

Talking Points - Communicating Career Technical Education: Learner-centered Messages for Effective Program Recruitment

Opening Slide (SLIDE 1)

- We know that communication of Career Technical Education (CTE) is an ongoing challenge to effective program recruitment –and that misconceptions about what CTE is and isn't can be a barrier to more learners participating in CTE programs.
- The communications challenges exist for multiple reasons:
 - CTE comes in many shapes and forms, making it difficult to explain.
 - Even though CTE has evolved and gotten more rigorous, too many still view it in the lens of long-held perceptions of "vocational education."
 - CTE is often marketed as an option for those not going to college – set up as a "lesser track" for learners.
 - The value and benefits of CTE for policymakers and industry may be different from families, making messaging alignment difficult.
- This presentation will share some updates to research first conducted in 2017 that you can use to help better communicate the value and benefits of CTE and recruit more secondary learners into high-quality CTE programs – setting them up for a lifetime of success!

Agenda (SLIDE 2)

- Today, we are going to walk through major findings from a report that explores attitudes of middle and high school parents/guardians and learners about the value and benefits of CTE and college and career readiness.
- We'll spend some time exploring effective messages to help engage more parents/guardians and learners around the many opportunities afforded by CTE.
- We will also highlight message tailoring considerations for populations historically marginalized from CTE to ensure messages about CTE resonate with each learner.
- Finally, we will dig into some recommendations and tools to help you put this research into action.

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Advance CTE Report (SLIDE 3)

- In April 2021, Advance CTE, a nonprofit organization that represents State CTE Directors and other state leaders responsible for advancing CTE across the country, released the report: *Communicating Career Technical Education: Learner-centered Messages for Effective Program Recruitment*.
- This report reaffirmed many of the findings from research conducted in 2017 while placing a stronger focus on determining differences in attitudes and message impact among Black and Latinx families and families experiencing low income.
- And here's the URL where you can find this report and related tools and resources (URL listed on the slide).

Research Goals (SLIDE 4)

- This report drew on research conducted by a third-party research firm over a multi-month period that sought to:
 - Test resilience of 2017 research findings in current environment about the attitudes among families about CTE;
 - Confirm what families want in their education and their satisfaction level in and outside of CTE;
 - Understand what might motivate – or stand in the way – of learners enrolling in CTE programs;
 - Identify the most effective messages and messengers to “sell” CTE to learners and parents/guardians; and
 - Focus on findings by race/ethnicity and income to identify barriers to CTE participation and message tailoring

Research Methodology (SLIDE 5)

- To achieve these four goals, Advance CTE commissioned ten focus groups and a nationally representative survey of over 2,000 parents/guardians and learners.
- Importantly, the research included both those parents/guardians and learners currently involved in a CTE program – as well as “prospective” parents/guardians and learners.

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- Current learners and their parents/guardians means that the learner and/or their parents/guardian has enrolled in at least one CTE program. The survey also asked which of the 16 Career Clusters the learner was involved in.
- Prospective parents/guardians and learners are those not currently involved in CTE but demonstrating some degree of interest after hearing a brief description of CTE.
- When we refer to “families” in this presentation, we are talking about combined findings of both parents/guardians and learners.

Advancing CTE Without Limits (SLIDE 6)

- In March 2021, a new shared vision for Career Technical Education was unveiled that is supported by Advance CTE and over 40 national organizations.
- This research and the work ahead advance this vision by identifying learner-centered messages and messengers that most resonate with families about CTE so they feel welcomed and supported in participating in these programs.
- Our work ahead will also focus on ensuring the quality of our career pathways and the opportunities provided to learners align with these messages.

Key Takeaways (SLIDE 7)

- The report details five major findings, each of which we will cover in more depth and include equity considerations as we move through the presentation. Briefly, they are:
 - CTE still delivers a more satisfactory education experience for families.
 - Families are still most attracted to the real-world benefits of CTE.
 - The core components of CTE are key aspects that families are looking for in their education..
 - College and career are both aspirations for families, and CTE better prepares them for both.
 - School-based sources still endure as critical messengers for CTE.

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CTE Still Delivers for parents/guardians and learners (SLIDE 8)

- One of the most exciting findings from this research is that learners enrolled in CTE programs, and their parents/guardians, are incredibly satisfied with their education.
- As you can see, 53% of parents/guardians and learners are very satisfied with their school experience, compared to only 28% of those not enrolled in CTE programs.
- Almost 90% of current families are satisfied with their school experience, compared to only 75% of prospective parents/guardians/learners.
- Not only are families satisfied with their overall experiences, they are very satisfied with many things that are unique to CTE like: the opportunity to learn real-world skills and explore career areas, opportunities that often aren't a part of a more traditional high school experience.

CTE Still Delivers for parents/guardians and learners (SLIDE 9)

- Families are also more satisfied with nearly every indicator tested, from the quality of the teachers to opportunities for internships, demonstrating that CTE is a viable option for all learners, not only those looking for CTE-specific program elements.

Key Aspects of CTE Priorities for Families in their Education (SLIDE 10)

- This table compiles the list of the top two choices families gave when asked what aspects of education are most important to them.
- Families both and in and outside of CTE want the core aspects of CTE, gaining skills and exploring careers, as part of their education. These aspects were chosen by over 40% of families compared to 20% or less for the other categories listed.
- Prospective families favored career exploration over skill building, whereas current families favored skill building (this is not surprising)
- Advocates should consider this nuance when messaging to families - prospective families may not know what CTE has to offer or what career path to follow so career exploration is a larger priority, while those further along in their journey are more interested in gaining skills in a specific career.

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Families are Attracted to Real-World Benefits (SLIDE 11)

- We'll briefly shift to messaging, where the finding indicates the top message from 2017 about CTE still resonates with families today. That is particularly impressive considering the changes that have occurred in both education and the workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic downturn.
- Gaining real-world benefits was also the top outcome desired from CTE by families both in and not in CTE programs. We will explore this finding further later in the presentation.

CTE Benefits and Outcomes: Finding Passion is a Priority (SLIDE 12)

- One aspect of the research that emerged in 2017 but was elevated in 2020 is that learners are looking for CTE programs that align with their interests and paths they are passionate about. This is important because that may not be the first message employers and policymakers – frequent advocates for CTE – think of regarding what families are looking for in CTE.
- Preparing for the Real World was the #1 outcome across the board, while Finding a Career Passion was #2 across the board.
- Notice that this benefit was ranked above the financial benefits and earning college credit. Learners in CTE want to be impactful and feel like their job matters, and that must be considered in messaging along with the benefits of skill building.
- This is a particularly surprising finding given the economic downturn and related concerns about unemployment and underemployment by many Americans. Despite these challenges, families still consider passion a higher priority than a paycheck.

College and Career Success are Both Important (SLIDE 13)

- In 2017 our findings showed that both college and career success matter to families in CTE, which is important because it pushes back against the common narrative that CTE is for career paths other than college.
- Almost 80% of families both in and not in CTE plan to pursue some level of postsecondary education, whether that be a credential, some college, a two-year degree, a four-year degree or more.

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- Especially encouraging is that families are more open to college paths other than a four-year degree compared to our 2017 findings. While the percentage planning for college stayed steady, the percentage planning for a four-year degree was almost 10 percent lower (52%) than in 2017 (61%) for families in CTE. It was even more pronounced for those outside of CTE.
- This shift demonstrates the openness for CTE pathways that continue in community college or area technical center settings.

CTE Learners Prepared for College (SLIDE 14)

- According to the research, families in CTE are more satisfied with opportunities to prepare for college.
- Over 80% of families currently in CTE are satisfied with opportunities to earn college credit and take advanced classes compared to only 60% of prospective families.
- We will share data about how our findings indicate that CTE can help close confidence gaps for completing postsecondary education, particularly among historically marginalized populations.
- When you put this information together, parents/guardians and learners truly want both college and career preparation, and CTE provides better opportunities to succeed in both.

Teachers and School Counselors are Go-To Messengers (SLIDE 15)

- What's as important as the messages is who your messengers are. And as you can see, you don't need a huge ad campaign to reach families with information about CTE.
- School-based sources, specifically school counselors and teachers, are the go-to messengers for information about CTE programs.
- When considering how to engage these audiences, you must ensure you're using these messengers to do so.
- Parents/guardians and learners want information from those who are closest to them, like their school counselors, teachers and peers who they interact with every day. Arming these messengers with the right messages will be critical in getting learners and parents/guardians interested in CTE.

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Effective Messaging (SLIDE 16)

- Next, we'll dig into the findings around what the best messages are to use to encourage parents/guardians and learners to consider CTE programs.

Message Testing (SLIDE 17)

- Messages were originally tested among the ten focus group sites and refined after speaking to parents/guardians and learners.
- Next, Advance CTE tested three messages in the national survey on a scale of whether it describes perfectly, somewhat, or not at all for the four categories listed on the screen.
- At the end of the survey, families were asked to choose the message that was the most effective in convincing them to enroll into CTE programs. The three messages to choose from were Prepare for the Real World, Safe Bet in this Economy, and Making Connections
- Prepare for the Real World was a retest of the most effective message in 2017. Safe Bet in This Economy wanted to test the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and whether there was more focus on the evergreen benefits of CTE regardless of economic conditions. Making Connections emerged out of the focus groups and tested whether the opportunity to build networks with peers and professionals with similar interests was the most attractive aspect of CTE.
- For more insight on these messages, visit www.careertech.org/recruitmentstrategies

Most Effective Message: Preparing for the Real World (SLIDE 18)

- From this research, it was clear that the message, "Prepare for the Real World" was the most convincing choice among parents/guardians and learners.
- What is most encouraging is that this message was the top message across race, income and participation in and out of CTE, so you can feel confident in using this message with all learners.
- This message builds off of the idea that CTE gives purpose to learning through real-world skill building and that CTE learners experience tangible benefits such as hands-on training, mentoring and internships delivered by local employers.

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- It also reinforces the top benefits/outcomes of CTE chosen by families, where preparing for the real world was identified as the top benefit across the board.

Language That Works (SLIDE 19)

- When talking about real-world experiences and offerings, there is some specific language that resonates with parents/guardians and learners that connects to the top message as well as what families are looking for in their education.
- These are things such as hands-on experiences, making connections, exploration of careers you are passionate about, and adding to your high school experience.
- Again, these tangible benefits were a major selling point, and should be something you emphasize in your messaging strategies.

(Pause)

- Now that we've walked through the research, the major findings and lessons from the message testing, let's spend some time putting the pieces together.
- To recap, families want to gain real-world skills and find a career they are passionate about, and are looking for high-quality ways to do so.
- CTE naturally offers such opportunities, and many families just don't know that. We need to make sure don't not just talk about the real-world skills learners gain, but also how learners get them – by engaging with employers, working on hands-on projects and solving real-world problems. And, it's always better to show than tell – especially when it comes to talking about skills.
- We're now going to talk about a simple way to help you communicate all the messages we talked about.

Language that Works (SLIDE 20)

- When we put all of those messages we just mentioned together, we get the core message.
- What this graphic represents are the three core motivators that must serve as the foundation for any and all communications to recruit parents/guardians and learners to CTE. Research shows that people can't digest more than three messages at once, so this provides a simple guide on how to message the research.

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- At the heart of the message triangle are learners. CTE should be communicated in terms of how learners benefit from CTE, not about the systems of CTE itself. The core messages are that through CTE learners can
 - “Explore careers to find their passion;”
 - “Gain Real-World Skills;” and
 - “Have more options for career and college success.”
- As a whole, these are the messages about the value of CTE that you should repeat each and every time you engage with parents/guardians and learners – or related groups or organizations – on the benefits of CTE.
- Additionally, these should not only be used in virtual and print materials, but also when developing recruitment activities. For example, during an open house, you could consider having current CTE learners discuss what real-world skills they learned, and how they’ve already used them through work-based learning experiences.

Equity Considerations for Historically Marginalized Populations (SLIDE 21)

- Now that we’ve talked about the key messages that resonate across race, income and participation, we want to delve into some of the nuances that emerged across those categories.
- Keep in mind that these findings do not mean that you need to change your key messages, but to tailor messages by emphasizing certain pieces to make sure you effectively reach each audience.
- There were some positive findings, and some areas where equity gaps emerged where work needs to be done from both a messaging and program quality standpoint.

Real-World Skill building, Hands-on Experiences Face Satisfaction Gaps (SLIDE 22)

- The good news is that the hallmarks of CTE, career exploration and skill building, had equitable increases in satisfaction from those not in CTE to those participating in CTE. This means that families across race and income are for the most part getting equitable opportunities to participate in these aspects of education.

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- However, when you drill down a little deeper, there are equity gaps in opportunities for hands-on experiences like internships and connections with employers. White learners were a lot more satisfied with these opportunities in their education than Black and Latinx learners.
- That means that as we communicate about the value of these experiences to Black and Latinx families, we must address program quality and better understand why there is such a significant drop off in satisfaction among these groups.

Real-World Skillbuilding, Hands-on Experiences Face Satisfaction Gaps (SLIDE 23)

- This slide shows the data tied to the findings just mentioned.
- As you can see, for white learners there was an over 30 percentage point increase in satisfaction for learners in CTE compared to those not in CTE when it comes to opportunities for internships and making connections with employers.
- However, for Latinx learners there was quite a drop to 12 and six percent improvement respectively.
- Even more disappointing is that Black learners NOT in CTE are statistically equally as satisfied as those in CTE with opportunities for internships and connections with employers.
- We must close these gaps to ensure not only that our messages are effective, but to ensure that each learner receives equitable and high-quality CTE experience by having access to the complete spectrum of CTE experiences, especially work-based learning and making connections.

CTE Helps Each Learner Prepare for and Complete College (SLIDE 24)

- On a more positive note, we return to the finding of the importance of college and career success to families.
- We noted earlier that families in CTE are more satisfied with opportunities to prepare for college through advanced classes and college credits, and that those in CTE are more confident about not only starting but completing postsecondary education.

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- One really positive note is that historically marginalized populations, specifically Latinx families and families experiencing low income, had very high levels of satisfaction in these categories.
- The two charts on this slide show the increase in satisfaction for these opportunities between those not in CTE compared to those participating in CTE.
- Among Latinx families, Latinx families participating in CTE had a 24-percentage point difference up to 60 percent in plans to complete postsecondary education immediately after high school. Among families experiencing low income the improvement was smaller but still encouraging, from 42 to 55 percent.
- Black families, who are not mentioned here, had the highest confidence in completing postsecondary education by race.
- This finding matters in terms of messaging because it is important to emphasize the paths CTE provides to remove barriers to participation in and completion of postsecondary education, and it shows the potential CTE can provide to historically marginalized populations.

Source Trust and Accessibility Matters (SLIDE 25)

- As mentioned before, messengers matter as much as the message when it comes to effectively communicating CTE to families.
- The good news is that across race, ethnicity and income, parents/guardians felt comfortable accessing school counselors (top two go-to source) for information about CTE.
- However, that finding did not extend to Black and Latinx learners, who were significantly less likely to consult school counselors about CTE. This demonstrates that there is work to be done to continue to build trust with learners.
- The findings also show that messages must be shared across messengers and platforms that are accessible to families, especially when trust or access to in-person sources are a barrier.
- You can see on the slide the populations where online information was a go-to source even more than the school-based sources, particularly among Black families. Messages about CTE must not only be consistent, but digestible and in languages and terminology that each family can access and act on.

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- Both of these findings must be considered when building out your communications plan to reach historically marginalized populations to ensure equitable participation in CTE.

Effective Secondary Messaging: Making Connections (SLIDE 26)

- The final equity consideration returns to the three messages that were tested.
- While Preparing for the Real World resonated across race and income and was the top message across the board, something stood out in the order of the second and third place messages among historically marginalized populations that indicates potential for secondary messaging to compliment Preparing for the Real World.
- The two charts on this slide show the percentage that historically marginalized learners chose the 'Making Connections' message over the 'Safe Bet in this Economy' message. Black and Latinx families and families experiencing low income had significant differences in preferring the Making Connections message compared to White learners.
- The gaps were larger among current learners, showing the value and promise of CTE to deliver experiences that make connections through high-quality programs. This message could be used to not only recruit learners into CTE, but to retain CTE learners.
- When you are using the message triangle and discussing opportunities to explore careers and gain skills, tailor those messages to emphasize how those aspects of education can also help learners make valuable connections.

Putting Research into Action (SLIDE 27)

- We have talked through the research findings, the messaging that most resonates and three key messages you should use in all of your communications, and message tailoring to ensure these communications reach each family.
- So what can you start doing today to get these messages out? We have some Key Dos and Don'ts to share with you.

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Key Dos and Don'ts (SLIDE 28)

- First and foremost – be consistent with your messages! Start with the core messages or core motivators shown on the previous slide and make sure you and all of your colleagues are on the same page to drive your message home.
- After your colleagues are on the same page, share this information with other stakeholders such as industry, policymakers, administrators, etc. to ensure messaging is consistent and reinforced across all messengers.
- Make sure passion is included in your messaging – don't make it just about what learners can earn. This could be a game changer for career pathways where demand significantly outweighs the supply of skilled workers.
- The learner voice matters in communications. Make sure you are active not only in finding ways to include testimonials in your messaging, but to include families in your feedback loops in evaluating program quality and outcomes.
- Finally, there are a lot of policy and program impacts related to this research, but one that everyone can work on is making sure that our messages reflect CTE program quality and equity. We have work to do to ensure historically marginalized populations can make connections and make the most of work-based learning experiences.
- We also need to be really specific on what opportunities are out there for learners to get hands-on experiences and what paths exist to postsecondary education.
- Another key finding was the importance of localizing your CTE examples. Parents/guardians and learners want to know how CTE will work for them in their own schools and communities and will be put off by examples that they can't relate to. Again, using local examples can help explain the nuts and bolts of how CTE is delivered and provide an opportunity to highlight specific partnerships with local colleges and employers that are recognizable.
- As we discussed earlier, parents/guardians and learners see college as a major post-high school aspiration. We cannot set up CTE as an option for learners not going to college and expect the majority of parents/guardians and learners to be interested, and we have a huge opportunity to explain the many valuable college paths available through CTE. It is critical that you stress the ways in which CTE learners are prepared for both college and careers to attract more to CTE.

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- Parents/guardians and learners want you to be specific! Give details on the various benefits learners get from participating in CTE – from gaining real-world skills to earning college credit, work-based learning opportunities, and how secondary career pathways can seamlessly transition to postsecondary education.
- Finally, keep your messages positive. Parents/guardians and learners generally like their schools and their teachers and don't want to hear them being put down. CTE is a true value add - so market it that way, not as an 'other' experience.

Updated Resources You Can Use (SLIDE 29)

- Core Messages that summarizes a lot of what we just presented.
- Do's and Don'ts which detail how to use the messages and how not to use them.
- A fact sheet that you can use as a one-pager leave behind on the benefits of CTE.
- A guide on how state leaders can use this research.
- A guide on how to create a parent/guardian engagement strategy.
- Ready-made resources such as a messaging card, brochures, postcards, and social media graphics.

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