the concept of “common measures” across a range of federally funded human capital programs—including Perkins, WIA Title I, WIA Title II, Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), higher education, et.al.—to better support their alignment at the state and local level. While we recognize that individual programs may need to track additional measures not captured by the common metrics, we believe all such programs should include some type of employment, wage, and credential attainment measures that can be tracked not only across programs, but also longitudinally for individual students—to show how these programs are collectively contributing to someone’s skill and career attainment over time.

To do so effectively, however, we are going to need some kind of additional “interim” or “initial progress” common measure(s). This will be particularly important for ABE and in-school CTE programs, in which students are not necessarily seeking immediate employment, but for whom we would still like to make some assessment as to whether they are clearly on the pathway toward that goal. To that end, we think that both Perkins and WIA reauthorization should include some type of common measure related to basic or fundamental skills attainment. This would parallel emerging best practices in a number of industries (paralleled by many CTE programs) developing competency models that specify pathways of fundamental skills, generalized industry skills, and occupation-specific skills and credentials for hire within that industry. Particularly in the context of CTE programs, industry-defined fundamental skills or other validated work- or career-readiness certificates could be used as alternatives to traditional GED or literacy levels measures, to bring basic skills attainment more in line with contextual learning and longer-term career pathway strategies.



We also think that the Department could be much more aggressive in including CTE and ABE programs in the Student Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) reforms being funded in the states by its own National Center for Education Statistics. Right now, most SLDS work is focused on tracking young people through their K-12 years and into traditional postsecondary study or (where feasible) employment. Young people and adults who take alternate pathways in their education and training, or achieve credential outcomes other than traditional degrees, are often not captured (or at least their participation in these programs is not captured). The much smaller DOL-funded Workforce Data Quality Initiative is trying to encourage a few states to link Labor-funded training programs to these SLDS systems, but CTE and ABE programs are not required partners under those grants, either. Hence, we feel the Department of Education needs to take a more comprehensive stance not only toward defining outcome measures for Perkins and ABE programs that better align them with other workforce development programs, but also toward including Perkins and ABE programs in its own data quality and evaluation efforts.

4. Industry Validation of Pathways and Credentials through Sector Partnerships

The best CTE programs develop their strategies in dialogue with local employers, to ensure that their students are being prepared to meet the changing needs of regional industries. Unfortunately, the best WIA-funded workforce development programs do the same thing, as do vocational programs (Perkins-funded are not) at community colleges, etc. As a result, if a local community were so lucky as to have effective CTE, workforce and postsecondary training programs, these programs are likely reaching out simultaneously to some of the same employers, each getting slightly different information to meet the specific needs of their respective programs. In addition, we have other publicly-funded cluster strategies (supported by Commerce, Small Business Administration, state and county economic development agencies, etc.) which are not principally focused on workforce education issues, but which often come around to skilled workforce needs as industries assess what they need to grow and prosper.

This is not an efficient way to ensure the industry relevance of different training programs. These parallel, program-specific engagements with employers can actually undercut an industry's ability to define longer-term, comprehensive workforce strategies that would likely require contributions from a number of education and training programs (including those supported by Perkins) to both develop new worker pipelines and to retrain and upgrade incumbent workforces.

Hence, National Skills Coalition has been long recommending the independent, public investment in the creation of regional sector partnerships of multiple employers in an industry—including those small- and medium-sized employers not big enough to shape a CTE program all on their own—to help that industry assess both its short- and long-term skilled labor needs. Then, that partnership can work in collaboration with local CTE programs at high



schools and colleges, Workforce Investment Boards, and other education and training providers to begin to operationalize and implement that industry-wide strategy at all levels of its workforce. This would include developing common curricula, identifying pathways of industry-recognized, stackable credentials, and leveraging resources across a range of public and private sources.

Support for such a concept within the context of Perkins reauthorization would be another useful contribution in the effort to better align a range of federal programs to better support worker advancement in today's changing economy, while meeting changing industry needs.