



MAKING AN **IMPACT**:

How CTSOs Support Students in Poverty

By Emily Saed and Eva Scates-Winston

T

he US Department of Education reports, even with efforts during the Obama Administration to narrow the achievement gap, more than a third of the United States maintains a dropout rate of 20 percent or greater ("Diplomas Count," 2016). These statistics beg the questions:

- Who are these students and why are they dropping out?
- How can we as educators better support them?

Who Are These Students and Why Are They Dropping Out?

Let's start with the poverty line: According to the US Census Bureau (2011), a family of four (two adults, two children under 18) that earns less than \$23,021 falls below. About 15 million children in the United States live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold. Couple that with the fact that children who live below the poverty line are 1.3 times more likely to have developmental delays or learning disabilities (Currie, 2014); these students are operating at a disadvantage from the moment they begin their academic journeys. While these obstacles are certainly enough to explain the disproportionate high school completion rate, students battling poverty face additional challenges. High school students in poverty have a higher rate of absenteeism because they are more likely to have to care for and/or financially support family members. The result: Students who come from low-income families are seven times more likely to drop out of high school (KewalRamani, Laird, Ifill & Chapman, 2014).

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The Power of Opportunities in CTE

Education and job training are a necessary means to reduce (and eliminate) poverty, and to achieving economic mobility and a livable wage. Attainment of skills, degrees or credentials create a marketable difference between the earnings of those with postsecondary education and those with none. Hence, there are measurable differences in average earnings between high school graduates and those with any level of postsecondary education, including those who have not earned credentials.

In a report published by the Urban Institute, Sandy Baum found that low-wage workers who were able to complete college “do better in the labor market than people with no education beyond high school. Higher levels of education correspond, on average, to higher levels of employment and higher wages.” A bachelor’s degree was once believed to be a ticket to a middle-class life, but as tuition and fees rise at alarming rates, everyone is questioning “the value of a college education” (Baum, 2014).

Michael J. Petrilli, for The Brookings Institution, went on to comment that the “push” to acquiring a degree as the [only] way out of poverty is a failed strategy with fewer than desired results: “The common outcome of our current strategy is that a young person drops out of college at age 20 with no postsecondary credential, no skills, and no work experience, but a fair amount of debt. That’s a terrible way to begin adult life, and it’s even worse if the young adult aims to escape poverty.” Consequently, certificates and apprenticeships are considered alternatives rather than an appropriate pathway that meets an individual’s identified need or interest.

Career and technical education (CTE) provides a viable and realistic solution to curb the dropout rate and encourage transitions into postsecondary. Plus, CTE offers multiple pathways to acquire knowledge and skills for high wage, high demand jobs:

- Experiential education including work-based learning, internships or work experience
- All aspects of industry: relevant knowledge and skills, application
- Stackable credentials including technical skill attainment
- CTE student organizations for skills, leadership and networking
- Pathways to postsecondary and employment college credits for successful transitions to college

How Can We Better Support These Students?

Here is the good news: CTE in conjunction with integrated career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) is highly effective in improving student outcomes. The success of utilizing CTOS as a tool to increase classroom participation and long-term student success rates has been proven time and again:

- Ninety-five percent of educators surveyed found CTOS to be an effective tool in keeping students engaged in the classroom (Ullrich, Pavlock, Fazarro and Shaw, 2007)
- Eighty-one percent of dropouts stated that more “real world” [experiential and applied] learning would have influenced them to stay in school (Bridgeland, DiIulio and Burke Morison, 2006)

Co-curricular student organizations provide countless benefits to students. They allow students to see the relationship between academics and career opportunities through hands-on learning and activities. CTOS also help the student to gain confidence and knowledge through peer interaction and skill-based competitions.

Once enrolled in a CTOS, sustained involvement is a key factor in generating a positive outcome. To really benefit from

the participation in the CTOS, the student must develop connections with their peers and activities over a period of time.

What We're Doing in Minnesota

In 2012, the Minnesota Foundation for Student Organizations (MFSO) sought to identify the barriers to meaningful participation in CTOS among underserved, nontraditional and students from special populations. MFSO partnered with CTE leadership at the Minnesota Department of Education and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities to recognize financial need. Based on this information, MFSO facilitated a “sub-grant” program allowing CTOS to apply for support of individual projects.

Using this method alone, MFSO achieved moderate success in addressing the financial needs of struggling CTOS chapters. But the sub-grants only put a bandage on the problem. MFSO believed it could do more, but there was uncertainty about what or how to do it.

In subsequent years, the MFSO and CTE leadership continued awarding the sub-grants to individual student organizations. They also added umbrella components benefiting all of the CTOS. This included professional development and training opportunities for CTOS advisors and CTE instructors focused on a number of topics impacting special populations, including overcoming gender bias in career fields, and identifying the obstacles of economically disadvantaged students.

Embedding poverty awareness into MFSO’s mission was part of those efforts. Leaders were encouraged to participate in poverty awareness training directly through Communications Across Barriers with Dr. Donna Beegle. The MFSO also certified its executive director (Emily Saed) as poverty awareness coach, allowing her to provide individualized support to CTOS advisors across the state.

To date, this project has directly supported 16 secondary and 10 postsecondary CTOS chapters. Direct support provided economically disadvantaged chapters the opportunity to engage in opportunities that would otherwise not have been available to them.

One Minnesota DECA student gained confidence through attending an event he would not have participated in without

receiving sub-grant funds. “The State Conference was an experience I will carry with me forever,” he said, “especially since it is the only competitive activity I have ever been a part of. I am so proud of myself and the people I had the honor of working with. It has changed my life” (“Overcoming barriers,” 2014).

An economically disadvantaged BPA college student was able to attend the state conference and earn an industry certification. “It has helped me gain confidence in my speech, my tests and my character. This conference will forever be a part of my professional career” (“Overcoming barriers,” 2014).

Through supporting CTSO programming, more than 200 CTSO chapters across our state have received indirect support. MFSO has reached more than 100 CTSO board members and advisors with messages about poverty awareness.

One Minnesota HOSA advisor stated about their chapter's experience, “We are excited to continue working with our student organization, and want to thank you for the opportunity to access funding through the Special Populations Grant for our new chapter. Our chapter is made up of 100 percent students of color, and 65–70 percent free and reduced lunch.” The advisor continued,

“This is an outstanding group of young people who have tremendous things to offer... and would not have this opportunity otherwise” (“Overcoming barriers,” 2015).

Moving forward, the Minnesota Foundation for Student Organizations plans to continue to offer professional training opportunities, and to support individual CTSO initiatives to address underserved, nontraditional and students from special populations. The MFSO is also exploring new development opportunities focused on cultural competencies. MFSO is grateful to have the continued support of CTE leadership at the Minnesota Department of Education and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System.

What Can CTSO Advisors Do?

1. Observe, ask and listen. It's your classroom; you see these students every day. Notice behavior changes. If a student is sleeping in class or homework is coming late (or not all), ask if something is going on.
 2. Create a “safe place.” It may sound cliché, but if a student is looking to share challenges they are having at home, they have to feel comfortable talking with you. Simply asking what they had
3. Identify with your students. Pay attention to when you are directly or indirectly criticizing a student's behavior or lifestyle and make efforts to suspend judgments. Instead, recognize that “bad behaviors” might be a product of life struggles such as hunger or fear of homelessness. Without inappropriately offering details, share information about your school experiences or challenges you've faced that might resonate with your students.
 4. Know your community's resources. If a student confides they are living in the crisis of poverty, be prepared to address that situation. Have information about local shelter, food pantry, and other community assistance programs on hand. Know who in your school or on your campus is equipped to help students connect with needed resources. Go one step further: Help your student make the calls and find the help they need.
 5. Learn! Encourage your school, district or campus to look into poverty awareness training. Communications Across Barriers' comprehensive two-day Poverty Institute is offered nationally.

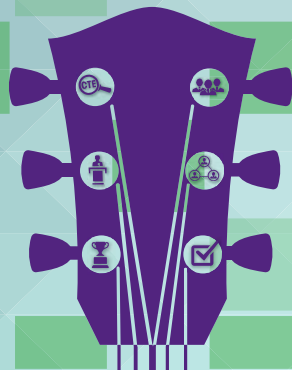
for lunch or complimenting them on their clothing will build common ground and a basis for a trusting relationship.





Emily Saed & Eva Scates-Winston will present at **ACTE CareerTech VISION** two sessions on how CTSOs can and do support students in poverty further their lives and career opportunities above the line. See and learn from them on Friday, December 8 and again on Saturday, December 9.

careertechvision.com



Additional training is available to certify Poverty Coaches. Social service organizations in your training area might offer poverty trainings related to the housing crisis or hunger relief programs. Seek these professional development opportunities and add them to your diversity and inclusion resources.

Student Support Is Key.

When students acquire comprehensive knowledge about career choices, build networks through CTSO involvement and attain academic and technical skills, they will:

- Increase their marketability in the workforce
- Raise their potential earnings
- Decrease the likelihood of unemployment (Loup, Kornegay & Morgan, 2017)

According to the National Research Center for CTE, the more students participate in CTSO activities, the higher their academic motivation and engagement, career self-efficacy, college aspirations and employability skills (Alfeld et al, 2007). Providing equitable opportunities for students means ensuring that *every* student obtains the necessary resources and knowledge to reach their full potential. The more coaching and support that we provide for every student, the better chances they have of succeeding and achieving their goals. ■

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