

## CAREER READINESS SERIES

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# EXPANDING CAREER READINESS THROUGH CAREER AND TECHNICAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

**E**nsuring students are “college- and career-ready” has become a critical issue as concerns rise about the success of the U.S. education system and, ultimately, the country’s economic competitiveness. The discussion surrounding college readiness is generally limited to academic skills, but actual career readiness requires an even more rigorous blend of academic, technical and employability skills, and the ability to apply these skills in authentic career situations.

The foundations for strengthening career readiness are already in place through career and technical education (CTE), which offers this unique blend of skills through comprehensive programs of study. One of the most critical components of strong CTE programs is student participation in related leadership organizations, known as career and technical student organizations (CTSOs).

With more than 1.5 million student members combined, CTSOs provide “a unique program of career and leadership development, motivation and recognition for secondary and postsecondary students enrolled, or previously enrolled, in career and technical education programs.”<sup>1</sup>

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Association for Career and Technical Education  
1410 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 • Phone: 800-826-9972  
Fax: 703-683-7424 • [www.acteonline.org](http://www.acteonline.org)

*Educate. Advocate. Lead.*



CTSOs are specifically authorized by the U. S. Congress in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and operate as national not-for-profit organizations divided into state associations and local school chapters. At the national, state and local levels, CTSOs offer diverse programming that is designed to enhance classroom instruction and four common organizational goals: leadership development; academic and career achievement; professional development; and community service.

At the local level, CTSO chapters operate as in-school, co-curricular programs led by CTE teachers as advisers in middle schools, high schools and postsecondary institutions. For students, participation in a local chapter includes activities designed to expand their leadership abilities, contextualize their academic instruction, encourage them to pursue their education and equip them with job-related skills in their career field of interest. Students participate in local, state, national and international career-based competitions designed to measure their academic understanding and skills development. Scholarships, prizes and awards also encourage students to continue their career-path education and assume personal responsibility for their own career readiness.

Research has shown that participation in activities like CTSOs has a positive impact on students' overall career readiness:

- Students who participate in CTSOs demonstrate higher levels of academic engagement and motivation, civic engagement, career self-efficacy, and employability skills than other students, and the more students participate in CTSO activities, the better the results.<sup>2</sup>
- Students who participate in school organizations in 10th grade have higher high school grade point averages and are more likely to be enrolled in college at age 21 than other students.<sup>3</sup>

By providing students with contextualized academic instruction and the opportunity to work in settings where the career skills learned in the classroom can be utilized, CTSOs effectively facilitate the development of students' academic, technical and employability skills.

## ACADEMIC SKILLS

To truly be career-ready, students not only need foundational academic skills, but also need to be able to apply academics in the context of real-world situations. This is one of the strengths of CTSO activities—students are able to explore career-related

## THE 11 CTSOs RECOGNIZED BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION ARE:

- Business Professionals of America (BPA)
- DECA
- Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA)
- Future Business Leaders of America—Phi Beta Lambda (FBLA—PBL)
- Future Educators Association (FEA)
- Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA)
- National FFA Organization (FFA)
- National Young Farmer Educational Association (NYFEA)
- National Postsecondary Agricultural Student (PAS) Organization
- SkillsUSA
- Technology Student Association (TSA)

tasks aligned with state academic standards. One example of this is the HOSA medical reading competition, which requires students to read five different health care-related books, such as Lisa Sanders' *Every Patient Tells a Story: Medical Mysteries and the Art of Diagnosis*, then apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information from the assigned books in written and oral exams.

CTSOs also have been shown to increase student engagement, better connecting students to academic classroom activities. Consider the following:

- A study of sophomore CTSO members found that "participation in career and technical student organizations produced a positive contribution to student achievement as measured by student grades in high school."<sup>4</sup>
- In a study of student performance measures, FBLA high school seniors significantly outperformed their non-FBLA counterparts on four performance measures: ACT scores; SAT scores; GPA; and graduation rate.<sup>5</sup>
- A study by Purdue University found that FFA members are more enthusiastic about and attach greater value to their school studies than the average student.<sup>6</sup>
- The National Research Center for College and University Admissions reported that close to 85 percent of DECA members indicate their DECA experiences have had a positive effect on their academic performance.<sup>7</sup>

## EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Employability skills have often been cited by employers as the skills most critical to workplace success in the 21st-century economy. Many positive examples of these skills have been identified in CTSO programs, including teamwork, decision-making, critical thinking, leadership, community awareness, career awareness, and personal and social development. For example, FCCLA members have reported that career preparation, communication, and leadership were among the top skills they developed through their involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous research studies over the last several decades have also shown that students' leadership skills in particular are increased through participation in CTSOs.<sup>9</sup> BPA 2010-2011 College/Postsecondary President Micah Hopper explained that leadership is one of his biggest gains from participation. "BPA has given me the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives by helping them grow as leaders. It has also given me the leadership experience that I was looking for to be a successful business owner."<sup>10</sup>

## TECHNICAL SKILLS

Through professional development activities and competitive events, students participating in CTSOs can gain enhanced job-specific knowledge and skills critical to future careers. For example, students in FBLA develop competitive projects in such areas as accounting, cybersecurity and marketing to gain in-depth skills in these areas, while students in FEA compete in impromptu speaking and lesson planning and delivery to hone their career skills, and HOSA students demonstrate knowledge of medical terminology and medical careers, as well as

laboratory procedures in areas like biotechnology. These events help students transfer knowledge gained in the classroom to authentic career-related situations.

Another set of such events is the SkillsUSA Championships, where SkillsUSA students showcase their skills. These contests start at the local level and continue through the state and national levels. During the 2011 SkillsUSA National Championships, more than 5,500 contestants competed in 94 separate events, which included such categories as 3-D Visualization and Animation, Architectural Drafting, Automated Manufacturing Technology, Occupational Health and Safety, and Mobile Robotic Technology.

The philosophy of the Championships is to "reward students for excellence, to involve industry in directly evaluating student performance and to keep training relevant to employers' needs."<sup>11</sup> Students who demonstrate outstanding achievement in the technical competitions will be awarded Skill Point Certificates validated by industry leaders. The certificates contain lists of competencies mastered and the logos of companies that plan and manage the competitions, and they serve as documentation of skills for students to use with potential employers.

Other opportunities both in and outside the classroom, such as state and national conferences, contribute to students' technical knowledge and expose them to business and industry opportunities and requirements. Recent research of students in TSA showed that TSA activities contributed significantly to students' understanding of skills required for a technical career, such as knowledge of how technology works and of the design process.<sup>12</sup>



Like all CTSOs, FCCLA chapters across the country provide significant community support through a number of diverse national programs and service projects that contribute to students' career readiness. For example, "FACTS—Families Acting for Community Traffic Safety" is a FCCLA peer-education program through which young people strive to save lives through safe driving habits.

Members from Brookings High School, South Dakota, positively affected their community and developed employability skills by planning and carrying out a year-long project that focused on safe driving. Their "Drive to Survive" project enabled the students to advocate on traffic safety

issues, influence their peers on the school campus, promote their efforts to the community and collaborate with various community stakeholders—all skills that will help them as they pursue further education and careers. Specific project activities planned and conducted by students included a docudrama, DUI simulations, school assemblies and displays, and workshops on distracted driving. Students enhanced their communication skills through the development of public service announcements, newspaper articles and interviews with local radio and TV stations. One of the student members even had the opportunity to testify before legislators on texting-and-driving bills in the state capitol and Washington, DC.



As in other CTSOs, FFA's local, state and national leadership conferences prepare students to be leaders in their schools, jobs and communities. Students hone their leadership skills by giving speeches, participating in debates, organizing ceremonies and events and conducting community service projects. A special FFA-developed curriculum known as LifeKnowledge, which includes lesson plans, activities and e-learning modules, helps FFA advisers integrate leadership, personal growth and career success instruction into their classrooms, benefitting all students. Content includes such diverse topics as conflict management, strategic thinking, personal goal setting and business communications.

FFA 2010-2011 President Riley Pagett elaborated further on the leadership skills gained in FFA. "My membership in FFA has allowed me to develop real, tangible leadership—looking others in the eye when spoken to, shaking hands firmly, holding the door open and practicing manners, recognizing the potential of others and drawing on that potential, delegating work, using time efficiently, allowing others to occasionally take the lead, speaking confidently, remaining flexible, respecting others, remembering the past, making wise decisions, overcoming obstacles and rising to the call of action when others need you to really serve them."<sup>13</sup>

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In addition to providing enhanced academic, employability and technical skills, CTSOs also have an impact on students' educational attainment. The vitality and competitiveness of America's economy are contingent upon increasing the number of high school and college graduates, and more students need education and skills beyond high school for true career readiness.

- According to the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, participating in leadership and professional development activities in a CTSO raises students' educational aspirations.<sup>14</sup>
- FFA members are preparing for postsecondary studies in slightly higher numbers and have more sharply defined career objectives than the average student.<sup>15</sup>
- According to TSA, of their 150,000 middle and high school student members, 100 percent are likely to graduate from high school and 75 percent are college-bound.<sup>16</sup>
- More than 30 percent of students in BPA are also enrolled

in AP courses, above the 2010 national average of 28.3 percent, and 30 percent are involved in dual enrollment, as well.<sup>17</sup>

- More than 70 percent of DECA members at the 2009 International Career Development Conference indicated that DECA has influenced their future career plans, and more than 65 percent indicated that DECA has influenced their future college plans.<sup>18</sup> ■

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