

Authentic Redesign: Bridging High School and Workforce Development (continued)

Authentic Engagement

How do we leverage the knowledge from some of these exemplars to create a new approach to graduation? A number of years ago Wakefield High School in Arlington, Va. started to require all seniors to complete a Senior Project for which they earn a full-year course credit. Projects cover a range of topics that may include community service, leadership, career interests, cultural exploration, and political and social activism. Students work with a Senior Project advisor and document their work to complete the Project that includes a requirement of 100 hours or more doing research, practice, new learning and community interaction. Examples of student projects have included:

- Raising Awareness about Bone Marrow Donation,
- Organic Living in the Modern Day,
- Reading Classics by Dickens, Austin and Elliot, and
- Learning More about Superconductors.


Hearing first-hand from recent Wakefield graduates highlights the value of this unique experiential learning opportunity:

“Superb! It was hectic but good at the same time. I impressed myself as a young man.”

“I’m so thankful that Wakefield requires this project. It has helped me grow and mature as a person.”

While the Wakefield example represents a robust and comprehensive model, a similar experience is offered to seniors at Washington-Lee and Yorktown High Schools through the Senior Experience Program. These programs are designed as culminating end-of-year activities for seniors to explore professional opportunities beyond the classroom, foster collaboration with the community and begin to prepare them for some of the challenges they may encounter in college and career settings.

Although there are differences in the scope of these examples, the tenets and purpose of both programs are comparable to the proposed new requirement for Applied Knowledge and Skills.



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And, just this year, Washington-Lee High School, initiated a pilot that allows students who are on a clear path to graduation to elect to waive the full-day requirement and leave school to pursue work and/or projects in a specific area of interest.

I strongly believe similar models exist throughout other Virginia school divisions. Thinking strategically, we should draw on all of these existing examples to create robust experiences that will “connect the dots” for our graduates and lead to the development of a more dynamic workforce that can meet the future needs of our economy.

New Thinking in Higher Education

Simultaneously, colleges and universities who have been the static and traditional educational model are reevaluating the college admission process to incorporate an experiential element of how students have integrated their learning into the larger community. The recent study from Harvard Graduate School of Education, *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admission*, points to the importance of students demonstrating both intellectual and ethical engagement.

Richard Weissbourd, author of the study highlights the conclusion of the study, saying, “What is important (in terms of service) is whether students immerse themselves in an experience that is meaningful to them over a sustained period of time.” This study further confirms the importance of authentic experiences in benefitting the common good and others in society.

The Big Picture: Bold, Timely & Wise

This more integrated approach to learning is realistic. It blends the knowledge and skills that our students have acquired in the classroom setting, and then transfers and applies those attributes to the real world in a safe and structured environment where learning and successful experiences can grow. Clearly, an integrated approach can provide significant benefits to students, communities across the Commonwealth and the economic well being of Virginia’s future workforce. Redesigning authentic requirements for graduation could be just the right catalyst for promoting workforce development for students and building a stronger economic environment.

As a public educator and a citizen concerned about the future of our next generation, the Commonwealth and our Nation, I believe that we must take this bold, timely and wise step. It is bold because it is a positive step away from testing toward more authentic experiential learning that we know is the best outcome that we can provide our learners. It is timely, because we recognize a need to make a shift in how we prepare children for their future. And finally, it is wise because the signals on the horizon all point to a need for immediate and substantive change in how we prepare our work force of the future.



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Reference: *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions*. (January 2016). Retrieved from: <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/collegeadmissions>