

Positive Student Attitudes Toward CTE

By Dave Gaunt and Louann Bierlein Palmer

For nearly a century, career and technical education has been a federally funded fixture within secondary education in the United States. However, faced with the challenges of the federal No Child Left Behind mandates, and the emphasis on academics and the value of a college education, CTE finds itself in a battle for federal funding, and for its very reputation (Gray, 2004).

Of primary concern is student enrollment in CTE programs. Unlike mathematics, English and science, CTE programs are electives within the high school curriculum. If students choose not to *elect* CTE programs, then enrollment declines, and if that erosion continues, those affected programs are ultimately discontinued. It is therefore essential that CTE educators better understand the factors that influence students as they make curricular decisions in high school.

Previous research studies have revealed that image and perception problems have plagued the CTE community for some time. For example, Cohen and Besharov (2002) report that in many instances, CTE has had an image problem, due to the perception that it provides poor quality education for the worst students. They also note the lack of current research to ascertain how years of national, state and local efforts to improve the image of CTE might be paying off.

Other research has looked at the factors (besides perceptions) that influence students in their career choices. For example, Rossetti's 1991 study was one of the most comprehensive to look at the variety of people

who tend to influence students in their decisions about CTE. However, information from this study is nearly 15 years old and may no longer be relevant given changing student demographics and cultural shifts.

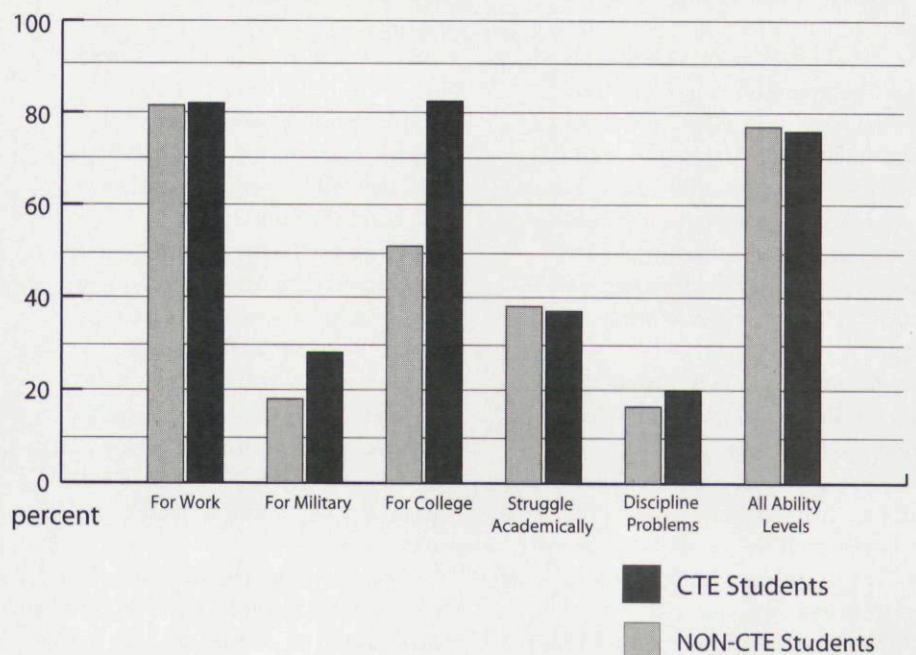
Given the lack of current research on perceptions and factors that influence student decision-making, a study was recently conducted involving high school students in Michigan. Key research questions included: What are students' overall perceptions of CTE, and whom do they believe is best served by career and technical education? Who are the people that most influence students as they

consider their curricular alternatives? Are there other factors that influence students' decision-making regarding CTE?

The Setting for the Study

Career and technical education is delivered in many ways throughout the state of Michigan, from comprehensive and career-technical high schools to area career-technical centers. The setting for this study was an area career-technical center, typical in many respects to other centers throughout the state. The Wexford Missaukee Area Career Technical Center (WMACTC) is located in

Figure 1. Comparison of the perceptions of non-CTE and CTE students (Strongly agree or agree)



Cadillac, Michigan, and has been serving students in the region since 1971. Students from seven local districts are currently enrolled in 13 programs available at the center (with most beginning their junior year with plans to complete a two-year program by the end of their senior year).

In this study, a survey of all high school seniors (both those attending CTE programs and those not) from the seven high schools that feed into this area center was conducted. Overall, 451 seniors responded to the survey, of which 126 were enrolled in a CTE program at the area center, and 325 were not participating in CTE programs. The survey captured the perceptions of students toward the center, as well as what people or other factors influenced their decision to attend or not to attend.

Findings

This study resulted in numerous findings of interest to the broader CTE world. These include a current profile of CTE students, as well as perceptions of CTE and non-CTE students, and factors that influenced their curriculum decisions (Gaunt, 2005). Given the length of this article, only

the pieces associated with perceptions and influences will be reported.

Student Perceptions of CTE

Students were asked to identify for whom they believed the career-technical center was designed to serve. The categories were identified as follows: those who plan to go to work immediately after high school; those who plan to join the military immediately after high school; those who plan to go to college immediately after high school; those who struggle academically; those who have discipline problems; and those of all ability levels.

While these questions focused on perceptions of high school seniors with regard to the purpose of the career-technical center, that is, for whom it is designed to serve, the resulting data reveals information regarding the image of the center. For example, the percentage of students who strongly agree or agree that the career-technical center is for students of all ability levels indicates a positive image of the career-technical center. On the other hand, the percentage of students who strongly agree or agree that the career-technical center is designed for students who struggle academically or

who have discipline problems indicates a negative image.

With this in mind, Figure 1 shows a comparison of the perceptions of non-CTE and CTE students.

Clearly these data indicate this career-technical center has a positive image with high school seniors, given that nearly 80 percent of both CTE and non-CTE students believe the center is designed for students of all ability levels. Furthermore, less than 40 percent believe that the center is for those who struggle academically, and less than 20 percent believe that it is for those who have discipline problems.

Interestingly, there is a statistically significant difference in perception between non-CTE and CTE students for only three items. More CTE students than non-CTE students believe that the center is designed for students who: have discipline problems (20 percent compared to 16.5 percent); plan to go to college (82.4 percent compared to 51 percent); and plan to join the military (28.8 percent compared to 18.3 percent).

Perhaps more significant than the categories in which CTE and non-CTE students responded significantly different are the areas in which each group responded similarly. This is especially noteworthy in two categories. First, 81.7 percent of the non-CTE students, and 82.4 percent of the CTE students, believe the career-technical center is designed for students who plan to go to work immediately after high school. The connection between CTE and the workforce is evident on the part of both groups.

Second, and perhaps even more noteworthy, is the similarity in responses of the CTE and non-CTE groups with regard to the ability level issue. Non-CTE students responded slightly more strongly, at 78 percent as compared to 76.6 percent of the CTE students, that the career-technical center is designed for students of all ability levels.

For CTE educators and stakeholders, these data are encouraging. Certainly

Figure 2. Influence of people on CTE student decision-making ("A little" or "A lot")

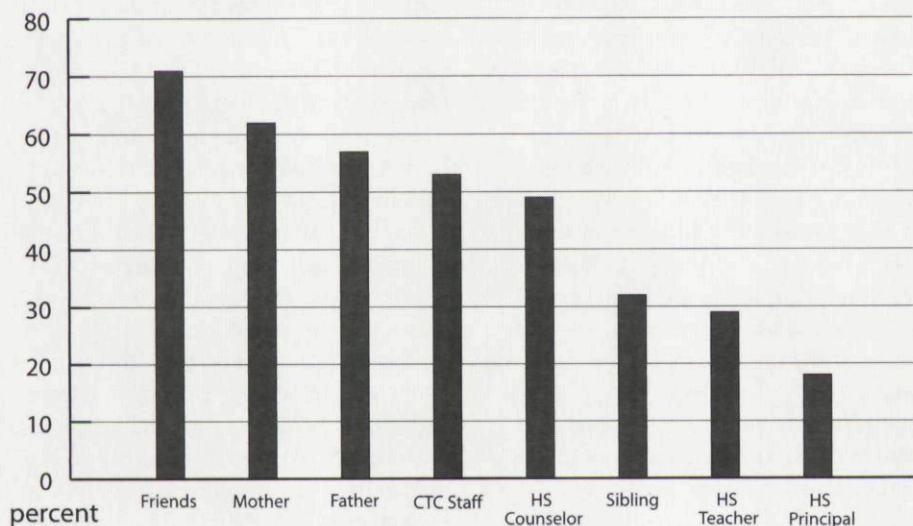
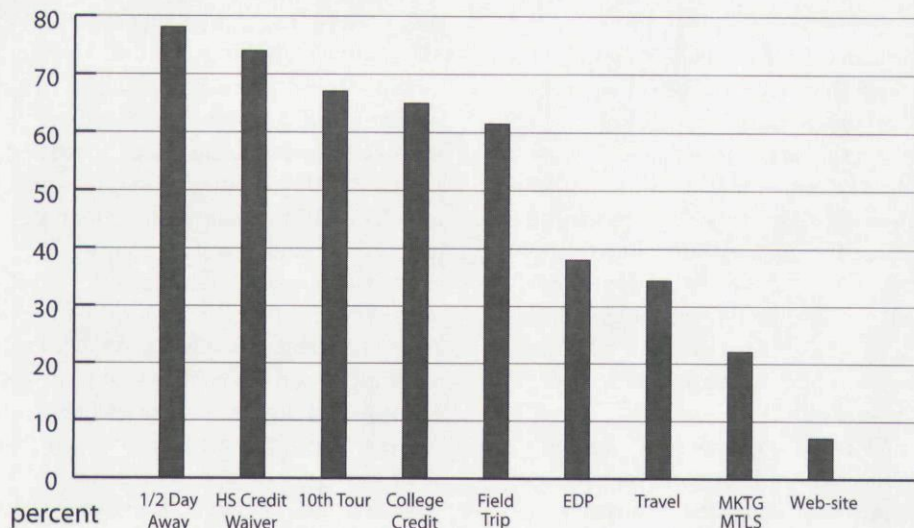


Figure 3. Influence of other factors on CTE student decision-making ("A little" or "A lot")



much effort has been put into improving the image of CTE, from the initial name change from vocational education, to the persistent message that CTE is for students of all ability levels. Efforts to portray CTE as a path not only to the workforce but to college as well have been ongoing and purposeful. Apparently there has been some success in that regard, as evidenced by the results reported in this study.

Influencing People and Factors

The survey also asked students to identify the extent to which eight different people influenced their attendance at the career-technical center: the high school counselor; a high school teacher; the high school principal; their mother; their father; their brother or sister; a friend; and an area center staff person.

Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of the percentage of CTE students responding "A little" or "A lot" to the influence each category of people had on the student to attend, ordered from the greatest percentage to the least percentage.

Analysis of these data indicates that CTE students are most influenced by

their friends, with more than 70 percent indicating this to be true. Mother (61.9 percent), father (57.7 percent) and CTC staff (52.4 percent) follow this. Slightly below half of the respondents are influenced by the high school counselor (49.2 percent), followed by sibling (31.7 percent) and high school teacher (29.4 percent). The high school principal had the least influence at 18.2 percent.

The survey also asked students to identify the extent to which nine different factors encouraged attendance at the career-technical center, including: a 10th-grade tour of the CTC; another field trip to the CTC; a high school career plan (EDP); marketing materials such as brochures and videos; the CTC Web site; time spent traveling to the CTC; spending half of the day away from the high school; receiving a waiver of high school credit for completing a CTC program; and receiving college credit for completing a CTC program.

Figure 3 shows a graphical representation of the percentage of CTE students responding "A little" or "A lot" to the influence that each factor had on the student to attend, ordered from the greatest percentage to the least percentage.

These data indicate CTE students are most influenced by the opportunity to spend half of the day away from the high school. This was a significant factor for 78.4 percent of the CTE respondents. This was followed by 73.4 percent of the CTE respondents who indicated that a waiver of high school credit influenced their decision. The 10th-grade tour was a significant factor for 67.4 percent of the CTE respondents, followed by the opportunity to receive college credit (64.8 percent) and another field trip to the career-technical center (60.4 percent). There was a significant drop-off in influence of the next factor, the EDP, at only 38.4 percent, followed by the time spent traveling to the career-technical center (34.7 percent) and marketing materials (21.7 percent). Only 6.4 percent of the CTE respondents were influenced by the Web site.

Key Lessons

So what are the key "take-aways" from this study?

First, CTE educators should be heartened to see that nearly 80 percent of these high school seniors believed that the programming offered by the CTE area center was for students of all ability levels (not just those with discipline problems or low achievers). And for more than 50 percent of those not involved in CTE programming to know that the CTE center is for students who want to go on to college is a big plus. These perceptions are quite different than those often found in previous research.

It is clear that this CTE area center's aggressive recruiting and outreach efforts appear to be making a difference regarding the image of CTE programming. A concerted effort is made by its staff to actively recruit students, including: the development of brochures; creation of a Web site; organization of visits and tours of the center by sophomore students from the local high

schools; collaboration through meetings and visits with local high school personnel on issues ranging from credit waiver and articulation opportunities to new program development; and letters sent to the homes of prospective students. Other incidental efforts include timely newspaper articles and district newsletter insertions regarding the center.

Overall, these and other staff efforts are designed to portray CTE in a positive light and enhance the image and perception of CTE and the area center in particular. And the best news is that these are efforts easily replicated by other CTE programs.

Second, per this study, the most influential people upon a student regarding a decision to enroll, or not to enroll, in CTE are friends and parents. To increase the likelihood of strong enrollment, CTE educators and stakeholders must take their recruitment messages directly to these individuals.

For example, social ties are strong. CTE students are most influenced by friends, many of whom are likely enrolled at the area center. Non-CTE students are reluctant to leave friends behind and spend half of the day away from them at the area center. Area centers should promote themselves as socially friendly places with the opportunity to meet new people, and should also sponsor social events to ease the transition. Making new friends eases the separation from old ones.

Strategies specifically addressing parents should be a high priority for CTE educators and stakeholders.

Whether it is letters sent home to parents of potential students inviting them to open houses and other events, or material sent to them explaining the benefits of a career and technical education—both financially and academically—the influence of parents is significant and must be addressed if enrollment in CTE is to flourish.

High school counselors remain a significant part of the enrollment landscape, and positive relationships with counselors and with other high school personnel can be beneficial. Further, while results of this study indicate that CTE staff have a significant impact on enrollment, having positive relationships with educator colleagues in the local high school, and encouraging colleagues to interact with students in that environment, may significantly enhance enrollment.

The opportunity for students to see the area center firsthand is an important factor in influencing their decision regarding attendance at the center. In this study, the 10th-grade tour, where all sophomore students visit the center, is a strongly influential factor in assisting students in making a decision about enrollment. Other field trips and firsthand experiences can be just as significant.

Finally, the opportunity to receive college credit is a key influential factor as students consider attending the center. Expansion of these arrangements with colleges may prove fruitful in enhancing CTE enrollment. Obtaining college credit for CTE programs legitimizes the breadth and depth of the curriculum taught, and gives students a distinct advantage when transitioning to the college level. Knowing that parents are a significant influential factor in student decision-making regarding CTE, emphasizing this theme with parents may be a particularly productive strategy from both an academic and a financial standpoint.

In closing, the topic of image has dominated the CTE landscape for many years. Results from this study indicate that these high school seniors view CTE as designed for students from all ability levels, and that fact alone presents a positive sign for the future of career and technical education. Given that mothers

and fathers are key influencers in student decision-making, CTE will have found an army of allies when today's students become tomorrow's parents. Much more needs to be done, but conscientious and coordinated efforts by CTE educators can indeed make a difference. ■

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