Contribution to Society

Exploring Purpose-Driven Framing for Career Pathways

The coronavirus pandemic brought about a rapid disruption in the world of work, particularly in labor market participation and how businesses and industry match available jobs with the talent searching for those jobs. Many of the trends reflected in the future of work — remote work, desire for a more distinct work-life balance, the definition of a "good job" — were accelerated by the pandemic. These factors, coupled with the Great Resignation that saw 46.6 million employees quit their jobs in 2022,[1] are leading employers to search for ways to retain dedicated talent, while employees now more than ever are seeking to contribute to the society that they live in and find purpose-driven work.[2]

And yet, the conversation in career advising often remains centered on a specific job or practical resources to help construct a postsecondary plan (such as filling out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid), or it is driven by discussion around course progression, in large part due to a lack of capacity or increased caseloads for school counselors.[3] Many learners report that their career-oriented conversations happen with trusted adults, yet they also report this discussion is not happening in a school setting.[4] School counselors agree with this assessment; only 22 percent of surveyed K–12 counselors describe their state career advising and development system as extremely effective or effective for Career Technical Education (CTE) learners.[5]

At the postsecondary level, silos between academic advising and career services can create gaps that limit the opportunity to discuss purpose-driven career paths and instead focus on a job in a given field.[6] Compounded by capacity concerns and time and resource constraints, these challenges limit the ability of career-focused advising staff at both the secondary and postsecondary levels to ask the right questions at the right time to effectively lead learners to the purpose-driven career of their choosing.

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As learners yearn for more conversations about purpose-driven futures, they look to themselves, their friends and families and the Internet, rather than the adults in their school systems that could support their career journeys in a purpose-driven way.

Given the changing world of work coupled with learners' and employees' interest in more purpose-driven work, Advance CTE seeks to explore how describing a career pathway's "contribution to society" might serve as a valuable frame for CTE programs, leading a learner to explore a career path that aligns with how they want to affect the world but that they might not have otherwise considered. This brief builds the case for a purpose-driven framing for career advising, shares results from preliminary research into this type of framing and lays out both implications for different populations and future work needed to validate and implement this framing. Exploration of a learner's overarching purpose — or **how they want to contribute to their society and make a difference in the world around them** — in connection with their academic and technical coursework prepares them to be passionate and excited about their future work, while providing employers with a strong and motivated talent pipeline.

Building the Case for Contribution-Focused Career Advising

Regardless of race or socioeconomic status, learners value the opportunity to explore career options that allow them to change their communities, and they find conversations about the future to be an opportunity to build both social capital and a future occupational identity.[7] Research builds multiple cases for leveraging "contribution to society" as an appropriate framework for career conversations.

Learners Want to Talk About Their Future Contributions but Do Not Know How

Faced with a unique set of societal hurdles, including a global pandemic, climate change, social unrest and ever-widening economic disparity, Generation Z learners increasingly search for opportunities to change the world around them for the better. In a survey of Generation Z individuals, 70 percent report being involved in a social or political cause.[8] Learners find themselves wanting to contribute to a larger societal goal, with 25 percent of young people reporting that the causes they are interested in highly influence their career choices[9] and 30 percent of teenagers reporting that they want to learn more about climate change career paths. Further, learners want to thrive in their own "good jobs" that lead to a "good life," adding that being able to support or give back to one's community is a key component of a "good job."[10]

However, only 30 percent of learners report having enough information to work toward effective change, limiting the desire or agency to pursue cause-driven careers.[11] More than half of teens report that friends and social media are the primary sources of information that influence their interest in particular causes,[12] and only 22 percent of surveyed teachers say they talk to learners about career opportunities in the sustainability field.[13] Similarly, Black and Hispanic learners see themselves as the most important change agent in their own lives, opting to tap their own decision-making abilities instead of relying on others to help them make decisions about the world around them.[14] As learners yearn for more conversations about purpose-driven futures, they look to themselves, their friends, their families and the Internet, rather than the adults in their school systems who could support their career journeys in a purpose-driven way.

Developing an Occupational Identity Through Social Capital

As learners work toward a career, they build a vision of themselves in a future workplace, including "what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel like they belong."[15] Development of youth occupational identity comes through a series of exposure, engagement and participation opportunities that are built on who they know, who is represented in careers around them, and the causes they care about. By participating in meaningful work-based learning and civic action, learners can develop a sense of belonging that is more typically developed by career professionals.[16] This feeling of belonging connects learners to a community that has shared values, interests and practices, which recognizes that learner as a legitimately interested and engaged member of that community.[17, 18]

Access to and the ability to learn from this community serves as (and then strengthens) a learner's social capital; to be successful in their careers, learners often first need a network of similar professionals to grow within and around

that can support their progression and provide navigation tools for their challenges ahead. Programs that provide learners from marginalized backgrounds, in particular, with career-relevant training or affinity-based mentorships lead to strong identity outcomes because of the ability to build social capital in a purpose-driven way.[19]

As young people develop a sense of their occupational identity, they try on a variety of hats – and exposure to who they know and what they have access to becomes critical in helping learners explore different careers.[20] Contribution-centered conversations with trusted advisers build occupational identity by exposing learners to a variety of career paths and fields they might not have considered otherwise because those fields align with learner interest rather than a specific career. However, youth, particularly youth of color, often lack the opportunity to

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engage in authentic conversations about career trajectories with mentors or potential advisers who come from the same racial or socioeconomic backgrounds they do.[21] Conversations led in a purpose-driven way, particularly in school settings facilitated by career advisers, could also lead to authentic work experiences with potential mentors and connections to like-minded peers. Especially as learners increasingly drive toward careers that have an impact on their communities and the world around them, they need the opportunity to learn about careers that could fulfill their professional goals while being exposed to people that look like them in those

Stages of Occupational Identity Formation

Exposure
Who they know, what they see, and what/who they have access to

Exploration
Trying on different aspects of career and work

Selection
Determining the first steps of a chosen career pathway

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fields; in this way, conversations about purpose-driven careers can open the door to experiences that allow learners to build their occupational identity and social capital alike.

Strengthening the Talent Pipeline

In a changing workplace, employers and employees alike are seeking to find purpose-driven impact to their work, with an increasing understanding that connection to the purpose of the work is a key driver of retention. Employees list a misalignment between personal values and the values of an organization as a foremost driver of attrition,[22] while 83 percent of employees further note that heightened purpose in the workplace provides meaning to day-to-day work.[23] Employees that "live their purpose at work" are 6.5 times more likely to report higher resilience and 1.5 times more likely to go above and beyond to make their company more successful.[24] Research notes that young people in particular attribute retention to a connection to their employer's purpose, with millennials 5.3 times more likely to stay when they have a strong connection to their employer's purpose.[25] As the research demonstrates, employers should look to hire employees with the passion to give back to their communities through their work, especially if the employee is able to clearly explain what that contribution can be and how it informs their identity.

Initial Findings

Reviewing this research revealed the importance of beginning to explore the intersection of occupational identity formation, career advising and a learner's purpose. To better understand "contribution to society" as a frame for CTE pathways and programs of study, Advance CTE commissioned focus groups of both CTE and non-CTE learners at different learner levels. We also conducted in-depth interviews with professionals involved in the hiring process for their particular organization from across six industries (for a more in-depth methodology, see the Methodology section). Both groups reviewed descriptions of Career Clusters® from the National Career Clusters® Framework and alternative descriptions framed in a more purpose-driven way (see Appendix for descriptions). Initial findings from this research include the following.

■ **Framing career pathways and programs of study around a contribution to society has value, but language must be framed appropriately.** Having a "one-size-fits-all" model rarely works in education, and the development of this type of framing is no exception. Across learner levels, learners have different motivations for their interest in a given career pathway or program of study. Younger learners are often very purpose-driven; they have a touchstone "why" for their desired career path but lack the contextual knowledge of how to get there.

One middle school learner, for example, shared that they "want a center for people to get help if they need it. … I want a space where anyone can come, and I can provide a list of people that can help them." Another shared that "I would really love to take care of kids and have my own space for them." In contrast, a secondary learner might be able to be more specific in their purpose: "I want to make air travel a lot quicker, safer and cheaper." Postsecondary learners still might have purpose in mind, but the conversation becomes more increasingly about "how do I get the job I'm in line for" as older learners develop or execute a career plan that may even be completely agnostic of their desired contribution to society. Multiple postsecondary learners in focus groups laid out the exact list of credentials and experience they need to work through to land the career of their choice. Others presented a similar continuum in occupational identity formation from exposure to exploration to selection. Layering appropriate language linking one's contribution to society as a core component to the formation of a learner's occupational identity may prove vital to ensuring that learners see a successful future for themselves.[26]

■ **Titles and descriptions of programs of study or industry sectors alone are insufficient for effective advising.** To see the value of a program or career pathway, a specific course, or even a given industry area, learners need a sufficiently in-depth understanding of what the program of study focuses on without much technical jargon. If a learner cannot see themselves in a given career pathway or cannot connect a career pathway or program of study to a conversation they had with a trusted person, the learner then has difficulty formulating the type of work they would be doing, what a future looks like in that field or how to get there.

In a discussion about using "information technology" as a descriptor for a program of study, for example, focus groups were confused about the term, despite having familiarity with the sector: "My dad is in [information technology], and that's why I was kind of hesitant on what [descriptor] to choose for this category. Because the many times he showed it to me, it's just like numbers and pages. I don't know how people can look at that all day. I just think computers." When described in a different way, however, other learners found connection to the sector: "I think that would draw me because that's something I would want to have a job in, helping develop software or apps, especially to solve problems."

> **"Knowing how [the program] could benefit them could make them want to [enroll]…It has a better description than just listing the job."**
> — *Middle School CTE Participant*

Similarly, employers often misunderstand the titles or descriptions of CTE programs or pathways and shared that such descriptions do not consistently align with descriptions of their work. One employer shared that using "finance, business management and administration" as a program of study descriptor "just focuses on what you did in school. It doesn't translate to what you'll actually be doing in the workforce." If learners know how to describe their career pathway using only the language they are given, they may unintentionally create mismatches between themselves and potential employers or pass up opportunities that they might have been interested in if the career pathway were described in a way that was more connected to their purpose-driven career interests.

■ **The most effective framing of a program of study — for both learners and employers — links a learner's contribution to society to their career goals.** In focus groups, learners of all ages remained concentrated on a specific career goal, whether that goal was purpose-driven or more job focused. In describing CTE programs

to learners, descriptions that resonated most demonstrated a direct link between career goals and contribution to society. Even if a learner was not particularly interested in that career path for themselves, descriptions of career pathways explicitly demonstrating a contribution to society were more appealing as a potential path for learners. Words and phrases such as "resources," "community," "transform," "sustainable," "connecting" and others that showed up in sample alternative descriptors spoke widely to learners and appealed to them more than specific job tasks. One focus group participant shared their excitement about "the whole idea of connecting communities. Everyone is using social media and on digital platforms. I really like the idea of connecting communities."

vague. If someone says they went through an [information technology] program, what kind of program did you go through?"

■ **Employers see value in CTE programs, particularly in creating passionate and committed employees.** Previous research indicates that employers view CTE very positively and see CTE as a value-add, with 96 percent of employers that had heard of CTE previously reporting a favorable or very favorable view of CTE.[27] In these interviews, however, CTE as a whole remained largely unknown by employers, though existing titles and descriptions of CTE programs occasionally resonated because of a technical word or term. After a discussion about CTE and its connection to programs that could be influenced by how

"I feel like 'providing sustainable solutions' is important to everyone, no matter what your career path is. So, that's just one that resonated with me, and I think it should resonate with most people." — *Postsecondary CTE Learner*

Importantly, CTE program descriptions must remain grounded in practice, as broad and more general descriptions, even those connected to a wider purpose, did not appeal to focus groups. When given a comparison of existing program descriptors and alternative descriptions, one high school non-CTE learner shared, "I think the first [statement] tells you what you're doing. But sometimes the first one can be too broad. So, I feel like they should have the first one [as] the class name, and then the other three will be under it, entailing what you might learn in that class."

Employers also cautioned on the balance between breadth of program and focus on a specific contribution: "It depends on what I'm looking to hire them for. If it is computer science, I want them to tell me they 'develop software and apps to solve problems.' If I'm getting someone that's super specialized… I don't want it to be

a learner wants to contribute to their society, employers began to see the value in CTE programs as building both skills and passion. Employers articulated that learners who have already invested multiple semesters of coursework and can speak to the value of this experience would demonstrate a commitment to the work that could overcome many of their hiring and retention concerns.

Implications for Stakeholders

Though limited, these focus groups and interviews — along with the growing research base around what young people want and how employers need to adapt to the future of work — indicate a number of potential implications for different stakeholder groups about the value of a "contribution to society" frame for CTE programs. The following chart identifies a few key implications for each group.

Implications for Stakeholders

Learners	● Leading explanations of career goals with contribution to society could result in the development of a more concrete occupational identity and long-term career interest. ● Understanding how to best describe their needs and interests in a way that reflects the impact they would like to have on the world around them in conjunction with their technical skills could improve their ability to secure a position with a potential employer. ● Conversations about a learner's purpose and ideal contribution to society could better recruit learners into CTE programs that are described or explained with connection to purpose.
Instructors and Counseling Professionals	● Starting with the "why" instead of the "how" in advising conversations could ground learners in a purpose-driven career path helping to develop a more intentional focus on career goals. ● When differentiated by learner age and demographic, career advising language can drive learners into a more purpose-connected career field while still creating a plan to get there. ● Practitioners could develop opportunities for peer-led and peer-facilitated spaces to discuss learners' contribution to their society in conjunction with their future career path, creating opportunity for authentic conversations around future goals. ● Authentic and culturally responsive instruction and projects designed with contribution to society as a central component can inspire and help build agency among learners.
Administrators and Policymakers	● Advising crosswalks that link specific contributions to society to an industry area or program of study could help create a more comprehensive understanding of what careers are available to learners. ● Guidance is needed to help explain programs of study beyond course titles or general descriptions. The contributions of state-prioritized fields, in particular, can be better explained in guidance to help drive recruitment of learners into those sectors. ● Questions in statewide individualized career and academic plans or other career advising initiatives could focus on the impacts a learner has to signal a concerted focus on the importance of a learner's impact on their community as a core component of career success.
Employers	● Intentional creation of work-based learning programs (e.g., internships or apprenticeships) built around social impact could attract CTE learners with both skills and purpose. ● Explicitly signaling in job postings or company descriptions the contribution to society an employer's work could have demonstrates purpose that is relevant to the interests of potential employees. ● Questions in interviews about purpose or what impacts a learner wants to have throughout their career could lead to hiring and mentoring opportunities that contribute to long-term retention.

Directions of Future Work

While reviewing the growing body of research and the findings from the resulting focus groups and interviews began conversations around the benefits of framing career pathways and programs of study around a learner's contribution to society, opportunities for future work became evident. First, conversations about social capital and occupational identity formation need to be considered in career advising professional development, particularly in CTE spaces, to help professionals better understand the value of using a contribution to society framing for the development of a learner's career future. Working with a community of practice or shared solutions workgroup could illuminate best practices for counseling professionals at both the secondary and postsecondary levels to help better leverage contribution to society as a deciding factor for learners, particularly how it relates to the formation of one's occupational identity.

Second, crosswalks between national CTE models (such as the National Career Clusters Framework) and descriptions of contributions to society need to be further pressure tested and validated with advising professionals to determine the feasibility of implementation and to better understand the impact of specific conversations. Continued interviews, focus groups, surveys and workgroups could inform and standardize the contributions a certain sector, career pathway or program of study could have in a local, state or national context and make these contributions more easily accessible for learners and counseling professionals.

Finally, additional research is needed to determine promising practices for how industry evolves the recruitment and engagement of early career professionals. Conversations with employer groups and hiring professionals could inform policy and practice about how new employees can contribute to the organization and their larger communities and how this contribution might affect retention, workplace satisfaction, connection to the work and other factors.

Methodology

For this project, Advance CTE worked with an independent research firm to conduct five focus groups with a total of 41 learners. Participants ranged from sixth-grade to second-year community college learners and included both CTE and non-CTE learners. Learners were asked to respond to questions about their contribution to society and their future career goals. They were also asked about common CTE names and titles, as determined by the National Career Clusters Framework, and to respond to alternative descriptions. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with business professionals from six different fields (accounting/finance, construction/architecture, health care, manufacturing, information technology, and agriculture/natural resources). All participants were compensated for their participation.

Appendix: Sample "Contribution to Society" Reframing Used in Focus Groups

- **Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources**
  - "Providing food and sustainable resources"
  - "Helping to feed your community/ the country"
  - "Providing energy resources to keep powering the world"

- **Architecture & Construction**
  - "Providing sustainable housing for your community"
  - "Transforming the spaces in your city/town"

- **Finance, Business Management and Administration**
  - "Helping your community have financial resources they need to be successful"
  - "Making sure businesses are successfully run"
  - "Developing new products, jobs and opportunities by running your own business"

- **Health Science**
  - "Ensuring the health of your community"
  - "Working with sick people or people who can't physically help themselves"
  - "Researching cures to illnesses or diseases"

- **Information Technology**
  - "Developing software and apps to solve problems"
  - "Connecting communities through digital platforms"
  - "Ensuring everyone has access to a global network"

- **Law, Public Safety, Corrections & Security**
  - "Protecting your community"
  - "Supporting people through their legal challenges"
  - "Making the world a safer place"

- **Manufacturing**
  - "Using technology to make a company's production more efficient and scalable"
  - "Ensuring a company's outputs are safe and sustainable"
  - "Protecting the health and safety of employees"

- **Transportation, Distribution & Logistics**
  - "Finding the fastest way to get people and things from point A to point B"
  - "Making sure highways and infrastructure are smoothly operated"
  - "Providing green/sustainable shipping and transportation solutions"

Acknowledgments

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